

# Fighting in the Shadow of an Apartheid State: Boxing and Colonialism in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>

ABRAHAM SEDA

*University of Minnesota Twin-Cities*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5598-3097>

## Abstract

Boxing was arguably the most popular and controversial sport in colonial Zimbabwe. To tame the sport's violence, which was considered too extreme, colonial officials in Zimbabwe sought guidance and advice from South Africa from the mid-1930s on how best to regulate the sport. South Africa occupied a unique position in this regard, not only because of the relationship it had with colonial Zimbabwe as a neighbouring white settler colony, but also because of how sections of its white settler community responded to the triumphs of Black boxers over white opponents around the world. The colony of South Africa played a significant role in shaping the control of boxing in colonial Zimbabwe. The relationship between the two colonies culminated in the passage of the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1956 in colonial Zimbabwe, an identical version to a similarly named law that South Africa had passed just two years prior.

## Keywords

Boxing, sport, *mangoromera*, colonialism, subversive, interracial boxing.

## Introduction

This article examines the development of boxing in colonial Zimbabwe and how African boxers subverted western style boxing by partaking in the sport on their own terms. Using rules and norms which did not abide by colonial notions of fair play and sportsmanship, African boxers redefined boxing into a powerful form of cultural expression. Boxing in the African context named the African subject differently by

---

1 I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance and support I received from institutions at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities which include the History Department, Center for European and German Studies, Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change and the Graduate School as well as the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American and African Studies at the University of Virginia.

centring indigenous power objects and belief systems whose core was not tethered to colonial technologies of domination and social control. This way, boxing became Africanised, and its meanings were localised. Colonial administrators in Zimbabwe, whose perceptions of 'scientific boxing' were shaped heavily by the control measures and rules which had been adopted in England and South Africa, became increasingly convinced that the sport had been corrupted by Africans. They also concluded that the sport had been emptied of all meaning. The paper questions whose meanings were actually lost. If anything, the Africanisation of boxing in colonial Zimbabwe underscored the limits of the assumed universality of colonial notions of play. In the eyes of colonial administrators, boxing had the capacity to discipline and shape the ideal colonial subject. By engaging in boxing on their own terms, African men not only refused to be defined by the disciplinary regimes of the Queensberry rules but also actively shaped the boxing culture of the city. By troubling the underlying assumptions of colonial forms of play, particularly boxing, I argue that African boxing in colonial Zimbabwe constituted a rejection of the dictates of Victorian-style muscular Christianity. The refusal by African boxers in colonial Zimbabwe to abide by the regimes of western style boxing provides a different vantage point from which to examine settler rule in colonial Zimbabwe and Southern Africa.

Mbare, the first African township in colonial Zimbabwe was the 'home' of African boxing. Throughout the colonial period, it was in Mbare that boxing became a popular sport among African men. Celebrated colonial era boxing icons, such as Chida Duli and Beira 'Tar Baby', all made their names in Mbare; it was in that township that they became folk heroes. Mbare was also the place where many African workers from different colonial territories within Southern Africa were housed. Similarly, Mdantsane township, a labour reservoir in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, also had a very rich boxing culture. For African men living in colonial urban centers such as Mbare and Mdantsane, boxing emerged as a very popular pastime. Beyond these similarities between Mbare and Mdantsane, the relationship between South Africa and colonial Zimbabwe warrants further examination. When it came to boxing, the links between South Africa and colonial Zimbabwe extended to policy and institutions, law, and strategy, as well as shared ideas about white racial superiority. The other heading<sup>2</sup>, which this article is taking, is one which blurs colonial boundaries to interrogate how two supposedly distinct colonial territories coordinated to regulate boxing in ways which underscored common interests that transcended colonial boundaries. Of course, this does not mean both colonies were not distinct entities; I argue that the history of boxing in colonial Zimbabwe makes this less obvious.

Studies into the history of boxing in colonial Africa have highlighted how Black African boxers such as Hogan Bassey drew inspiration from prominent African American boxers such as Joe Louis.<sup>3</sup> Navigating the racial tensions of the British empire, Black South African boxer Andrew Jephtha became the first black boxer

---

2 J. Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, P-A. Brault and M. B. Naas (trans.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 14.

3 M. Gennaro, 'Nigeria in the Ring: Boxing, Masculinity and Empire in Nigeria, 1930-1957' (PhD thesis, University of Florida, 2016), 106.

to win a British boxing title.<sup>4</sup> In places such as the Witwatersrand, African men working in mines also became heavily involved in boxing and the sport took on new meanings.<sup>5</sup> The different histories of boxing across the continent have demonstrated how African men became celebrated folk heroes and negotiated questions of race in pursuit of pugilistic glory, while also using the sport to define new forms of African urban culture and manliness.<sup>6</sup>

Boxing in colonial Zimbabwe thrived organically from as early as 1915 without much state intervention. Despite colonial characterisations of African boxing as devoid of meaning and function, Richard Parry argues that ‘boxing was at the center of a highly developed and complex strand of urban culture.’<sup>7</sup> Around the same time that South Africa was starting to regulate boxing by passing the Boxing Act of 1923, African men in Zimbabwean towns such as Bulawayo and Salisbury were also starting to participate in boxing in increasingly large numbers.<sup>8</sup> Because colonial governments in both South Africa and colonial Zimbabwe were interested in policing boxing, given the centrality of violence in the sport, both governments started contemplating a regulatory framework to govern the conditions under which Africans would be allowed to fight. In colonial Zimbabwe, this process was a bit slower, leaving members of the British South Africa Police (BSAP) to monitor the fighting in the city occasionally.<sup>9</sup> South Africa’s early attempts to control boxing would eventually provide a regulatory template for administrators in colonial Zimbabwe.

