

A People's Martial Art:
Filipino Martial Arts and Decolonial Praxis
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Abstract

Beginning in April of 2013 I began apprenticing and collecting ethnographic data about a topic of deep personal significance, the indigenous martial arts of the Philippines as practiced by Filipino Americans in Seattle. Filipino martial arts (FMA) are a collection of Indigenous martial arts that have existed in the Philippine archipelago since pre-European contact up to the present. Over the centuries, these arts have distilled into various systems, each with their own styles, rituals, ceremonies and codes, including my specific system, Balintawak Cuentada Eskrima. Because of the Spanish colonial outlawing of blades and swords, our ancestors transitioned to training with fire hardened rattan sticks in secrecy to preserve the art. My pivotal argument is that for people of Filipino descent, FMA goes beyond a pastime avocation, but is a cardinal component to decolonial praxis. I am utilizing literature and theory alongside interviews with practitioners to drive a discourse around the question, *how do Filipino practitioners see themselves both as Americans, and culturally maintain a practice that embodies an identity that is the outcome of the mixed blood of conquest?* My findings reveal a notion that FMA translates into a desire for an ancestral habitus that embodies a physical critique to domination. This desire to inhabit a cultural meaning that stems from a situation of colonial resistance I argue, inhabits a cultural meaning that offers a decolonial praxis. My ethnographic methods have been direct participant observation and performance, shadowing, interviewing, literature review, video recording, journaling and self-reflexive analysis. The base of my theoretical framework echoes Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory and Frantz Fanon's philosophy on the use of violence. I am also utilizing numerous Indigenous, non-Indigenous and Filipino anthropologists, scholars and psychologists synthesized together to build a ground theory of ancestral habitus, blood memory and non-discursive sites of tacit knowledge transference. The findings uncovered thus far in the work reveal that in

an attempt to reconnect with our ancestors, we found connections with one another that strengthen our community bonds.

Cartography of Carnal Ethnography

[M]artial arts and combat sports imply an acute sense of the management of violence... Thus, such activities offer a vantage point for observing regarding gender relations and construction. [T]hese activities are preferential sites to study ethnicity and 'race' issues as the development of martial arts and combat sports is considered as a mark of authenticity in diasporic communities or re-elaborated by the receptive culture on the other side of the globe. [M]artial arts and combat sports can be understood as certain kind of 'secular religion'. [T]he ascetic regimes surrounding some of these practices and even the potential for self-transformation of the individuals should be taken into account from a religious perspective.¹

This ethnographic work explores the topic of performance as it pertains to the encoding of violence on the body that also correlates to identity, history, phenomenology, and decolonial praxis. This cartography of carnal ethnography is a map of what the reader will encounter through this text. I begin by providing relevant background on FMA, and continue with an analysis of the significance of FMA for Filipino-Americans who view this practice as key to maintaining their identity. Despite the difficulties in documenting the performative aspects of the practice, I embrace the challenge of representing the ceremonial portion of this work. This work is intended for other descendants of the Philippines to explore, argue and examine. Through any type of practice or discourse about FMA, one must come face to face with violence and legacies of colonialism.

My approach to writing about decolonial violence is based on the spirit of the writings by Frantz Fanon. For Fanon, liberation will never be something given, only something fought for and taken once the colonizer has been defeated. I rely on other scholars' readings of Fanon, as well as my interpretations of their readings to move the

¹ Garcia and Spencer 2013

discourse about decolonial violence into other spaces not yet covered, namely what are our indigenous ethical and moral concerns when it comes to violence? The ethnographic collaboration that forms the basis of this research contains details around transformative practices and deals with questions pertaining to what is the value of training to harness violence. Martial arts is an opportunity for an outsider of the art to transform into an insider through ritualized drills that bring the practitioner's ability closer to the idealized performance standards of the curriculum. The participant performance and observation portion focuses on drawing connections between practice and positionality. In my self-reflexive analysis I examine the dialectical relationship between the phenomenon of Bruce Lee's challenge to orientalism, and the reinforcement of the fantasy of the other as a consequence of Lee.

In my section on indigeneity, I establish a claim that FMA is an indigenous practice, not merely because it originates from a particular place and people, but because it is a practice that has evolved out of a relationship with colonialism. And finally I close with a conclusion that should not be considered an ending, but rather a stopping point for this leg of my research. Along the way I supplement the text with field notes, stories and interview responses to my research inquiries. It is the goal of my research to present my community's voices in a manner that is equal to scholastic text.

Background

The peopling of the archipelago occurred over several thousands of years and included numerous groups of ethnically and culturally diverse bands of people. It is difficult to pin point when exactly indigenous martial arts emerged, but FMA exists in the historical record in context to nearly four centuries of resistance to Spain, a decade of resistance to American occupation, three years of resistance to Japanese occupation and continues to exist as a primary means of self defense for Filipinos who live in overpopulated metropolitan centers, riddled with the agonies of economic poverty.

Metallurgy appears in the archaeological record sometime around the 5th century

B.C.E. through trade with early Iron Age peoples of India.² This period introduced new implementations in farming, hunting, crafts and weaponry most notably, sword and blade manufacturing. This can only lead to speculations about martial art systems that coincided with the artifacts from the material record. However if we look to other places in Oceania that did not have the benefit of proximity to mainland Southeast Asian culture contact, we start to find other forms of indigenous martial arts that startlingly resemble Filipino and Indonesian martial arts in terms of body motion, mechanics in leverage, slips, low line attacks and joint destruction. Bwang³, from the Coralline Islands and Lua an indigenous Hawaiian martial art⁴ are just two examples from other Pacific Island peoples that had traditional systems of combat and self-defense practices. It is feasible that martial arts in the Philippines pre-date the arrival of iron technology.

Chinese chronicles of trade with the northern islands date back to the early part of the first century C.E. with Chinese settlement beginning as early as the 9th century C.E.. It is believed that these early Chinese immigrants brought with them a form of Kung Fu that merged with the local martial arts forming a new system, Kuntao. There are also various upland mountain tribes of the northern islands that practice a form of wrestling called Dumog, which relies heavily on body disruptions through tactics of quick jerks, pushing, dragging, and pulling to off balance the opponent. Elements of both Kuntao and Dumog are embedded throughout most FMA in lesser or greater degrees.

My own system of Balintawak Cuentada Eskrima, which is a relatively recent system of FMA, also utilizes many of the base elements of Dumog bodily disruptions. During the 1920's, Eskrimadors for the first time in nearly 400 years began to come out of hiding and by the early 1920's a subculture of FMA began to emerge with practitioners in Cebu forming the Labangon Fencing Club and cross training their techniques with one another.

By 1932 the club was reformed into the Doce Pares Club, founded by the Saavedra and Cañete families. The founder of Balintawak Eskrima, Venacio "Anciong" Bacon (b. 1912) was among the first twenty-four members of the club. By 1952 Bacon

² Jocano 2001.

³ Vélez-Ibáñez 1982.

⁴ Paglinawan 2006.

divorced himself from the Doce Pares Club over political and personal differences over the Club's direction. He began teaching a handful of students in the backyard of a watch shop owned by one of the students on a small street in Cebu, called Balintawak. The street was named after the northern province Balintawak, which launched the first national rebellion against Spain that ushered the Philippine revolution. That first attack by revolutionary rebels is known as the Cry of Balintawak, or alternately remembered as *Sigaw ng Pugad Lawin*.

