

Arnis: A Question of Origins

by Felipe 'Bot' Jocano, Jr.

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The term *arnis* evokes a number of reactions from people every time it is mentioned in a conversation. Some people start fanning their hands in the air, imitating the distinctive movements of the two-stick (*double baston*) training method. This image of *arnis* is one of the most popular to the layman. A second reaction, and quite as common as the first, is the question: “*Saan ba talaga galing ang arnis?*” (Where did *arnis* really come from?) Alternatively, “*Di ba, sa atin nanggaling ang arnis?*” (Isn't it that *arnis* comes from us?) is a question also heard. This article is an attempt to critically examine the roots of one of the martial arts of the Philippines, *arnis*. It must be noted that in no way does this article claim to be the final say on the origins of *arnis*. It is actually a preliminary look, a start if you will, into re-examining carefully the origins of an art form.

Arnis, also known as *kali*, *escrima*, *baston*, etc. is a complete martial art system, encompassing weapons training and empty-hand self-defense. It includes training in single stick techniques (*solo baston*), double stick techniques (*doble baston*), stick and knife or dagger techniques (*espada y daga*) and knife techniques (*daga*). Some styles may include staff and spear (*sibat*) training in their curriculum. Others will include the practice of medium to long bladed weapons (*bolo*) in their repertoire. Many styles have some form of empty hand combat, encompassing striking, kicking, locking, throwing and even choking methods. These are usually taught when the practitioner has demonstrated a reasonable degree of proficiency with the weapons of his style of *arnis*. Different *arnis* styles, from different parts of the country, may emphasize different areas of training methods noted above. The term *arnis* is believed to be a Tagalog corruption of the Spanish term *arnes*, or harness, a reference to the decorations worn by the early Filipinos. *Kali* is another term used to refer to the same kind of martial arts. Different provinces may have different names for *arnis*, such as *baston* and *kaliradman* (Ilonggo, Bisaya), *pagkalikali* (Ibanag) and *kalirongan* (Pangasinan). These are only a few examples of the terms already recorded in different sources.

With such a comprehensive system of martial arts being taught and promoted in different areas of the country, it is inevitable that people would ask, where did such a complete martial art system come from?

One suggestion is that it originally came from another martial art system, called *tjakalele*. This is actually the name of a branch of the Indonesian martial art system known as *pentjak silat*. Another suggestion is that it was brought here from the Southeast Asian mainland, particularly during the Madjapahit and Shri-Visayan empires. Yet another suggestion is that it was propagated by the so-called ten Bornean *datus* fleeing persecution from their homeland. We shall critically examine these assertions one at a time.

The idea that *arnis* evolved or was derived from another martial art system, namely *tjakalele silat*, is due to linguistics. The alternative name for *arnis* is *kali*. It is widely held that this is the older term for *arnis*, and that *kali* itself emphasizes bladed weaponry apart from practice with the stick. It is not surprising that a connection could be seen between the term *kali* and *tjakalele*. However, linguistic similarity alone is not enough ground to assert that *kali* was indeed derived from *tjakalele*. There has to be documented proof that one came from the other. What form should this proof take? Authenticated documents certainly are one of the best pieces

of evidence – if such could be found, and proven to be genuine. A close and thorough comparison of both styles would help, but it must be remembered that they would have changed over time, reflecting the different changes that have happened in their cultures of origin. On the other hand, one of the local terms for a bladed weapon is *kalis*. It is also believed that *kali* is a derived term from *kalis*. This assertion will require study before it can be validated.

Another oft-quoted idea is that *kali* was brought here during the Shri-Vishayan (7th-14th centuries) and Madjapahit (13th to 16th centuries) empires. This reflects the notion that the Philippines then was somehow an integral part of both empires. It must be noted that the archaeological evidence for the role of the Philippines in both empires is very meager. About the best that could be said is that there was commercial contact, but whether such contact also included the spreading of martial arts is circumstantial at best.

A third idea regarding the spreading and propagation of *kali* in the Philippines is that ten Bornean *datus* (sometimes nine) fled here and settled in various parts of the Philippines. They brought with them their fighting systems and taught these along with other arts in the academies called the *bothoan*.

A key problem here is that much of what we know about the ten *datus* is derived from the *Maragtas* of Pedro Monteclaro, published in Iloilo in 1907. Doubt has been cast on its usefulness as a historical document, especially since it records folk or oral history. Scholars such as the late William Henry Scott and F. Landa Jocano, are clear on this point – the *Maragtas* is a document recording folk or oral history and not an actual eyewitness account of the events stated therein. As such, its historical value diminishes rapidly with each retelling of the story. If the original story of the ten Bornean *datus* is folklore and not authentic history, what are we then to make of the story regarding the propagation of *kali* in the *bothoan*? Folkloric history is useful in enabling people to identify with the art of *kali*, but it should not be taken as actual history.

If after having critically questioned the sources of the origins of *kali*, or *arnis* as it is known today, and through these critical analyses, have come to the positions stated above, what can we then say about the origin of *kali*, or *arnis*? Regardless of the name of the art or its sources, the fact that the early Filipinos practiced some form of combat was not lost on the Spaniards who first arrived here. Pigafetta's description of the death of Magellan is graphic in its description of the weapons wielded by the natives. It is interesting to note that Magellan died as he was rushed by the defenders armed with spears and bladed weapons. In more recent time, Scott's book *Barangay* includes a chapter on ancient Bisayan weapons and warfare. This was derived from the accounts and dictionaries of the early Spanish friars, some of whom were witnesses to the use and practice of weapons and warfare methods of the time.

Martial arts, in whatever form, and in whatever place, are the unique product of the people who developed them, as members of their culture. A case in point is Japanese fencing, *kendo* in its modern format, *kenjutsu* as the traditional form. Japanese fencing is a product of the technology and the values and habits of the Japanese. Similarly, it should be remembered that *kali* or *arnis* as it is called today, is very much a product of the Filipino cultural experience. The relative informality of most practice sessions, for instance, is a reflection on the importance we place in building harmonious relationships with others.

To state therefore, that its origins lie outside the Philippines is misleading, for it disregards the unrecorded but no less real experiences our forefathers went in simply trying their best to survive. These experiences are recorded in the techniques of their styles of *arnis*. It is also quite possible that there were blendings with different styles of combat, but if so, these are quite difficult to verify historically.

A key difficulty in researching the origins of *arnis* is that most sources tend to be oral history or folkloric in nature. They are not exactly historical documents in the sense of being eyewitness accounts. Hence, their authenticity in this sense is always suspect. On the other hand, as folklore, they serve as a window, if you will, into how people think. Folklore gives us an idea of how people actually understand their world and their place in it.

In conclusion, it is not easy to actually trace the origins of the art of *kali* or *arnis*. Perhaps we may never actually trace it to a single key event in the lives of our forefathers. On the other hand, it is equally important to remember that the art itself is a continuing evolving product, subject to change and refinement over the years. What is also important is that we remain open-minded, willing to improve our understanding of the origins of this martial art. Such open-mindedness is useful inasmuch as it provides us with further insights into our identity as Filipinos.

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