### Controlling boxing in colonial Zimbabwe

From the early days, African boxing was predominantly organised by Africans in Salisbury, the colonial capital. Utilising the open spaces around and within the ‘native location,’ fighters challenged each other in public spectacles for dominance and bragging rights.<sup>10</sup> Some of these fights were organised along ethnic lines, with boxers of different ethnic backgrounds competing against each other. By the mid-1920s, some of the most prominent boxing clubs included the Nyasaland boxing club, Mazeduru boxing club and Manyika boxing club.<sup>11</sup> Although colonial administrators had observed that African boxing was organised differently from western style boxing, it was not until around 1927 that colonial administrators began complaining about the supposed lack of rules in African boxing.<sup>12</sup> The consumption of alcohol by Africans at boxing matches was seen as a further corruption of the sport. By the end of 1930,

---

4 K. Campbell, *To Write as a Boxer: Disability and Resignification in the Text. A South African Boxer in Britain* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 6.

5 T. Fleming, “Now the African Reigns Supreme”: The Rise of African Boxing on the Witwatersrand, 1924-1959’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28,1, 2010, 47-62.

6 T. Ranger, ‘The Meaning of Urban Violence in Africa: Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, 1860-1980’, *Cultural and Social History*, 3, 2, 2006, 193-228.

7 R. Parry, ‘Culture, Organisation and Class: The African Experience in Salisbury, 1892-1935’, in B. Raftopoulos and T. Yoshikuni (eds.), *Sites of Struggle: Essays in Zimbabwe’s Urban History* (Avondale: Weaver Press, 1999), 53-94.

8 T. Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning: The Social History of a Southern African City, 1893-1960* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2010), 100.

9 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Roger Howman, *A Study of Recreation For Natives*.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

colonel Carbutt had concluded that alcohol consumption was contributing to violence among African men.<sup>13</sup> The association of alcohol consumption, lawlessness and boxing provided justification for the control of African boxing because boxing spaces were seen as facilitating the vices of alcoholism and urban violence.

In a letter to the Superintendent of Natives, the Chief Native Commissioner made the following observation, 'My own feeling is that the situation is potentially dangerous, and I do not forget Carbutt's considered opinion that the Bulawayo disturbances of some years ago arose from feelings engendered by this so-called boxing.'<sup>14</sup> Carbutt's scornful characterisation of African boxing mirrored the broader disregard for African boxing within the colonial government. This disregard was the result of colonial perceptions about African boxing as a corrupted and illegitimate pastime. Ultimately, the control of African boxing intersected with other forms of state control which restricted the consumption of prohibited substances as well as the presence of African women in urban areas. African women sold alcohol at boxing matches, which they smuggled into boxing spaces by concealing it in their undergarments.<sup>15</sup> The control of boxing was therefore seen as crucial to policing other activities such as alcohol and *marijuana* consumption, which were widely seen as morally deviant.

The early fights in Mbare did not take place in a boxing ring. There was no boxing ring. Spectators gathered around the fighters and formed a circle, and the two fighters would fight within that circle. Roger Howman, an anthropologist hired by the colonial government to study African boxing and recreation, had consistently complained that 'the natives pursued the sport [boxing] in any secluded grove of trees.'<sup>16</sup> Although complaints about the lack of a boxing ring were partly influenced by a desire to keep boxing western in its appearance, the concept of a boxing ring was also a critical disciplinary and control measure. The ring imposed some restrictions; it separated the spectators from the boxers, and at times minimised ring invasions by the spectators. From the perspective of the colonial government, the boxing ring meant and symbolised control, a very specific space in which African boxers could fight and wrestle, where their aggression and violence could be contained. Nevertheless, and just like boxing gloves, the ring did not offer much protection or control. Boxers were constantly pelted by frustrated spectators and the gloves only 'softened' the blow.

When spectators felt that their preferred boxer had taken too many punches, they would intervene and stop the fight to minimise the damage.<sup>17</sup> Spectator interventions did not always put an end to a fight. Sometimes it led to further violent skirmishes between rival sections of the crowd. 'Disturbances' at boxing matches were seen as seri-

---

13 The Chronicle, 1930.

14 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Chief Native Commissioner (Hereafter CNC) to the Superintendent of Natives.

15 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Howman.

16 T. Ranger, 'Pugilism and Pathology: African Boxing and the Black African Urban Experience in Southern Rhodesia', in W. J. Baker and J. A. Mangan (eds.), *Sport in Africa: Essays in Social History* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1987), 196-213.