Bacon's FMA methodology was to use a single stick, gripped in the right hand, which freed the left hand for *tapi-tapi*: checking and monitoring the opponent's stick. The left hand could thus be used for a variety of uses such as pushing, pulling, punching, grabbing, joint locking, slapping, distracting, lifting and blocking. His style was direct and confrontational, breaking many Eskrima codes such as single stick, grabbing the other person's stick, countering with linear counter strikes minus the twirling and flashy combinations common to Eskrima. He wanted to refine the system into a reaction based system that emphasized training under unscripted pressure that resulted in attuning the body's reflexes to be balanced and well harnessed to counter attack any manner of strikes or grabs. Some of his earliest students were Jose Villasin and Teofilo Velez, who along with Bacon in the early 1970's would become the teachers of Balintawak to Grand Master Bobby Taboada. The Grand Master appreciates the respect people show him when they refer to him as Grand Master, but his preference is to be called Bobby, or just *Manong*, which is a Filipino endearing casual slang term for friend.

GM Bobby continued to build on the Balintawak style refining his own system based on Cuentada principles which means to grant the possibility that your opponent is as skilled as you are and that you must anticipate their counters and defend while premeditating possible counters to their counters. Bobby also built on the original system by emphasizing a boxer's twist to every strike and block. This twisting that begins at the feet and hips adds an incredible amount of force through the explosive torque of the body core causing massive full-power blows with devastating effect. Over the years Manong has produced a handful of fully qualified instructors that he has allowed to teach his curriculum of Balintawak Cuentada, among them my primary instructor, Guru John Soriano, who continues to teach me the principles of Cuentada which daily awakens a

deeper understanding of myself.

Modernity

A focal question to my research has been, *how do practitioners see themselves both as Americans, and culturally maintain a practice that embodies an identity that is the outcome of the mixed blood of conquest?* This is a difficult question to answer, and no two practitioners will respond with the same answer. Interestingly, many practitioners acknowledge their privileges living here in the U.S. versus those of our people, still living in the Philippines.

I think most Filipinos know of Eskrima (or Arnis) and tend to be proud of that, but most probably do not understand the significance of FMA as a "cultural export" of the Philippines. Just walk down any street in any town in the Philippines and ask someone if they practice Eskrima or Arnis and most would shake their head. In a third world country where people are struggling for jobs, a roof over their head, or their next meal, the last thing anyone cares about is learning a new "hobby". Fact. – Interview with Jeff, Balintawak Guru based in North Carolina.

When I first ran this question past Grand Master Taboada, he was not sure about the meaning of my question and he asked me to rephrase my meaning. This was definitely a case where a stronger mastery of my own indigenous tongue would do a lot to further my investigations. Manong is a very humble man and he has admitted to me on a couple of occasions how he both loves anthropologists, but is sometimes scared of not knowing what it is that they are actually asking. He worries that his responses will be taken out of context, or that he is answering within a context that he did not fully understand. So I modified my question and asked if he thought whether or not Filipinos understood that our culture had our own martial art? I certainly did not know until I was in my mid-twenties. Manong's response to my question is worth quoting at length:

I know that a lot of Filipinos are not aware that we have a Filipino martial art. So when I first came to the U.S. it became my main purpose to promote the art and expose this to the Filipinos, to people of Philippine descent who otherwise would not have known it, and to non-Filipinos around the world. I consider it as an added bonus if by learning our Philippine martial arts they would come back and claim their heritage. I am honored that a simple and uneducated guy like me would be contributing to the promotion of the Filipino martial arts in the world. In my teaching, I have always emphasized that this is an art that we have inherited from our ancestors who lived 500 years ago before Spain colonized us. The ancient art evolved into different styles now like the Balintawak Eskrima Founded by Great Grandmaster Venancio Anciong Bacon, Modern Arnis founded by good friend the late Professor Remy Amador Presas, The Doce Pares by SSG Ciriaco Cacoy Cañete and the Cañete Clan, La Puntis by Grandmaster Filemon Caburnay and the son Grandmaster Undo Caburnay and many others. Among the Grandmasters of Balintawak Eskrima who were the students of Great Grand Master Anciong Bacon - Grandmaster Teddy Buot, Grandmaster Jose Villasin, Grandmaster Tinong Ybanez and Grandmaster Teofilo Velez. I wish they were still alive today, watching us promoting the art of Balintawak. – Interview with GM Bobby

Manong's response was far more profound than what I believed my simple question would generate. Here was a man with a humble beginning whose only ambition was to spread the art back to the diaspora. Perhaps these are not the words that he would use to describe what he intended or what he has accomplished, but it is certainly the outcome of his effort to promote a singular aspect about our culture. It seems that the commonality among practitioners of Filipino descent is that the practice of FMA is only one aspect, yet an incredibly important one. Most of the group of men (and women?) who share their thoughts with me about Filipino identity, create their identity out of an assemblage of acts, such as what and how they eat and with who they eat, family customs,

and especially activities they encourage their children to participate in such as traditional dances called *Tinikling*. So answering the question of how Filipino practitioners maintain their identity may be impossible since most are not necessarily consciously constructing an identity as much as they are *being* an identity. A conversation I had with Guru Jeff can illustrate this point:

Since college, I have had many of the same observations and questions you seem to be addressing in your research. I was the first generation to be American-born, but I didn't learn Tagalog as a child and I didn't get to visit my parent's homeland until I was a senior in high school. As a youngster growing up in a then primarily white North Seattle [I interrupted Jeff to comment that it is still primarily white], I felt subconsciously forced to choose an identity - either act and behave like all the white kids, or go search out the Asian kids. Even through high school, I was "lumped" into a demographic of "Asian" - which is difficult. I knew as much about Chinese or Japanese culture as I did black culture. But for white kids, they assume since we all eat rice, we are similar. Back in the early 80's there wasn't as much diversity in Seattle. The Pan Asian culture you see in Seattle today was not prevalent, especially in North Seattle. I think things would have been vastly different (not necessarily better) had I grown up in a Filipino-heavy community, like Beacon Hill, or parts of California like Daly City or Union City. In some ways though, it made me appreciate my "Filipino-ness" as I got older I've had to actively seek it out.

By the time I was a young adult, I was searching out things that were not just "Asian" but also Filipino. Strangely, it wasn't until I was an adult, living in the Bay area, that I was truly able to start identifying with my Filipino American heritage and understand it better.

When I finally stumbled onto FMA, I found a school in Providence, where I was living at the time. It was taught at a Jeet Kune Do school by *a very white instructor*. When I approached him about how all I was interested in

was the Filipino martial arts, he told me that "Kali was advanced" and I needed to train in JKD for 12 months minimum before I could join the Kali [Kali being another form of FMA] classes. I explained that I was Filipino-American, had trained in other arts, and that I really wanted to focus on the Kali. But he was resistant to this, so I joined his JKD school and about 8 months into it, he finally let me start practicing Kali. Thankfully for me, we moved to NC a year later and I met Bobby Taboada.

Here I was, a very enthusiastic student, asking desperately to learn FMA, and a white guy telling me that it was "too advanced" for me. To make matters worse, he used a few Tagalog words mixed into the curriculum, and absolutely butchered these. He had no historical or cultural perspective and had essentially stripped any of that from the way he taught the art. To add to this, although it's not relevant - his brand of FMA turned out to be incomplete and not very good [I disagreed with Jeff and thought the teacher's skill set level was extremely relevant]. In my experience with studying FMA and meeting other practitioners, instructors like him are more prevalent. I thank my lucky stars daily for happening upon Grandmaster Taboada. – Follow up interview with Guru Jeff.

When I reflect on this conversation, as well as the casual conversations I have regularly with other Filipino practitioners, I am left wondering if the practice of FMA for Filipino Americans is an Indigenous cultural resurgence. If so, is this a potentially powerful catalyst towards decolonization or is it a modernist desire for a symbolic patrilineal lineage? In other words, It seems as though this practice may encompass a bit of both, especially when I observe how few Filipina women there are that practice FMA, especially Balintawak. There are certainly Filipina and non-Filipina women in our system, but they are overwhelmingly the minority. The practice both challenges the colonial narrative, but it also reinforces the patriarchal narrative of domains of male spaces.

