

Filipino Martial Tradition

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I hear that on the Internet there is acrimonious debate on questions such as who is the arnisador whom Gran Maestro Antonio Ilustrisimo appointed as his successor; who should continue the line of Edgar Sulite; who is the real representative of Pekiti-Tirsia? I can only shake my head in amused disbelief. To a traditional arnisador, such questions are non-questions. The controversies arise because some martial artists who know the Chinese or Japanese martial arts try to force the tradition of arnis to fit the moulds of those styles. But the tradition of arnis is different.

Arnis is a Military Art, not Civilian

Legend asserts that monks and civilians developed kung fu and karate. There are many variations to those legends. In one, monks hardened their hands so that they could chop wood for fire because they could not carry bladed implements. They extended their discovery to develop external kung fu for self-defense. In Okinawa, civilians also hardened their hands and feet, and use agricultural implements to defend themselves against marauding Japanese soldiers. That is the origin of karate, legend says. And Taoist monks developed internal kung fu to integrate mind and body. How about arnis?

Here, there are no records; there are no legends. But we can make educated inferences. The first clue is the name of the art, arnis de mano. Arnis seems to be a corruption of the Spanish word, *arnés*, which means mail armor. Mail is flexible armor made of overlapping metal rings, loops of chain, or scales, such as those worn by European knights in the Middle Ages. Arnis de mano thus literally means armor with the hands and alludes to the reputed ability of the arnisador to defend himself with his hands as though he had put on an armor of mail.

Another clue to the military character of arnis is that arnisadores train with weapons before they train with bare hands. Why? No soldier goes to war with empty hands. He fights with weapons first, and uses his bare hands only as a last resort. (In contrast kung fu, karate and judo practitioners betray their civilian origins by starting with empty hands.)

Arnis Adapts to Civilian Weapons

But when the Spaniards occupied the Philippines, they abolished the warrior class. They forbade the Filipinos from carrying their beloved spears, kampilan and blowguns. They banned archery. But...Filipinos could still carry the riding or whipping stick with which to drive their cows, carabaos and horses. They could walk around town with canes or walking sticks even if they were not elderly. Farmers could strap a utility bolo around their waists before stepping out of the house. Any farmer or townsman could conceal a dagger or a knife around his person. And of course, a man or woman, always had his hands and feet.

Arnisadores now concentrated their techniques around those five classes of weapons. They no longer practiced archery, used the spear or employed the blowgun, and they eventually forgot their techniques for those weapons. Of course, the arnisadores would also use other weapons if they were the only ones available, such as the hand scythe, the pestle or the carrying pole. But they retained the military character of arnis. Arnisadores still began their training with weapons and teaching remained "impersonal."

Arnis is Tribal, not Familial

What do I mean by “impersonal”? The unit of ancient Filipino society is the barangay. A barangay is composed of several families, which were not always related to one another. The number of dedicated warriors in a barangay was probably small. So every able-bodied man had to be able to defend the barangay. Thus arnis masters would teach any able-bodied man in the barangay regardless of the man’s family.

In contrast, ancient Chinese and Japanese masters considered their martial arts as family heirlooms to be used to defend a family or to enhance its prestige. So they confined – or tried to continue – their instruction to members of their clan. For example: Formerly only members of the Ch’en family could learn tai chi chuan until Yang Lu-ch’an broke the monopoly. Only the Takeda family and their retainers could learn aiki-jutsu. At present even the Kano family tries to keep control of judo even though instruction is not confined to the Kano family and is open to anyone.

In those styles, the titles of student, master, grandmaster, great grandmaster, and so on reflect those of the family: son, father, grandfather, great grandfather, etc. The master becomes a second father who can interfere in the most intimate details of life of the student to an extent unknown to the arnisador.

Each Arnis Master is *Sui Generis*

Kung fu students avidly seek genealogical charts of their styles because that is how they establish their legitimacy. But classical arnisadores pay only scant attention to charts like this. For the classical arnis master stands on his own abilities. He is not a master because he has received a certificate from a school, or because he has been appointed successor by a grandmaster. He is *sui generis*.

Arnisadores prefer teachers who shine by their own light, like the sun, rather than planets that shine by the reflected light of their school or teacher. That is why arnisadores like Jose Caballero, Remy Presas and Edgar Sulite claim to have created their own styles, rather than to have inherited them.

When a student first approaches a traditional master, the master may say, “*Yes, I’ll teach you the little that I know.*” He would then demonstrate his abilities and if the student likes it, he would stay for more instruction. What the classical master will not say is, “*Yes, I will teach you because I’m the 10th degree master of Rabid Dog Arnis*” or “*The grandmaster of Howling Devil Arnis appointed me as his successor.*” Such boasts are the product of a later, crasser, more commercial age.