17 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Howman.

ous violations of boxing protocol, something to be frowned upon. Although weapons were specifically banned at boxing matches, these were always smuggled in. In response to these perceived violations of boxing etiquette and norms, the local colonial administration increased police presence at boxing matches to stem ‘unsanctioned’ violence. Even when a boxing ring was eventually put in place, it failed to contain the violence, and it was constantly invaded by spectators who jumped in to stop fights or throw rocks and sticks into the ring to disrupt the fighting.<sup>18</sup> This open defiance of explicit norms and expectations was only permissible in the context of boxing. Colonial responses to African boxing were therefore shaped by a desire to police a sport which they believed had been corrupted to such an extent that it served no real purpose other than for unruly crowds to congregate.

Another factor that shaped colonial attitudes regarding the control of African boxing was the fear of the impact that the sport would have beyond the boxing ring. There were concerns about how boxing might lead to violent clashes in African townships. In the Bulawayo violence of 1929, the fighting resulted in significant property damage, as well as injury to several Africans working in the city.<sup>19</sup> Following the violence, an inquiry was initiated to investigate and establish its causes to anticipate any future disturbances. The commission concluded that the boxing culture in the city plus the occasional use of weapons by Africans had resulted in the violence.<sup>20</sup> Among the several conclusions of the inquiry, was the determination that ethnic tensions, allegedly engendered by boxing, had played a part in causing the violence. Members of the BSA Police were convinced that boxing remained the primary cause and catalyst for the violence.<sup>21</sup>

The policing of African boxing required a strict enforcement of the rules and norms of the game, the Queensberry rules. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Queensberry rules of boxing were widely perceived as the embodiment of fair play.<sup>22</sup> Because of these perceptions, the sport’s enthusiasts around the world viewed boxing as ‘democratic’, because it was a battle of the fists only.<sup>23</sup> By the late 1930s, numerous complaints had been made about African boxing, and there were sustained debates about whether the sport should be allowed to continue at all. One of the most prominent voices in the deliberations was Roger Howman. In describing the sport, he argued that boxing had:

[S]pread like wildfire but the etiquette of boxing, its code, its control, and the whole subjective background as crystallized in such expressions as, “hitting a man lighter than yourself”, “hitting below the belt”, “hitting a man when he is down or not looking”, “fair play” are not as susceptible to

---

18 Ibid.

19 I. Phimister and C. Van Onselen, “The Political Economy of Tribal Animosity: A Case Study of the 1929 Bulawayo Location “Faction Fight”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6, 1, 1979, 1-43.

20 NAZ S1.13A, CID Report, 21 July 1929.

21 *The Rhodesia Herald*, 1 January 1930.

22 K. Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 38.

23 Ibid.

diffusion in the same way. No matter how much we may pride ourselves on the possession of such attitudes we have to appreciate that we had to learn them as part of our English culture.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding Howman's cultural arrogance, complaints about the lack of rules in the game laid the groundwork for the subsequent regulations which were eventually put in place to regulate the sport. Efforts to exercise tighter control of African boxing were also shaped by fears within the white settler community that should Africans become skilled fighters, they might be inclined to attack settlers.<sup>25</sup> Enforcing the rules and norms of western style boxing was thus seen as foundational to making sure that Africans appreciated the values of rule-bound combat. In this sense, boxers and other Africans that were seen to be upsetting the order of things or undermining colonial authority were perceived as malcontents whose actions could potentially upend the structures of settler authority. Furthermore, it was not accurate that African boxing did not have rules; they were just different from the Queensberry rules. For example, for boxing matches of the early 1920s and 1930s, you had to knock out your opponent to be considered the winner. This was different from the rules that colonial administrators looked to and they constantly decried the lack of a point system that would determine the victor and the way in which spectators, as active participants during the course of a fight, would intervene to stop a fight if they were convinced that a fighter had taken too many punches.<sup>26</sup>

For colonial administrators, such as Native Commissioner N. H. D. Spicer and Howman, boxing was an appropriate outlet for African men, a way to instill discipline in them. The double bind of wanting to encourage boxing, while being aware of the numerous ways in which African men had co-opted the sport, complicated the debates about imposing a permanent ban on boxing. The way in which African men in Salisbury had claimed boxing as their sport also heavily influenced that decision not to ban boxing. For instance, during a meeting to discuss the control of African boxing, Spicer was said to have acknowledged that 'boxing amongst natives had become too popular to be stopped altogether'.<sup>27</sup> It was therefore not entirely up to colonial administrators to ban the sport; they also had to consider the implications and possible reactions from African men in the city following a ban on such a popular pastime. Ultimately, the decision not to ban the sport was due to several factors. The lack of clear legal standing, the need to encourage boxing for purposes of social control as well as the popularity of the sport in the city ultimately made the idea of a total ban seem ill-advised.

In sport, rules establish the law, the 'thou-shalt-nots'.<sup>28</sup> Ideas of 'fair play' and 'not hitting a man when he is down' are and have always been foundational to

---

24 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Howman.

25 Ibid..

26 Ibid..

27 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Minutes of a Meeting Held at Office of Assistant Commissioner, BSA Police, 30 June 1938, to Discuss the Question of Native Boxing and Its Control.