In my own Seattle club, there are at two women who train regularly and a third woman who trains irregularly, all of whom are Filipina, one of whom is a mother. For

both of the Filipinas who are regular members of the club, their training fits within a category of cultural fulfillment, but more than that, it addresses an insecurity they have about uncertain safety, if accosted by a male attacker. For both of these women, the challenge of the art doesn't address an existential or metaphysical desire of claiming a masculine warrior heritage; the primary function of the training is to build real life bodily preservation skills. Based on conversations I have had with men in the club, their worst fear may be to be robbed at gun or knife point, but for the women, their fears and anxieties about confrontation include these dangers plus the added danger of sexual assault and the inability to defend or repel a much stronger assailant. A young Filipina who I had an opportunity to meet in Charlotte NC during my first level exam surprised me with an unexpected response to a question I asked her about what her hopes were for the future of FMA.

Honestly, I'm a little selfish. I wish sometimes that it would remain underground; a cultural secret; our weapon. Sometimes I wish that it could have remained an art to be passed down from father to son (and hope that I was somehow in one of those great families). But it is not of course, and it will continue to spread and grow in popularity with non-Pinoys. What I do know is that I will teach it to my children in the context of its being part of their heritage, and not merely as another sporty extra-curricular activity. I want them to know that we have always prided ourselves in hard and honest work, that we have never feared poverty. I want my children to know that the blood that runs through their veins is the blood of warriors.-
Interview with Aisa.

Aisa's response seems to answer yes to both questions about FMA as decolonial practice as well as it also being a desire for a patrilineal lineage. How can we think about this tension? Can both meanings have a parallel position of importance, resolving and neutralizing the tension? Perhaps the weaponizing aspect of the practice is both literal and symbolic. Literal in terms of strikes to immobilize a more powerful foe, but symbolic in that it becomes disadvantageous for other cultures if they try to interfere with our autonomy and try to force a hegemonic rule. I am reminded of situations I experienced

growing up when I witnessed women in my family and other Filipino families (as well as my Mexican friend's families) carrying out the matrilineal position of family cook, spending long hours in the kitchen preparing meals for the family. From a white second wave feminist perspective, and for good reason based on the Anglo feminist context, this position within the home and family dynamic can be a place of subservience to the father or husband. But when I think about what I experienced growing up in a matriarchal Filipino home, the kitchen was from where the head of the house ruled, and there was no doubt that the same women who were spending a large portion of the day rolling lumpia, were also making all of the critical family decisions. Aisa distinctly refers to FMA as "a cultural secret; our weapon" while also seeing it as a tradition of knowledge passed down through patrilineal lines.

Examining the ethics in training women, which involves men physically hitting women, Alex Channon writes, "By becoming accomplished fighters, it is suggested that female martial artists can be the living expression of feminist resistance... [T]heoretically speaking, within mixed-sex training the subversive value of women's involvement in martial arts is amplified, given that they are learning to fight with, against and alongside men."⁵ Whether or not I can uncover with certainty that FMA is at its core, decolonial, it is certainly clear that for almost all Filipino practitioners, the arts translate into a desire for an ancestral habitus that embodies a physical critique to domination that many fathers in Balintawak teach to their daughters.

It is this desire for Filipinos of the diaspora to seek out and inhabit a cultural meaning that I propose offers a decolonial praxis. I use the term praxis in Gramsci's sense of its meaning. In his words from *The Prison Notebooks*,

A philosophy of praxis cannot but present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise, as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world). First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of 'common sense', basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that 'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating

⁵ Channon 2013.

and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity.⁶

What Gramsci is poignantly describing in this passage is the potential for anyone (especially the marginalized) to be a philosopher. Our tacit knowledge possesses ways of making sense of the world we experience. For Gramsci, there is no tension between the intellectualized belief of the world, and the embodied praxis of negotiating through this world. The conflict of acting in a way that is alternate to what is verbalized is a product of experience. Even if a Filipino believes in the American hegemonic narrative of the U.S. as the savior to *the little brown brother*, the everyday lived experience of those in the margins builds a consciousness of the people that through cultural practice, becomes a weapon to intervene the hegemony of colonial culture.

Ceremony

Our system’s ceremonial opening...

“Attention” (holding the stick with both hands in front).

“From my heart” (holding the stick in our right hand over our heart).

“You are welcome” (extending the stick to our right side, symbolically opening the soul).

“With respect” (returning the stick to a double grip in front as we bow our heads).

When something has meaning, it no longer exists abstractly as merely sitting in the world, but it exists at once in its most robust, vigorous, and powerful form but also as its most fleeting, fragile and ethereal form. Capturing the personal meaning ascribed to a practice in any fashion aside from the ceremonial act itself is as nonsensical as carrying water in the palms of your hands across the vastness of a desert landscape. Even if one were to complete the journey with some amount of water left in their hands, immeasurable amounts of precious water would slip through the carrier’s hands or be lost to the sun. This is the challenge of conveying through written analytical documentation,

⁶ Gramsci 1929-1935.

the personal and collective meanings of ritualized performance. I recognize the absurdness of this work and opt for drinking the water and relying on the hermeneutics of ethnography to transmit the meaning of its sustenance through my year and a half long journey. This by no means is the end, but only the beginning.

What are martial arts at their base other than the symbolic reenactment of violence in a controlled (and presumably safe) environment. The application of the arts for the practitioner ultimately depends on the situation and what is ethically acceptable to the practitioner. The conditioning aspect of martial art training becomes a ritualistic performance built on semiotic frames constructing meanings for the practitioner. The pupil assembles their sense of identity, social capital and bodily capital out of a matrix of non-discursive forms of knowledge transmission through their phenomenological experience during training. This happens at the macro-conscious level of following their martial art system's codes of conduct, style of movement, rules of obedience, memorizing specific techniques and their given names, but also at the micro-conscious level of unspoken cues, group dynamics, and the subconscious absorption of oral knowledge between practitioners as they share historical, political, or anecdotal stories pertaining to a myriad of topics perhaps not even directly related to martial arts.

In Loïc Wacquant's observations of Black boxers in South Chicago, he writes, "[M]embership in the gym stands as the tangible sign of acceptance in a virile fraternity that allows the boxer to tear himself away from the anonymity of the mass and thereby attract the admiration and approval of the local society."⁷ In my research I find this commonality along with the added aspect of cultural connection to a specific geographic origin along with an ancestral habitus. Wacquant skillfully describes boxing pedagogy by writing,

[B]oxing consists of a series of strategic exchanges in which one pays for one's hermeneutical mistakes immediately, the force and frequency of the blows taken (or the "punishment" received, in pugilistic parlance) providing an instantaneous assessment of the performance... To understand the universe of boxing requires one to immerse oneself in it firsthand, to learn it and experience its constitutive moments from inside.

⁷ Wacquant p. 15, 2004.

Native understanding of the object is here the necessary condition of an adequate knowledge of the object.⁸

The logic of ritual possesses within itself a structure of meaning to meanings. Simply put, the meanings produced as a result of the structures that formed them, do not project away from its origin, but secure and renew the ritual that bore them. Remembering as ritual is indigenous.

Decolonial Violence

Frantz Fanon proposed that colonialism is violence at its most embodied, political and institutional form. He further believed that the only way to make violence yield was with greater violence and that participation in struggle against colonialism was in and of itself a healing act for the colonized. Fanon writes, “Decolonization is the encounter

between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation.”⁹ The root story of martial arts is the story of two bodies; the body that is forcing its power, its authority, dominance and rule over another, physically, and the body that is resisting, defending, refusing to allow itself to be aggressively controlled and violated. FMA offers a cultural reflection of this philosophy along with a deep ethical code of the appropriateness of violence and the difference between self-defense and warrior ethics not to be confused with the violence of occupation and the war machine.