A Student Becomes a Master

But in that case, when does an arnis student become a master? Does he promote himself? Strange as it may seem to a Chinese or to a Japanese stylist, the answer in traditional arnis is, yes. The traditional arnisador begins to teach when he feels he is ready to teach, not when his master tells him so. For the traditional master will never give him a teaching certificate, much less appoint him as his successor, no matter how able the student is.

That for a simple reason. Once an arnisador starts to teach, he is open to life-and-death challenges. A master who gives teaching certificate to his student, or appoints him as his successor, effectively signs the death warrant for that student. No master likes that responsibility.

(A minor factor that may inhibit the master would be his loss of prestige should the student fail a challenge.)

Suppose the student wants to teach but the master thinks he is not yet ready? The dynamics of Philippine society decides what the master would do. He is likely to remain silent, although in rare cases he might tell the student not to teach. He might also express his doubts to a few intimate friends, but those friends are not likely to pass these on to the student. Thus the new master would go on teaching blissfully unaware of the misgivings of his teacher. There are arnisadores who have become famous masters without taking lessons. Pedro Walis of Iloilo was one: he claimed to have learned arnis simply by watching other masters' practice and teach.

Arnis Tradition is Open

Certificates of proficiency, appointments of representatives of a style, selection of successors are contemporary phenomena, products of masters who wish to commercialize their skills. Many of those masters have studied Japanese styles and they pattern their ranking after the Japanese; some even call their instructors, *dans*. For few contemporary students are willing to pay tuition, or put up money for a seminar, without a visible token in return, be it a certificate of attendance, a grade diploma to be hung on the wall, or even just a membership card. Contemporary masters can provide those tokens with a free conscience because life-and-death challenges are illegal and rare now.

Is this the end of the classical tradition and the start of a new one? Perhaps. For unlike the Chinese or the Japanese, arnis tradition is open. Arnis masters are not afraid to change. This is due to the military origin of arnis. In war, one utilizes even alien techniques if they are effective.

The first radical change in the nature of arnis occurred when the Spaniards abolished the warrior class and prohibited the use of their weapons. The arnis masters reacted by concentrating their techniques on the weapons now legally available to civilians. These are the riding stick, the walking cane, the utility bolo and the hand knife.

At the same time, a branch of arnis that so many aspire to learn but only a handful can master became Christianized. I refer to esoteric arnis, which deals with healing and the use of the *oracion*. The arnisadores now directed their attention to the Christian pantheon. Curiously, the arnisador sometimes found himself using the names of the old gods to address the gods of the Christians without losing the effectiveness of his *oracion*.

In many cases, the changes were not too traumatic. For example, the arnisadores simply moved the great days of initiation into the *oraciones* of the Moon Goddess to the days of Lent and to All Souls Day. As for the celebration of the Earth God – Christmas became one of them, leaving only the summer initiations without Christian equivalents. Incidentally, arnisadores prefer to offer themselves to the Goddess. A traditional practice, for example, is to drill during the nights of the moon to seek the favor, protection and strength of the Great Mother.

Next, the Spanish friars introduced the *komedya* and asked the arnisadores to choreograph the mock battles. Arnis masters responded by creating a new style, or branch of arnis, exhibition or theatrical arnis. Present day masters who coach cinematic actors are heirs to this branch.

The third change occurred when promoters introduced sports tournaments. Sport arnis has developed from competition without protection to one where the competitors protect themselves with armor. The rules for this new branch of arnis are still evolving, but already arnisadores have created techniques specially tuned to sports.

The fourth change is the one we have been discussing: the awards of certificates of proficiency by commercial gymnasia. This is no longer classical arnis. Commercial arnis? To some, that sounds derogatory, but need not be. Competition for students can improve quality, although it could also propel arnis the wrong way among unscrupulous masters hungry for money.

Some masters are caught in the transition to this “new tradition”. Grandmaster Antonio Ilustrisimo believed that certificates were worthless, so that he did not rank his intimate disciples. Nevertheless he cynically issued certificates when he needed money; or to silence disciples who pestered him for them.

And the future? I would like to see arnis maestros with intelligence and guts enough to integrate modern gun fighting into arnis. Some arnisadores would like to re-introduce archery, spear throwing and blowguns, but I consider that a backward step. People do not fight with bows and arrows, shields and spears, and blowguns anymore. They fight with guns.

A Different Enlightenment

If you were to challenge me to write in a few words the essence of arnis, what would I say? Arnis is the search for one’s unique self. Who am I?

If you are an arnisador, you begin by imitating your teacher. Then you find that the only way you can master the techniques is to make them your own, adapting them to your own build, temperament and reflexes. Now go back and forth between those two states, the conditioned and the unconditioned consciousness, until you realize that your self has always been and is always free. Then shout in exultant freedom.

The martial artist who is a Buddhist awakens the non-attached heart; the Taoist, the harmonious heart. The arnisador enjoys the free, creative, unconditioned heart.