28 D. T. Durbin, 'The Rules of Sport and the Rules of Rhetoric: Sport as a Performative Public Discourse', in H. L. Reid and E. Moore (eds.), *Reflecting on Modern Sport in Ancient Olympia* (Sioux City, Iowa: Parnassos Press, 2017), 105-116.

the mythology of boxing. In the colonial imagination, rules were central to the productive participation in sport, and where the rules were not observed, the sport lost its essence. Without the strict enforcement of such rules, boxing ceased to be the 'manliest of all sports' and had the potential to degenerate into 'uncivilised violence'. One of the most celebrated 'thou-shalt-nots' of boxing was the prohibition of using weapons during a fight. Outlawing the use of weapons had helped sanitise the sport in England and it had significantly pacified those who raised moral objections about the appropriateness of such a violent sport among a 'civilised people'.<sup>29</sup> It was the rules that made boxing 'civilised violence'. Aficionados of boxing had even gone as far as defining the sport as democratic, because men were only allowed to fight using their hands.<sup>30</sup> In such a context, the use of weapons by African boxers in colonial Zimbabwe was regarded as sporting sacrilege. Unarmed combat was conceptualised as more manly and resorting to weaponry was seen as cowardly.<sup>31</sup>

In a letter to the Chief Native Commissioner of Salisbury, Native Commissioner Spicer complained that:

On our arrival we found two European policemen and several native police and a large crowd of natives, seven or eight hundred I should say. The European policemen in charge reported that he had deemed it advisable to stop the boxing for the afternoon as quite early on in the proceedings stone-throwing had started ... the police showed me twenty or thirty weapons, sticks, sjamboks, piping and two or three sheath knives which they had taken from the crowd.<sup>32</sup>

Controlling the crowd became just as important as controlling the fighting taking place in the boxing ring. Complaints, such as the Native Commissioner's, were not isolated; they were quite widespread, with many officials expressing strong views about the social problem that African boxing was becoming. Occasionally, members of the BSAP were stationed at boxing matches where they were expected to regulate the actions of both the spectators and the boxers. Despite the police presence, colonial administrators did not always have total control of the proceedings. For instance Constable V. F. Wallace wrote to the Inspector for Salisbury town stating that, 'the stones were thrown from each side, and I was struck on the foot with one, causing a bruise only, Constable Cochrane was struck on the hand with a stick, we then decided to disperse the crowd'.<sup>33</sup> Although weapons were occasionally thrown into the ring, they were also used in the skirmishes and occasional fighting that took place outside of the ring. Despite increasing the police presence at boxing matches, it remained very difficult to establish any significant influence on the sport. Ethnic rivalries

---

29 Boddy, *Boxing*, 34.

30 *Ibid.*

31 D. N. Botchway, *Boxing is no Cakewalk! Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson in the History of Ghanaian Boxing* (Grahamstown: NISC 2019), 42.

32 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Native Commissioner Spicer to the Chief Native Commissioner of Salisbury.

33 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Constable V. F. Wallace to the Inspector of the Town of Salisbury.

among African men in the city culminated in physical fights in which weapons were occasionally used.

Quite often, members of the BSAP and the Native Commissioner had to plead with the spectators not to disrupt proceedings. The fact that colonial administrators had to implore spectators not to disturb proceedings also underlined the limited power that colonial administrators had in controlling African boxing. Ultimately, boxing provided a platform for African men to compete in a physical contest for dominance and be celebrated for their triumphs. In the ring, African boxers were celebrated boxers who scoffed at colonial boxing regulations. One of the most celebrated boxers in colonial Zimbabwe was Chida Duli. Marc Epprecht notes that Duli became a much admired scofflaw in Salisbury.<sup>34</sup> Duli became the embodiment of defiance in ways that contradicted colonial designs of creating submissive and disempowered colonial subjects. On the contrary, African boxers were assertive, they openly disregarded the established rules and tested the limits of colonial authority.

Following several disturbances at boxing matches, some which compelled matches to be abandoned altogether, colonial officials in Zimbabwe started to aggressively explore how South Africa was dealing with the issue of African participation in boxing. The relationship between South Africa and colonial Zimbabwe on matters related to boxing extended for a period covering at least five decades. In a series of correspondences, officials in various towns in South Africa wrote to their counterparts in Salisbury sharing ideas and strategies. Writing back to the Native Welfare Officer for Salisbury, the Acting Town Clerk for the municipality of Benoni, South Africa, mentioned that, 'two big tournaments (boxing) were staged in Johannesburg towards the end of last year and the City Council kindly donated several cups to be competed for...there should be no difficulty in establishing a similar club in Salisbury, provided that strict attention is paid to amateur rules.'<sup>35</sup> Although encouragement was given for the establishment of Cup tournaments, the advice was underlined by an insistence on the rules of the game. But establishing the rules and conventions of western style boxing had always been a contested issues in Salisbury.

In responding to a letter from the Native Welfare Officer for Salisbury, the Town Clerk of Durban, E. B. Scott said that:

In reply, I have pleasure in stating that we have, in urban, the Bantu social center, which caters for social, educational and indoor recreational sports, among natives. This organization has leased a double story building for this purpose towards which the city council out of its Native Revenue Account, contributes approximately 250 pounds per annum in addition to having furnished and equipped the premises at the inception of the scheme. Prior to the option of the scheme, the city council provided a raised boxing ring at

---

34 M. Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of Dissident Sexuality in Southern Rhodesia* (Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 123; T. Scarnecchia, 'The Politics of Gender and Class in the Creation of African Communities, Salisbury, Rhodesia, 1937-1957' (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1994), 83.