Last night Guru John asked me what my reasons were for wanting to know Filipino Blade techniques. He believed that in reality, there is no such thing as a “knife fight”. The blade isn’t shown until the assassination. He distinctly used the word *assassination*. He told me that a knife attack in the street is exactly like in jail; your attacker will hit you from behind or when you are not expecting it. Or from multiple attackers with one of their friends distracting you with a confrontation. There will never be a blades drawn, skill vs. skill scenario. Reality is unpredictable, unforgiving, and ugly. The blade is unforgiving and should be regarded with the highest respect. John believed that there are only three reasons why anyone would ever need to learn about blades; for the warrior culture aspect, military or law enforcement. – Field notes

⁸ Wacquant p. 59, 2004.

⁹ Fanon 1963.

Fanon further writes,
 [Decolonization] focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of history. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The “thing” colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation.¹⁰

Fanon’s words resonate with Filipino statesman Opolinario Mabini’s remarks: The Filipinos realize that they can expect no victory over the American forces; they are fighting to show the American people that they are sufficiently intelligent to know their rights... the Filipinos maintain their fight against American troops, not from any special hatred, but in order to show the American people that they are far from indifferent to their political situation.¹¹

FMA, while tactically useful in combative application, is at its spirit, a practice of honoring the integrity of the self.

Pushing further, Taiaiake Alfred offers an important reading of Fanon, and interprets three phases (in a non chronological order, and not in a completely compartmentalized order) of the philosopher’s notion of decolonialism; A) emulation, feeling that we are as good as the colonizer; B) nativism, seeking out of anything other than European that is indigenous, no matter if it does not belong to your culture or community; and C), living in this modern world but not of it. Being conscious of who we

¹⁰ Fanon 1963.

¹¹ Wiley. *Filipino Martial Culture*. 1997, original citation from Hurley, Vic. *Jungle Patrol; the Story of the Philippine Constabulary*,. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1938.

are, and knowing that we live in the world with all of its historical contexts while respecting and reawakening our traditions, without bowing to tradition.¹²

Let us transform Alfred's interpretation of Fanon's stages into the Filipino American context beginning with emulation. This is the need for the colonized to concede to the colonizer's platform as the ultimate point of arrival. This is similar to the second wave feminist perspective that women *could* be in positions of authority just as men, but without considering if anyone *ought* to be in positions of authority. This stage in Alfred's reading of Fanon could be compared to Dylan Rodriguez's analysis¹³ of the absenteeism of discourses within the Filipino national bourgeois on the topics of historic trauma of Filipinos by American forces. Since WWII, the narrative of the U.S. as saviors has erased the genocide of our peoples that occurred only 40 years prior to Japan's invasion.

Unable to defeat the guerillas in their mountains and forests, the Americans applied tactics of terror including forcing civilians into internment camps where many innocent people died of unsanitary conditions and torture. Other tactics included scorched earth campaigns where entire villages were slaughtered wholesale and left to rot in the open as a warning to the insurgents. The death toll from diseases attributed to conditions from war is debated among historians, but in November of 1901, during the height of the insurgency against the Americans, a correspondent reporting from Manila writing for the *Philadelphia Ledger* wrote,

The present war is no bloodless fake, opera bouffe engagement: our men have been relentless, have killed to exterminate men, women, children, prisoners and captives, active insurgents and suspected people from lads of ten up, an idea prevailing that the Filipino, as such, was little better than a dog, a noisome reptile, whose best disposition was the rubbish heap.

Our solders have pumped salt water into men to 'make them talk,' have made prisoners of people who held up their hands and peacefully surrendered, and an hour later, without an atom of evidence to show they

¹² Alfred, accessed August 11, 2014.

¹³ Rodríguez 2013.

were even insurrectos, stood them on a bridge and shot them down one by one, to drop in the water below and float down as examples to those who found their bullet-loaded corpses.¹⁴

The genuine comradery during WWII between U.S. soldiers who willingly gave their lives along side Filipinos defending their communities should not be forsaken, but along with that discourse ought to be a discourse about how the WWII Pacific engagement was much more of matter of one occupying force, fighting another occupying force in a territory that belonged to neither. One hundred years (and counting) of English as the language of education and economic prosperity has only complicated the desire of class upward mobility set against the backdrop of the agonies of desperate poverty in the Philippines. To emulate our colonizer only seems rational within all those given contexts. And staying close to Alfred's reading of Fanon, this is a good thing, because it is part of a cognizant process that opens possibilities for the other two stages.

Alfred's second stage description of decolonization is termed Nativism. Alfred describes this phenomenon as Native folks gravitating towards anything that remotely has any aspect of Indigenous culture, even if the art, artifact, practice, or insignia does not belong to their immediate community, and I would add to that, even if the art or artifact were an invented archetype. His examples are of North American Indigenous peoples wearing jewelry traditionally belonging to other tribes. I would also add to that, Indigenous people's wearing sports insignia of Indian caricatures, not out of fandom for the sport's ream, but out of a pride of reclaiming the mascot; something I witnessed on a daily basis for the ten years I lived on the edge of Diñe land.

One of my club mates, Raul, introduced me to my instructor's younger brother Jeff, who was testing that weekend for his fully qualified instructorship. Jeff and I touched hands and started off semi-quickly with some number 1, 2, 6 and 7 strikes; strikes directed towards either side of my head and upper arms. I blocked the attacks successfully at the speed Jeff was feeding them; he then picked up the pace and began delivering random attacks in doubling and tripling sequences. Some I evaded well, others penetrated my defense landing light yet stinging blows to my upper arms. The sting of the stick is the best incentive to moving faster.- Field notes

¹⁴ Welsh 2012 p. 85

In my interview with Guru Jeff, he spoke about his personal quest to find his Filipino-ness taking him through a passage of Asian-ness. My own personal experiences are comparable to others in my community who hold positionalities somewhere between Asian and Pacific Islander. It is by no coincidence that nearly every member of my Eskrima Club began their martial art journey in other martial art systems that have their origin rooted somewhere else in Asia. The process by which Filipino practitioners begin their journey in the martial arts habitus of other Asian systems before discovering FMA is our reflection of the Fanonian second stage of decolonizing.

The third stage, is one that I believe many practitioners possess, which is to acknowledge our historical context and to wrestle with a deeper understanding of why we are here. On my very first meeting of the Balintawak group, I was greeted with smiles when I informed them that I was half Filipino and that I would enjoy a chance to observe their class. The Instructor, John, asked me if I would prefer to actually participate. I did, and I have been since, most grateful.

The group was small that day and the other members became excited once John shared with them the fact that my mother was Filipino. They immediately wanted to know so much about me. Two members, Joel and Quentin, were lightly arguing over my "origins". One asked, "What city is your mom from?" I told them Zambagua City (heavily announcing the Z sound which assaulted theirs ears for a short time before I was corrected with the appropriate S sound to Sambagua City). At this point they began to argue back and forth about whether or not I was Vasayan, all the while in front of me.

They argued and laughed until Quentin turned to me and asked, "What does your mom speak? Tagalog, Cebano, Ilocano..." I said Chavacano. They both looked stunned. Apparently, my mother's dialect is a rarity in the Philippines, and even scarcer outside of the islands. It is a Spanish Creole that exists nowhere else in the world besides Zambagua City in Mindanao. Quentin kept saying to Joel while pointing at me with his stick, "Moro Moro", which is a reference to the Muslim Filipinos of the south, and historically was loosely used as a pejorative against Muslims after the Spanish successfully converted the central islands to Catholicism. Joel continued to insist that I was Vasayan because linguistically, Chavacano is a hybrid of Spanish and Cebuano, a Vasayan dialect.

Finally, getting tired of arguing, they both looked at me and asked, "Where is your mother's father from?" They waited in serious silence. These men were expecting an answer. I told them that my Lolo and Lola were both from Cebu and nearly everyone thought that was exciting, since the club at that time was mainly Vasayan and that Balintawak Eskrima originates from Cebu. As they laughed and jeered loudly I didn't tell them that my grandfather was also Muslim. I felt at the time that there were too many intercultural entanglements just between the five men in the room.

Before I left, Joel said to me, "The Spanish tried to just come in, and take over, and make us forget who we are. They tried to Hispanicize everywhere they went, even in the Philippines. We still exist because our ancestors had *this art* (Joel holding out his stick and referencing it with his body language when he said "this art") and they fought with *it* to preserve *us*." Although a subculture of Filipino culture, FMA has been the match to rekindle the furnace inside many of us. A decolonial process is not a template that each and every one of us can fit into the same way.

The last time I visited was 1981. Our family traveled to Manila and my father's hometown of Iba, Zambales. To be quite honest, in the past, I lost the urge to travel back to the Philippines because I didn't want to experience the corruption that we experienced back in 1981. But training in Eskrima has given me a greater appreciation for my homeland. I look forward to traveling to the Philippines, especially to Cebu, where so many Eskrima styles started.- Interview with club mate, Raul 2013.

Ethnographic Collaboration

Shadowing, Habitus and Fields.

In each moment that we call a "now" much of what happens at present is shadowed in indescribable mystery. It is for this reason that I use the term *shadowing*, to describe the act of existing inside the phenomenological shadows of experience. Things surround us in our environment, but the meanings of things are given their meaning through

interpretation. Something I believe Heideggerian analysis ignores is how the agent's conditioning and disposition also modify the way the agent interprets his or her environment. An example would be a street curb. To most people a street curb is nothing more than the corner of the raised sidewalk, separating it from the street. But to someone who skateboards, perhaps when they see a curb, they can visualize it as a place to potentially grind their board. To a gardener, a yard is a potential place to grow flowers or crops, not just a place that needs to be mowed every other week. To a person with insurance a doctor's office is where they can get check ups, but to some one without insurance a doctor's office can be a place of dread because of the enormous bill that will come later. These perspectives and positionalities can transform as easily as situations and contexts can transform for the agent.

During the transformation process of learning the FMA, this same shift occurs and transforms the surrounding environment and everything within it to the agent. A set of keys no longer holds meaning just a set of keys, but as a potential self-defense weapon. A rolled up magazine, walking cane, pen, keychain, or towel, all take on more meanings as potential devices and instruments of self-defense. Body parts take on these meanings as well. Fingers, elbows, palms, and knees become referred to as "primary" weapons. Things in the environment transform in meaning to become teaching aids for the arts. Observed for its ability to flex in the wind, the Tagalog term for bamboo, *Kawayan*, takes on meaning of instruction in Balintawak when my instructor tells me to lean back while keeping my feet planted.

Through much of the martial arts we encode on our bodies confidence, awareness of body and breath through movement. Marcel Mauss refers to 'bodily techniques' as corporeal schemas, learned through initiation.¹⁵ Through the act of Balintawak repetition, the practice passes through tradition and drills and exercises become culturally encoded, molding practitioner's 'bodily capital' into Balintawak capital. What is the ultimate aim of this manner of 'bodily capital'? We train in violence to understand the reality of violence so that we can hope to never experience street violence. The practitioner transforms from '*having* a body' to '*being* a body'. The constant act of *being* over thinking cultivates a body/mind/breath synthesis. For the beginner, the techniques of

¹⁵ Maus [1943] 1973.

motion and movement make little sense and it is only through time that bodily techniques gain meaning.

Being, for Heidegger is a long and complex idea that he spent nearly his entire life thinking and writing about. But at its core, it is simply total presence. For Heidegger, to be a *being* does not just mean being alive; that is merely existing. It means having a participatory engagement with one's own future. He thinks that there is a difference between one who builds a chair and one who purchases a chair; he even thinks that the two chairs have completely different values. The builder's chair was an assemblage of abstract components, in which the creator foresaw an eventual chair, and committed to a process of creation to meet the projected future. The purchaser lacks in all these virtues and essentially is futureless; without engagement and navigation of moments connected to a future, we are just living organisms with meaningless inertia.

What would that mean if the craft and production of the moment into the future were a process by which the building and transformation took place on the physical body? If building a chair fits into Heidegger's *Dasein*, martial art is the embodiment of *Dasein*.

Curbs, crops and chair purchasers merely sit inside the world. Only *Dasein* is *being* in the world. For Heidegger, to also be truly *Dasein*, there must be some amount of struggle to stand against anxiety, fear and death. *Dasein* feels no angst in the face of death. There is a Filipino expression that resembles this negation of anxiety in the face of uncertainty, *Bahalana*. It's an expression that captures a multiplicity of meanings all at once. It often is translated into *come what may*, but it also has an implicit connotation of things that are out of your hands, such as earthquakes and typhoons, and accepting them as an inevitable part of existence. *Bahalana*, is an important philosophical core to the Philippine psyche, and certainly a foundational base to FMA principles.

In order to bring theory out of the ethereal plane and place this work where sky meets earth, I turn to Pierre Bourdieu in particular his concepts of *field* and *habitus*. *Habitus* meaning "[S]ystems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way

When John watches, his head is slightly tilt and it almost looks like he points with his eyes. He watches form, position, mistakes, and troubles.- Field notes

being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.”¹⁶

To make this description clear let us imagine Jazz music for instance. It would be a mistake to believe that during Beethoven’s era all of the musical notes, rhythms and arrangements of Jazz music were already there, but simply had not been found. But point of fact, Jazz music could not have ever existed had there not been a historical sequence of musicians building from what existed out of the generation that preceded them. Jazz music could not have existed in Beethoven’s time because it would not of had the context to which it needed to push off of in order to exist.

In terms of Balintawak we can think of the system’s founder, Vanancio “Anciong” Bacon embodying the habitus of Lorenzo “Ensong” Saavedra’s Corto Linear style. We can even think of the Doce Pares Club as its own field, which Bacon emerged from, modifying the field just enough to found a new style. These transitions between conservation and transformations of fields are most subtle at their point of schism. Bacon’s focus on the single stick and empty hand application of Eskrima was a break from the curriculum of the double stick method. This was not only the birth of a new Eskrima style or method, but of a completely new Eskrima habitus. Balintawak’s concentration of close quarters tactics including grabbing the opponent’s stick, still challenges practitioners of other styles’ codes, who emphasize never grabbing the other person’s stick, because for them, stick training is only a stand in for blade fighting, but for Balintawak, the stick is just a stick, the *doxa*, or rules of the field, was not only changed, but accepted by practitioners who followed Bacon into the new field.

Returning to Bourdieu, reality is a social construct; to exist is to exist in relation to and with others. In Balintawak there is a relationship between Grand Master and pupils, whether they be beginner students, advanced beginners or Gurus; those that have completed the system’s curriculum and have produced another student that has completed the curriculum. These relationships comprise processes of differentiation into semi-autonomous and specialized spheres of action called fields.

¹⁶ Bourdieu p. 72, 1977.

Power relations between and within these fields structure human behavior and influence how practitioners take part. Each participant in the field is an agent and each agent has a position with respect to the field, in my case, the field being Balintawak Cuentada Eskrima. According to Bourdieu, agents have only two goals, transforming or conserving the field. This is done so because each position carries different dispositions, such as a Guru's position and title of respect based upon the agent's bodily and symbolic capital. The tools of habitus theory enables my research to generate a map and lantern to navigate through the shadows of phenomenological knowledge.

During the apprentice process, the teacher channels knowledge of the trade and is considered the authority that can make the apprentice's output legitimate. But the pupil's own agency has a hand in the stabilization or transformation of a process. In Balintawak, the term for the head instructor of a school or club is the *Guru*. This title can only be achieved through apprenticing another student through the six levels of system's completion and through testing before the Grand Master and other Gurus. The term *Guru* is a remnant of Filipino and ancient Vedic culture contact, where the term originated. A *Guru* is not a title of categorical status, but a position of sacred responsibility. The social body of Balintawak is characterized by associations of responsibility, each student being responsible for not only their own learning, but for that of their partners since training is contingent on one to one training.