35 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Acting Town Clerk for the Municipality of Benoni to the Native Welfare Officer for Salisbury, 1938.

one of the native locations with the view to encouraging this healthy form of sports, among others, as a desirable outlet for their superfluous energy and to tutor them in the art of scientific boxing... This form of sport is becoming very popular with certain classes of the natives.<sup>36</sup>

The manager of the Non-European Housing and Native Administration Department for Johannesburg, G. Ballenden, summarised his thoughts on boxing in the following words:

With reference to your letter of the 14<sup>th</sup> instant, I have to advise you that an association, of which the writer is vice president, has been formed for the control of amateur boxing among natives in this city, and periodical tournaments are arranged. The European community is desirous of encouraging boxing among the Bantu with the view to teaching them methods of self defense without resorting to the use of a knife and other lethal weapons.<sup>37</sup>

For the authorities in colonial Zimbabwe, such advice was critical given the extents to which the local administration in the city of Salisbury had gone to in trying to regulate and control African boxing without much success. The suggestions given to officials in colonial Zimbabwe underscored the values which the sport was expected to instill. Armed combat was seen as cowardly and ‘unmanly’, as opposed to boxing, a rule-bound physical contest in which the ‘better man’ would ultimately emerge victorious. The presence of weapons at boxing matches was one of the main reasons why African boxing was seen as potentially dangerous and criminal.

Adding to the problem that boxing was perceived to have become, was the widespread use of *mangoromera*. *Mangoromera* is a performance enhancing substance which was widely used by African boxers who believed that the substance gave them supernatural powers and protected them from spiritual harm. The ‘medicine’ was made differently in different communities, but the universal understanding was that the substance would give an advantage to whoever had been treated with it.<sup>38</sup> In explaining how *mangoromera* was supposedly made, the acting Native Commissioner for Gutu described it as consisting of:

[S]uch animals as the lion, elephant, hippo, honey-bear, crocodile, the head of a black mamba, two kinds of fish found in the Zambesi and various herbs. Pieces from each are burned together and pounded into powder. The compound is rubbed into incisions made in the wrists of those desiring increased strength. A person wishing to be a tower of strength will go as far as to have all his joints doctored as well as his chest. Some wear wrists

---

36 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Town Clerk, Durban to the Native Welfare Officer, Salisbury.

37 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Manager of the Non-European Housing and Native Administration Department for the City of Johannesburg to the Native Welfare Officer for Salisbury.

38 Interview with Winston Nyamandi. Kuwadzana, Harare, 2019.

guards (leather or python skin) which have been soaked in the preparation. The medicine is sometimes sewn into the wrist guard.<sup>39</sup>

In concluding his remarks, the acting Native Commissioner also mentioned that *mangoromera* was part of a wider economy of indigenous medicines and herbs all of which had a 'transgressive element'.<sup>40</sup> For African boxers and spectators, *mangoromera* was a legitimate way to increase one's strength and intimidate fellow boxers. The ways of knowing in which *mangoromera* was grounded were not legible to colonial administrators. *Mangoromera* was considered subversive because it was a power object, an indigenous 'medicine' that was untethered to colonial means of domination and subject formation. Although colonial administrators saw boxing as inherently western, the meanings and indigenous 'technologies'<sup>41</sup> of power which African boxers attached to boxing undermined the dominant epistemological assumptions of colonial games. Local understandings of *mangoromera* were varied, but the overarching belief was that anyone who acquired *mangoromera* became a powerful boxer. These beliefs were fundamentally opposed to colonial perceptions of imperial sport as cultivating raw athleticism only through discipline and training. *Mangoromera* provided a different orientation to ideas about power and what was considered 'manly combat'. As a result, colonial administrators became invested in policing and ultimately banning the use of *mangoromera* because they feared that the substance made Africans 'arrogant'. Describing the impact of *mangoromera* on Africans, one official remarked that it 'gave Africans exaggerated opinions of themselves'.<sup>42</sup> What officials interpreted as arrogance were African boxers whose actions contradicted colonial perceptions of African men as feeble and easily manipulated by the 'soft indoctrination'<sup>43</sup> of colonial forms of play.

Over time, indigenous 'medicines' and power objects which African boxers used were associated with criminality and violence in the city.<sup>44</sup> *Mangoromera* constituted a broader set of indigenous 'medicines' such as the *maji*, magic water, which colonised Africans in Tanzania deployed for protective purposes in their anti-colonial struggles. Questions about the efficacy of substances such as *mangoromera* are immaterial given how their use structured and defined African interactions with colonial officials at the boxing ring. One of the most prominent *mangoromera* users in Salisbury was Duli, an African immigrant from colonial Malawi.<sup>45</sup> Duli openly defied the established rules by fraternising with spectators during a fight and sitting on top of his opponents.<sup>46</sup> Although he was temporarily suspended for inciting the crowds in 1938, he remained a very defiant boxer who was well admired by fellow Africans in the city. Long-standing colonial perceptions of boxing as potentially subversive were

---

39 NAZ S998, Acting Native Commissioner, Gutu, 'Mangoromera', 28 June 1933.

40 Ibid..

41 C. Mavhunga, *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

42 D.H.C.P. 'Mangoromera', *Native Affairs Department Annual*, 1933, 59-61.

43 B. Stoddart, 'Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30,4, 1988, 649-673.

44 'Soldier's Handbook on Shona Customs', Issued by Military Intelligence Directorate, 1974.