Balintawak skill cannot be built autonomously and advancement can only occur if apprentices become teachers themselves.

Ethnoarchaeologists Nicholas David and Carol Kramer write about the importance of apprenticeship in the material record by stating, "The manner whereby craft skills are transmitted and learned affects continuity and change in cultural traditions."¹⁷

His rules are not law. His system is not law. When you are doing Balintawak, you're doing *your* Balintawak. He merely shows you A door and not *THE* door. – Field notes about GM Taboada

One of Bacon's early students, Teofilo Velez, had risen to Master by the time he began teaching Balintawak to Bobby Taboada. Bobby's father was also an Eskrimador from another system, but through Bobby's teen years, he trained in boxing, Shotokan Karate, Judo and Kung Fu. When Bobby first laid eyes on Balintawak, he knew he had found the most practical, simplistic and effective form of self-defense.

¹⁷ David and Kramer p. 311, 2001.

The process of apprenticeship builds on the benefit of the teacher's experiences. All of the master's mistakes, innovations, and techniques, form a capital of tacit knowledge that the apprentice can attain if they are willing to adhere to the shadowy doxa of habitus. Lorenzo 'Ensong' Saavedra was Bacon's Master, and Bacon was Master to others including most notably, Teofilo Velez, and Jose Villasin who both innovated Balintawak further by adding drills and exercises that honed key aspects to Balintawak. Velez and Villasin are credited with adding grouping systems to Balintawak. Bobby had the benefit of not just being an apprentice to one Master, but to all three Masters of Balintawak at that time, Velez, Villasin and Great Grand Master Anciong Bacon.

Cuentada (to counter) was an element of Balintawak that had always been present. It is preparedness for the possibility that your attacker may already be as good as you if not better. Cuentada however, became Manong's focus and he has devoted the past forty years of refining the Cuentada principles. The best way to describe what may look like stick boxing, but what we call *play*, is to imagine that you are playing a game that is a cross between chess and pin ball, but instead of dropping one ball into the game, defending in *play* feels as though numerous pin balls are dropped into the game.

Beneath the wide swinging, flashy, and visible blows, Taboada's Balintawak arnis cuentada uses an array of sophisticated hidden (i.e., non-telegraphed) movements. There is no limit on where and what to hit except in friendly workouts, where injury is avoided and safety imposed. As a matter of fact, what is considered dirty-play in many martial arts is embraced in Balintawak arnis cuentada. Furthermore, the practitioner of Balintawak arnis cuentada is taught that there is a counter for every counter, and that continuous research and discovery is the basis of knowledge and wisdom... [T]he practical essence of *cuentada*: tactical awareness, continuous constructive anticipation, and selective follow-through with a conscious and unfolding tactical mind.¹⁸

Bobby innovated the Balintawak system further by bringing in his background in boxing and Shotokan. By focusing on core body torques and twists that generate an

¹⁸ Wiley p. 273, 1996.

incredible amount of energy for delivering full power strikes on every blow. Until his innovation, the strikes in Balintawak (as well as most other forms of Eskrima) were mostly set about by numerous rapid-fire combinations; Taboada Balintawak is one hit one kill, celebrating our ancient Filipino reputation as headhunters. Grand Master Taboada will humbly claim that he did not change Balintawak, but that he merely added to what was already there. I cannot find any better example of the doxa of habitus changing than by examining the constant innovations of FMA systems by the very agents from within the field.

In my first moment of meeting the Grand Master Taboada, my teacher, John, introduced me to Bobby by saying, “GM, this is the one studying anthropology I was telling you about. He would like to get an interview with you.” In Manong’s thick Cebuano accent, he said, “*Interbiew*, I don’t know. Maybe if your questions are in *Pilapino* I can answer them better than American. My English is not the best.” I understood him perfectly fine and told him that I was Filipino and that my Tagalog was a bit rusty, but I understood better than I could speak it. He smiled brightly and in an excited voice he said, “Oh my gosh you’re Pinoy! What is this, (reaching out to grab my beard, tugging at it from the bottom) you must be *halp-halp*, huh? American father, or your mom?”

“My mom is Filipina.”

“Oh that’s good, that’s good. *Interbiew* me now, I’m ready.” Well I wasn’t ready. The Grandmaster caught me off guard and I wasn’t prepared to interview him then and there at the school as other students were stretching and warming up, so I asked him if I could have some of his time later.

Manong is not only our sage, but in a lot of ways, our ambassador back to our origins. Manong doesn’t want us to forget our past training; in fact another way to disrespect him would be if he thought you were disrespecting your previous teachers by abandoning them. “Never forget where you came from and who gave you your arts.”- GM Taboada, Field notes

There were only two students testing for their level 7. Jeff, my instructor’s younger brother and another practitioner named Adam. The time is close to 6:00 pm and my level one test began at 9:00, so I can only imagine to what degree Adam and Jeff were exhausted. It took nearly 30 to 45 minutes for each of them to demonstrate their original techniques during full speed play. Then Jeff had to defend against all 12 of the other fully qualified instructors. As each instructor would begin, they would congratulate

Jeff on a hard day's work, then begin with rapid and hard strikes. Jeff's exhaustion was set in and it was all he could do to just defend from numerous angles, feints and blows. When it was my instructor's turn to feed against his brother, Jeff, the whole crowd made a cooing noise of "oh" with everyone reaching for their cameras as Jeff and John laughed.

The last person Jeff had to then face was the Grandmaster, except Manong did not use a stick to feed, but rather a sword. Not a practice sword, but a live blade as they say. Once you see the blade being unsheathed, you wake up. Jeff defended with excellent blocks but the fatigue had some consequences and during one of Manong's thrusts, Jeff left his left arm raised instead of keeping his limbs in tight, and he took a puncture stab to the lower left forearm. As blood ran down his arm other folks mobilized to clean his wound and examine the damage. Fortunately, several of the other practitioners had a good deal of knowledge on how to treat for such injuries. As Jeff was getting his arm looked after, Adam then began his portion of the dueling as Manong tried his best to give his attention to Adam's training but in his face was written the expression of a man that was tremendously worried about his friend. When it was Adam's turn to face the blade, Manong taped up the tip of the sword so that it wouldn't puncture as easily. Adam, seeing the reality of what just a controlled blade could do, did not make the same mistake as Jeff and he kept his arms tucked in and tight against Bobby's sword slashes and spears.

Jeff was not seriously hurt and it turned out to be a fairly clean stab that only needed some stitching. But several people jokingly referred to Jeff as being lucky enough to have been stabbed by the Grandmaster. Of the whole weekend, the only injuries were from Manong to Jeff's arm and a black eye given to John on the first day, leaving others to wonder if the brothers were perhaps Manong's favorites. I turned to my club mate Raul and asked, "Hey Raul, besides you know, the stabbing, did it seem like Jeff's test was just a little bit more intense than Adam's?" Placing his hands on his waist and speaking quietly to me, "For Jeff and John, and you and me, Manong has a high amount of expectation. The expectation is higher on us because we're Pinoy. This is our system."

In school and at jobs, I have spent countless hours, days, weeks or even months never knowing another peer's name. By the end of that weekend, I made many friends with individuals who were but total strangers to me three days before. I set out originally in my research into Filipino martial arts to discover the embodiment of my ancestors. And through this process discover who I was. I imagine that a lot of other Filipinos I met that weekend began with the same intent. And who we discovered in the process, was each other.

When I am defending, I'm both no one, and the most boiled down or raw version of me. When I am defending, I am being, as opposed to all the other moments of everyday life when I just am. – Field notes

Participant Observation/Performance

“Attention.
From my heart.
You are welcome.
With respect.”

Those are the opening and closing words to every Balintawak class. I started my training in martial arts about ten years ago in Flagstaff Arizona. My foundational training was in Daitō-ryū Aiki-jūjutsu and Hapkido. Both systems are steeped in Japanese and Korean traditions. My instructor, Neil, was an American, who like many Americans of his generation, was enamored with martial arts in the movies. He told me about his love of Bruce Lee and how he felt the first time he saw on screen a roundhouse

As I touched hands that first day with variously skilled players we formed fast friendships and commonalities based on our love for the art. At a midpoint in the training, we went over a drill that I had difficulty in accomplishing. Manong said loudly, “Everyone have that?” I nervously shook my hand indicating that I was neither sure nor confident that I had the drill. GM said, “Come here man.” I walked to the center of the mat nervous to my core. The worst thing I could do was look bad, for I thought it would reflect badly on my teacher. GM had a type of power about him. It was as if he could read me and transfer some of his strength over to me, because at the moment we touched hands I had confidence, and more than that I felt the whole room silently rooting for me. He did a series of three variations of the same drill that provoked my defenses from a series of attacks, each ending with a punch; one to the head, one to the midline and one to the stomach. I completed the drill without error and he said, “*Bery* good, you see, you got that one man!”- Field notes

house kick given with precision and power. He knew he wanted to be able to do what he saw in the movies. Some twenty plus years later, he was a martial artist owning and operating his own martial arts dojo.

I remember once my instructor asked me in casual conversation about my ancestry, wanting to know where my origins were. I told him that my mother is Filipino and my father is American. His eyes lit up and he said to me, “You know that your culture has an amazing martial art, right?”

This was the first time someone clued me into the fact that the martial arts are not something exclusive to China, Japan and Korea. He planted the seed that would eventually lead me towards not only the martial art that I had been craving my whole life, but towards my cultural roots that I had also been separated from.

Moving forward from that time to five years later, I found myself living in Seattle Washington and looking for Filipino martial arts (FMA). I figured that with the large and historic presence of Filipinos in the Puget Sound area, finding a place where FMA was being taught would be a lot easier than it was in northern Arizona. I found a school that promoted itself as a FMA. I slowly started to realize that they only taught bits and pieces of Filipino systems. When the best teacher, Bob, opened his own school in west Seattle, I followed him over to his new school and continued training. I was hopeful that the new school would focus more on the Filipino arts, but once again I found myself craving not just bits and pieces of Filipino systems, but a complete Filipino system, taught by Filipinos. I was looking for the art taught along with the culture that produced the art.

I had honest discussions with Bob about my desires to be immersed in an intact system that was headed by Filipinos, and why that was culturally and personally important to me. He pointed me into the direction of one of his instructors who only focused on one Filipino system. So with Bob’s blessing I packed my Eskrima sticks and headed towards the Filipino community center (FCC) on the night that classes were being held.

I walked into the FCC and didn’t exactly know where to go. I saw a middle aged Filipino man sitting at the kiosk watching a sports game. I asked him if he could point me towards where FMA classes were usually held and he told me to go into the ballroom. I walked into the ballroom (which was converted from a bowling alley still with lanes and

triangles on the floor) and saw three Filipino men and Chinese man sitting around a table talking. The instructor's name was John, and he stood up and introduced himself to me and asked how I heard about his group. I told him that I trained with his student, Bob at the west Seattle school, but that I wanted more than Bob could provide. John asked me if I knew anything about Balintawak, and I told him I knew nothing, but that I was Filipino and I wanted to learn a Filipino system. He understood immediately that I wasn't just looking to learn how to fight, but that I was seeking a cultural practice to reconnect me to my community.

That was the night I joined the Seattle Balintawak group. Our group is not an exclusive Filipino martial arts group, and we have a few non-Filipino students, but by and large, the club is primarily composed of Filipinos. In Balintawak there are no pads, eye-wear is optional, and you will get hit; hopefully never too hard, which is why control is central to the system.

During my visit to Charlotte, NC to train with the Grand Master and to take my first level exam, we took a lunch after the first day of intensive training before the exams. During lunch my stretched ears fascinated GM. I have my earlobes stretched out to about 7/8ths of an inch. I began stretching my ears when I was 20, because in my early research of indigenous peoples, I had learned that the Spanish who viewed the practice as heathen and barbaric outlawed tattoos and body modifications. I began modifying my ears as a way to reconnect with my culture's ancient practice. Now I found myself in the presence of other Filipinos who wanted to know why I had done this to my ears. I explained to Manong that our ancient pre-Spanish ancestors had worn jewelry like the ones I was wearing for centuries and that this was my way of honoring them. He smiled and put his hands on my shoulders and said, "I love this guy."

"I never finished my education, *this* is my only education (as he held out his stick, implying it being his source of learning). *This* is my only education. With this, when I was very young I told my teachers that I was going to spread Balintawak to the world, and they just smiled and said, 'ok Bobby, we'll see.' I told them I would and I knew I would, I just didn't know how I would. I first left Philippines and went to New Zealand. There I make many friends with Maori and New Zealander. The Maori like my stick so much that they say I'm honorary Maori. Then I go to Australia. I find students to teach in Australia. Then I come to America, and everywhere I go I have to learn new English. First new Zealander English, then Australian, now American, by now I get all confused with all the different English" he said chuckling.- GM Taboada

Stories went around the table about the Philippines and the “old ways”. Manong is a funny man who can tell stories all day that end with everyone laughing. By the time our food had arrived, all other conversations around the table had ceased and everyone just sat and listened to GM’s stories, sometimes laughing, sometimes becoming silent at how harsh the conditions were in the Philippines to produce such an intense art. There are many martial arts in the world, but I know of few that can match the pure ferocity, speed and violence of a system that evolved in a place where nearly everyone carries a knife.

Manong asked me about my family in the Philippines. After I told him that I had lost all my connections and had no way of ever finding my family he said to me that it would be ok, that I would always have a family in Balintawak. Another Pinoy said to me, “To us, your family was Cebu and that means you are Cebu, and that’s good because Cebu is Balintawak, and you are also Balintawak.” How often does an anthropologist discover their location, long lost, from inside of their subject?

“We think that language brings us closer to the truth with another person, but sometimes you can still misunderstand. But with the stick, there’s no miscommunication. You build closeness very quickly with the guy swinging a stick at you.”
-Practitioner’s answers to questions during his level 6 exam

Self-Reflexive Analysis

Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble... The comment, ‘She or he lives in it therefore they know’ certainly validates experience, but for researchers to assume that their own experience is all that is required is arrogant. – Linda T. Smith¹⁹

Edward Said’s analysis on the long held tradition of western superiority over the orient is captured in his writing, “[N]o Oriental was ever allowed to see a Westerner as he aged and degenerated, just as no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the

¹⁹ Smith p.140 [1999] 2012.

eyes of the subject race, as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj.”²⁰ This long held tradition of ‘West and East’ relations was forever challenged symbolically in 1973 when a young martial arts actor named Lee Jun-fan, better known as Bruce Lee, stepped into the silver screen and crushed the white character O’Hara, played by Robert Wall. *Enter The Dragon* was the first major film with international distribution that depicted a person of color who was physically unconquerable, avenging his sister’s death by brutally dispatching the white male who assaulted her. Bruce Lee is often revered as a martial arts legend that ushered the introduction of martial arts to the West. In the post-colonial context, he is revered because he embodied a symbol of colonial rage against the West.

The anti-colonial interpretation of Bruce lee is largely missed within the West, and what is primarily captured is another fantasy of undefeatable masculinity appropriated by the phenomenon of the *Mcdojo*; inside slang used to describe diluted Americanized martial arts. In the last twenty years, the growing popularity of Mixed Martial Arts competition (MMA) has been a tertiary challenge and boost to both traditional martial arts and Mcdojos everywhere because of MMA’s realistic application of combat through bloody spectacle.