45 Scarnecchia, 'The Politics of Gender and Class', 87.

46 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Native Commissioner Spicer Spicer to Chief Native Commissioner, Salisbury.

therefore amplified by the widespread use of a substance which Africans believed gave them supernatural powers and protected them from harm. The use of *mangoromera* and other forms of *muti*<sup>47</sup> by African boxers became one of the many reasons why African boxing was seen as a corruption of an otherwise good sport. It also escalated colonial concerns about the effect that boxing would have on Africans working in the city. The boxing scene in Salisbury had long been characterised as volatile by colonial administrators. The incorporation of *mangoromera* into boxing was therefore seen as making African boxing more dangerous. Officials such as the Secretary for Native Affairs argued that the government should continuously monitor any increase in the acquisition of *mangoromera*.<sup>48</sup> Although the government had no actual means of accomplishing this, due to the secret distribution networks of *mangoromera*, administrators continued to raise alarm about the supposed harmful effects of the substance.

### **The Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1956**

Debates within the colonial government about the future of boxing in colonial Zimbabwe were protracted, with many within the government advocating for a total ban of boxing, and channeling resources to other sports.<sup>49</sup> From the early 1920s all the way into the late 1960s, officials from the British South Africa Police to the Ministry of Justice and Internal Affairs had raised many objections about the trajectory of African boxing. Although several stopgap measures had been implemented at different moments, the overwhelming sense was that there needed to be a lasting solution to the problem of African boxing. Writing to the Secretary of Cabinet, the Minister of Justice and Internal Affairs mentioned that:

This matter was originally raised in 1952, by Mr C. A. W. BARTELS, who felt that professional boxing was being carried out in Southern Rhodesia in a deplorable manner without any adequate control, and that the public was being exploited by rather dubious means...professional boxing and wrestling bouts are being staged in ever increasing numbers in this colony and it is essential that legislation be introduced in order that the necessary control may be exercised. The draft bill now submitted is based on the most recent legislation in the Union of South Africa of 1954.<sup>50</sup>

Following in South Africa's footsteps, Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe) passed the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1956, just two years after South Africa had passed its own Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1954. It is critical to note that the two laws were identical, literally word for word. South Africa had well-established

---

47 A. Ashforth, 'Muthi, Medicine and Witchcraft: Regulating "African Science" in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Social Dynamics*, 31, 2, 2010, 211-242.

48 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Secretary for Native Affairs.

49 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, J. S. Morris, Colonel, Commissioner of Police to CNC, July 14, 1938.

50 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, Minister of Justice and Internal Affairs to The Secretary to the Cabinet, 8 July 1955.

regulatory frameworks for different sporting disciplines, boxing included, compared to Zimbabwe. As early as 1923, South Africa already had a boxing act in place.<sup>51</sup> The act was later updated in 1954 to include regulatory measures that were designed to address the control and administration of boxing, after which it became the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1954. At the time that colonial Zimbabwe was considering adopting the legal framework that was already in place in South Africa, members of the BSA Police in Zimbabwe were already in anticipation of similar legislation being introduced in the country. In a letter to the Department of Justice, the Superintendent of the BSA Police stated that 'it appears that a form of boxing control similar to that in existence in the Union of South Africa, might be introduced in Southern Rhodesia.'<sup>52</sup> The superintendent went as far as to include a copy of the 1923 law that South Africa had been using to give the Department of Justice some perspective on what the South African regulatory system looked like.

The Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1954 enacted in South Africa imposed tighter control on the sport.<sup>53</sup> Under the updated law, interracial boxing contests were formally banned.<sup>54</sup> The passage of this and other discriminatory race laws was part of broader apartheid ideology which was dedicated to the systematic separation of black and white people.<sup>55</sup> In the case of colonial Zimbabwe, the passage of the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1956 was a watershed moment. This was the very first attempt to impose control on African boxing through legislative means. Following the passage of the law in colonial Zimbabwe, the boxing culture, particularly in terms of administration, changed significantly. Also, the coordinated effort which led to the Boxing and Wrestling Control Acts in both Zimbabwe and South Africa brings into sharp focus how settler colonial rule often transcended 'borders' on issues of mutual interest.

The power of the Rhodesia Boxing Board of Control (RBBC) was strengthened such that it could do almost anything so long it could claim that whatever actions they were taking were in the interest of public order and safety. Some of the provisions of the law stated that:

1. The Board shall not register any person as a boxer or wrestler who is not of the male sex.
2. At any time prior to the holding of any tournament, to prohibit any boxer or wrestler from participating as such in the tournament if, after such examination or test for physical and mental fitness as the Board may deem fit, it is satisfied that such boxer or wrestler should not be allowed so to participate or if such boxer or wrestler refuses at the request of the Board to submit himself to such examination or test

---

51 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, Boxing Act, 1923.