“If they think they’re below you, bring them up. If they think they’re above you, bring them down.”
-Grand Master Taboada

Because FMA includes multidimensional aspects of combat that range from standing strikes to grappling, various FMA systems have had a gaining interest to non-Filipinos looking for the most practical all encompassing form of martial arts. In two documentary films about FMA, *Eskrimadors* and *The Bladed Hand: The Global Impact of the Filipino Martial Arts*, a problem posed is that FMA is gaining popularity in the West, as it continues to decrease in the Philippines.²¹ Both films try to answer this problem by stating the difficulties associated with wealth disparities between the Philippines and the West as the largest contributing factor. Westerners have access to higher quality of food and modern training facilities while the everyday Filipino in the islands have to contend with the daily struggle of surviving.

²⁰ Said p. 42, [1978] 1994.

²¹ Go 2010 and Ignacio 2012.

I have listened to Anglos my entire life describe Filipinos as tribal and our ancestors as savage. It is a label that immediately situates us in an archaic backwardness, as though the term tribal was synonymous with ignorant. As though tribal was a pejorative. As though Americans weren't tribal themselves, with sports teams, consumer allegiances, nation state flags and hierarchal careers with class statuses. All people are tribal. The difference between tribes of peoples is in their power relations, ceremonies and their meaning. Perhaps the most meaningful moment for me was in October of 2013 when dealing with the helplessness of watching the news of devastations in the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan.

Within days of the disaster, the FMA community across the U.S. and Europe held benefit seminars offering our teachings for fundraisers, sending donations back to the Philippines. My own Balintawak group participated in a large FMA seminar gathering, which raised over \$8,000 in just four hours. My involvement in the organizing for the event included networking with numerous Filipino student clubs from various schools, and visiting Filipino businesses across the city via bus and foot to hang fliers. The disaster of the Philippines brought together the FMA community of Seattle and the greater Puget Sound area galvanizing the main seminar organizers to begin holding a yearly FMA seminar in which all donations go to Philippine charities. The loss of life and damage in the Philippines has prompted practitioners, at least in Seattle, to use our privileges to aid Filipinos back home who need long-term infrastructural support.

Indigeneity

I think FMA is a great draw for "Americanized" Filipinos who were either born here or immigrated at a young age. Filipinos are legendary for their ability to "copy" or imitate others - whether it is American pop stars, or products off the shelf. Much of this is obviously attributed to the way the Philippines has been invaded or occupied for most of the past 400 years and as a country that has adopted many of the Spanish, Portuguese, American and Japanese culture into its own. But ask most Filipinos to

name three things that the Philippines is responsible for adding to the world's culture, and you will get blank stares. - Jeff

More indigenous and people of color are responding to centuries of oppression and decades of exoticizing research about us by filling the discourse with our voices. Many of us have the mixed blood of conquest running through our veins and our approach to the social field is fueled with a passion to speak not only justly of the past, but also to act justly with the present. Speaking justly of the past and seeking justice for the present is paramount to healing all sides of the colonial experience.

For the Philippines specifically, our culture is one that has endured the agonies of the deprivation of poverty, stemming from the inability to access the daily means of right livelihood. Numerous occupiers saw our islands as stepping-stones to the East, or in the case of Japanese occupation, a launch pad towards the West. These occupations left a legacy of increasing competition for fewer and fewer resources. Despite these acts of invasion and enforced cultural amnesia, FMA offers a preserved custom that I and other Filipino practitioners can feel and remember in our blood. The practice not only revives the ancestral motion back into our bodies but it rekindles our kin networks and the social relationships of our present.

During play I
forget that my
body hurts. -
Field notes

Our 20th century Diaspora is not composed of one homogenous type of Filipina/o. Some sojourners were fortunate to maintain their class status abroad. Others, with more desperate circumstances, arrived in the U.S. as impoverished laborers for industry, soldiers for armies, or wives for men. We have established tightly knit communities wherever we have landed. We endured the pain of displacement and trauma of numerous occupying empires.

When I've asked other practitioners if they believe Filipino martial arts are an extension of an ancient pre-colonial art, or a modern Filipino innovation, both possibilities merge dialectically. In other words, yes to both questions. It is by most opinions a tradition of innovation. A study of FMA is a study about the resources a society possesses to continue their identity. If we echo Bourdieu's claim that we are beings who exist in relation to other beings, Balintawak clearly illustrates this by the very

fact that an individual's style can only emerge from training with other players, developing collaboratively as each player adjusts to one another's methods and body angles causing the evolution to be intermutual.

The function of habitus is, precisely, to restore to the agent a generative and unifying power, a constructive and classifying potency, while at the same time reminding us that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but that of a socialized body, which engages in practice organizing principles that are socially constructed and acquired in the course of a social experience at once situated and dated. – Pierre Bourdieu²²

Conclusions

What makes FMA indigenous is not just its genealogical or geographical origin, but also its commitment to reawakening the body's autonomous nature and encoding in movement an embodied history of resistance. The western paradigm of discourse and emphasis on empirical proof as the determiner of truth continues to spark rivalries among modern FMA practitioners. These rivalries are dominated with the master narrative of *historical evidence* as a tool to construct politics around which system is the *original*, and which others were modified from imported martial arts. The allegiance to oral tradition comes into full conflict with the western historical text and often both traditions of genealogical cultural passage (the oral vs. the written or documented) supplement the gaps in their genealogy with legends in order to compete with the other.

My hope is that more Filipinos can escape the cloak of the archival *proof* that western epistemology has blanketed across us. The fact is, no matter which system was an *original system* or *founder system*, whether it sprang from Spanish, Chinese, Indo-Persian or Malaysian influence, it was *indigenized* by our ancestors and cross pollinated or responded to each other in such dynamic ways that our cultural art is the outcome of

²² Bourdieu 2000.

these disruptions and intersections of histories and legends. As it stands now, Eskrima can contribute to our physical healing and certainly to our cultural healing.

Albert Memmi wrote, “The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community.”²³ Relocating ourselves, culturally and historically is our *Cuentada*. Our martial art is a symbol of our resistance to occupying forces and is a warrior practice that links us to our ancestors. This anti-colonial martial art teaches us how to take the embodied knowledge into a cultural practice of resistance, not only in the physical memorization of sequences of punches and kicks but also in the phenomenological battlefield against cultural hegemony. Our bodies possessed knowledge before there were words to separate them. Martial arts are a co-evolution between two fundamental forces, oppressor and the oppressed; war machine versus the autonomous. Many combative arts can teach you how to attack which stems from a (war machine mentality) need to control.

Many of the Filipino systems I have encountered emphasize defense first and foremost. In Balintawak Eskrima, our entire practice is based on reaction and embodying a fluid yet rapid counter to whatever possible and unpredictable attacks may come. To abandon control during a high stress sequence of serious multiple attacks and to forge a physical being that can engage and receive each attack with a counter strike is an embodiment of indigenous knowledge that our cultural martial art practice returns to the body.

Interpersonal conflict will always be a component of human existence, and will always be so as long as insolence, anger, fear, distrust, contempt, exploitation, oppression, deprivation and desperation are part of the human condition. Self-defense is learning what to do if someone violently accosts you. Martial arts are personal never-ending explorations of history, morality, violence, ethics, physical motion, identity and purpose. A martial artist trains to be physically, mentally and psychologically faster, more agile and durable than an opponent so that a potential escalation in violence can be avoided, but if combat were to occur, to treat the encounter as a fight to the finish. Indigenous martial arts do everything as mentioned above in addition to understanding that our colonial encounter is still yet to be unfinished.

²³ Memmi p. 91, [1965] 1991.

One system, many hands. -GM Taboada

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