52 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, BSA Police to the Department of Justice.

53 Fleming, 'Now the African Reigns Supreme', 57.

54 Ibid..

55 S. Dubow, 'Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid and the Conceptualization of Race', *Journal of African History*, 33, 1992, 209-237.

3. To issue a certificate of introduction to any registered boxer, wrestler, official or promoter proceeding to any place outside Rhodesia in order to take part in tournaments or to procure the services of any boxer or wrestler ordinarily resident outside Rhodesia at tournaments in Zimbabwe and to set out in such certificate such particulars concerning the boxer, wrestler, official or promoter as the Board considers necessary; and (n) to establish a benevolent fund to be used for such purposes as may be prescribed by regulation; and (o) to take any steps which the Board considers necessary or expedient for the due and proper regulation or control of, or to enable it to exercise due and proper supervision over, boxing or wrestling at tournaments.
4. The Minister may make regulations not inconsistent with this Act with regard to:
  - (a) The manner in which participants shall be attired and, in the case of boxers, the nature, weight and quality of gloves and bandages to be used
  - (b) The testing of the physical and mental fitness, the medical examination and the weighing of participants prior to any tournament.<sup>56</sup>

The RBBC became the primary governing body for African boxing. The board held considerable power on all matters regarding boxing in the colony. The inaugural board was made up of seven members and chaired by W. Walters. The other members of the board were N. van Weenen (vice chairman), V. D. Michelson (hon. Sec), J. J. Susman, D. V. Shore, S. Bloom and G. Summerfield.<sup>57</sup> Members of this board were all associated with boxing in different capacities prior to the establishment of the RBBC. For example, secretary V.D. Michelson previously held a promoter's and referee's license in the Cape. Chairman of the board, Walters was a former member of the British army, BSAP, and was trained as a boxing referee.<sup>58</sup> Overall, these were people who were considered authorities on matters relating to boxing. Their inclusion into the RBBC was considered critical in formalising the sport as well as tightening state control.

Members of the RBBC had the authority to register and withdraw licenses from individual boxers or promoters if they were considered to be in breach of the board's code of conduct. For instance, 'unauthorised' fighting, or participating in tournaments which had not been approved by the board could result in one having their license withdrawn. The board was also responsible for authorising local fighters in colonial Zimbabwe to participate in boxing tournaments outside of the colony. Failure to comply with the regulations could result in the withdrawal of a license. Fundamentally, the board's powers were so broad that it could suspend or cancel a

---

56 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, Boxing and Wrestling Act 1956.

57 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, V. D Michelson, Hon. Sec, Rhodesia Boxing Board of Control to the Commissioner of Police, Salisbury, 27 July 1954.

58 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, Rhodesia Boxing Board of Control: Memorandum on Boxing and Wrestling Bill.

fight without being required to provide justification. Although the boxing ring still remained a contested site, where African boxers still used indigenous 'medicines' such as *mangoromera*, the colonial government now had the power to pursue legal remedies to ban or suspend boxers considered to be 'troublemakers'.

Among some of the first to be registered by the board were Steven Nyanyigwa<sup>59</sup>, Sheki Mupoto and Mohamed Beira 'Tar Baby'. It was only the boxers who were registered that could compete in tournaments which were predominantly organised by the Native Welfare Society. The constitution of the Rhodesia's Boxing Board of Control explicitly stated that:

No person shall hold, assist in holding or take part in a professional boxing contest, competition or exhibition unless a license or permit shall first have been obtained from the Board of Control whose members, constitution and rules have received the permission of the Commissioner of Police.<sup>60</sup>

The range of powers given to both the RBBC and police underscored the colonial government's interest in exerting control in a sport that had come to be seen as enabling lawlessness.

### Fighting for supremacy

Interracial boxing matches and the triumphs of black boxers over white opponents had called into question white supremacist thought throughout the British empire and beyond. From Jack Johnson to Joe Louis, there had been many high-profile boxing matches in which prevalent notions of white racial superiority were challenged.<sup>61</sup> By the 1950s, many countries including the United States of America and England had all experienced serious public backlash following the defeat of white boxers by black opponents.<sup>62</sup> In the colonial world, where settler societies were organised around racial hierarchies in which black Africans were at the bottom, boxing became subversive. It threatened to upend the assumed racial superiority of white settlers and boxers.

Debates about boxing and race had been raging since 1908, when Jack Johnson became the first Black world heavyweight champion. The circulation of his images was censored in South Africa by local authorities, fearing that such images could inspire African men to subvert white authority.<sup>63</sup> Johnson's conquest of white men in the ring was a serious violation of racial protocol at a time when preserving the strength and purity of white bodies was central to white supremacist thought.<sup>64</sup> The idea of a black and white boxer squaring off in a boxing ring insinuated a level of

---

59 The Patriot, February 7, 2019.

60 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, Rhodesia Boxing Board of Control Constitution.

61 'Unforgivable Blackness: The Life and Death of Jack Johnson', Ken Burns, PBS, 2004.

62 J. Nilsson, 'A Black Champion's Biggest Fight', The Saturday Evening Post, 2 July 2020.

63 Runstedtler, Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner, 32.

64 Ibid..

equality which was considered heretic in colonial Zimbabwe. Furthermore, there was a very real possibility that a white boxer could be knocked out by a Black boxer, and the images of such an occurrence could disrupt discourses of settler racism and white supremacy.

Reporting on Jack Johnson's triumph to become the first Black heavyweight champion, the *Times of Natal*, a South African newspaper wrote that:

It seems absurd that a battle in faraway Nevada, disgusting in its details and with the most sordid environment, could have such wide-spread effects. But every student of native life, every administrator of native affairs, and everyone engaged in holding the balance between the white and black races, will acknowledge that the prestige of the dominant races has been lowered in the minds of the inferior races by this brutal conflict at Reno.<sup>65</sup>

While proponents of the sport claimed that the better man will win. Such declarations were however implicitly contingent on a white boxer emerging victorious. In a sport such as boxing, where violence is so central, notions of the better man winning complicated the racial realities of settler colonial rule. Interracial fights had long been seen as a threat to the racial hierarchies within the British empire. In 1911, then Home Secretary Winston Churchill banned a fight between Jack Johnson and Bombardier Billy Wells fearing the impact 'such a contest might have on the delicate race relations throughout the empire.'<sup>66</sup> Subsequent policies and legislation adopted in colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa in the late 1950s echoed the racial anxieties and prejudices that had shaped boxing throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To forestall the controversy and fallout arising from interracial boxing contests, the constitution of the RBBC explicitly banned interracial boxing in the colony, despite the fact that none had ever taken place before. In a section titled 'COLOUR BAR', the constitution stated that, 'Contests, competitions and exhibitions between white and coloured boxers are under no circumstances permitted.'<sup>67</sup> In colonial Zimbabwe, the term 'coloured' referred to mixed race people.<sup>68</sup> Although according to the letter of the law white versus coloured boxers were the ones specifically banned from fighting, the ban also extended to Black Africans. To highlight Rhodesia's unique attitude toward boxing and its wholesale adoption of South Africa's boxing laws, it should be noted that, in other sports, such as cricket and soccer, mixed race teams competed against each other at exactly the same time.<sup>69</sup>

From as early as the 1930s, settlers in colonial Zimbabwe were arguing that boxing might lead to attacks on white settlers. Fears about being attacked by 'savage natives'

---

65 Natal Times, 6 July 1910, in Runstedtler, Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner, 68.

66 J. Harding, *The Lonsdale Belt: Boxing's Most Coveted Prize* (Durrington: Pitch Publishing, 2016), location 309 of 7148 (Kindle version).

67 NAZ S3556/T1/31/5, Rhodesia Boxing Board of Control Constitution.

68 J. Muzondidya, *Walking a Tightrope: Towards a Social History of the Coloured People of Zimbabwe* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004).

69 A. Novak, 'Sport and Racial Discrimination in Colonial Zimbabwe: A Reanalysis', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29, 6, 2012, 850-867.

had always characterised the writing of early colonial settlers, who believed that they had a moral responsibility to 'civilise'.<sup>70</sup> Some of the white settler anxieties and fears included concerns that acts of sexual violence might be perpetrated by Black men on vulnerable white women.<sup>71</sup> Officials such as Howman had also cautioned that there was potential of 'interracial trouble arising out of the increased ability of the native to use his fists, or a tendency to resort to that mode of action under stress and of the growth of a truculent spirit among them'.<sup>72</sup> These concerns only increased with the growing popularity of the sport among African men in Mbare and around the country. The eventual imposition of a colour bar in 1956 was the culmination of longstanding racial prejudices which had defined settler rule. In a colonial society where ideas of white supremacy were deeply entrenched, a Black boxer could not be allowed to compete against a white opponent and emerge victorious.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, boxing was a controversial sport in colonial Zimbabwe. The boxing ring was the only space in which African men living and working in then colonial Salisbury could fight; it was the only space in which their aggression was celebrated. After realising that the sport had been co-opted by Africans, colonial officials became very interested in policing the sport. In this regard, South Africa played a key role. Different municipalities in South Africa gave advice to officials in colonial Zimbabwe about how best to control African boxing. The co-ordination between the two colonies was sustained and went from exchanging ideas to using identical pieces of legislation which were specifically crafted to centralise control of the sport and eliminate aspects of the sport which were considered unsportsmanlike. The transnational solidarities which existed between colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa, both settler states, allowed colonial Zimbabwe to lean on South Africa for support in a bid to exert tighter control on boxing. Boxing was different from many of the games that became popular in colonial Africa. It was a controlled form of violence, but it was not always controlled. Around the world, boxing had demonstrated that it could upend racial ideologies which were built into the fabric of many societies. For colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa, both embarking on a hardening of racial division as anti-colonial struggles were gathering strength across the continent, boxing became heavily policed and regulated.

---

70 J. M. Boggie, *The First Steps in Civilizing Rhodesia* (Bulawayo: Mardon Printers, 1952).

71 J. Pape, 'Black and White: The "Perils of Sex" in Colonial Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16, 4, 1990, 699-720.

72 NAZ S.1542.S12, 1936-1939, Howman.