

Followup article from Manila Times on the development of Arnis in the Philippines

By marppio

Followup article to this past weekend's news item on development of Arnis in the Philippines. We are republishing this Manila Times article as a way to propagate this information throughout the Internet. Salamat po.

The challenge of historical documentation



BY PERRY GIL S. MALLARI REPORTER (*Manila Times, Tuesday 20April 2010*)

Besides the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Philippine Sports Commission (PSC), another government agency that will be actively involved in the implementation of the Arnis Law is the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri said that the NCCA's role is primarily to oversee long overdue documentation of the history of the different styles of arnis.

While there are available works on the subject written by foreigners, the senator bemoaned that many of these writings are half-baked. "Some of them just made a two-month tour of the Philippines then produced a book," he said. With the NCCA

commissioned to do the job, Zubiri added that he was hoping to come up with a book or a general almanac of Filipino Martial Arts (FMA).

“I am even willing to look for sponsors so that this project will push through,” he said.

To a certain degree, the NCCA is involved with arnis. Cecile Guidote-Alvarez, the NCCA executive director, said arnis is among the indigenous arts that are being taught in the commission’s Kalahi program.

Validating arnis’ history

Unlike other Asian martial arts whose historical records are preserved through written and pictorial documents, arnis and the FMA’s history in general are hard to validate because of lack of proper documentation. For instance and despite debates on the claim of some FMA historians that kali is the ancestral art of arnis and escrima, the dispute has remained unresolved. The row could be attributed to lack of valid historical references.

Most articles and books on FMA history circulated up to the 1980s were based on *Mga Karunungan sa Larong Arnis (A Body of Knowledge in the Sport of Arnis)* by Placido Yambao and Buenaventura

Mirafuente. Written in archaic Tagalog and published by the University of the Philippines Press in 1957, it was the first definitive book on arnis. While the two authors produced an excellent presentation of the technical aspects of arnis, they failed to include a comprehensive bibliography of their sources, which later historians could use to validate the historical contents of their book. Among the authors’ claims was that kali is the original Filipino martial art. With the commissioning of the NCCA, with its pool of experts to conduct documentation on the history of arnis, the bibliography issue, for one, could be resolved.

Official documentation of the different styles of arnis is also crucial for the old masters of the FMA, many of them already dead, to be given due recognition. It is Zubiri’s dream to come up with a “Hall of Fame” for the grandmasters of the FMA. Many of these men, after generously teaching their art to both Filipinos and foreigners, died dirt-poor and unknown.

The most recent case was that of the late Grandmaster Antonio “Tatang” Illustrisimo. “He died in the squatters’ area,” Zubiri said. In his time, Illustrisimo was the most revered name in Manila’s arnis circles.

According to Zubiri, it was a common practice of many foreign arnis practitioners to train with local masters for a few months to increase their prestige.

“They own big gyms and are attracting many students in their countries while many of our arnis masters from whom they have learned their skills wallow in poverty,” the senator said.

Professor Armando Soteco, arnis master, author and director of School of Arnis Professionals, National College of Physical Education of the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila, cautioned that careful planning is needed for the effective implementation of the Arnis Law, including the documentation of FMA history.

On the immensity of the task, he commented, “Building a mansion is not like building a shanty, you have to follow a detailed blueprint. The same thing must be done with the implementation of the Arnis Law.”

Ned Nepangue, researcher, author and practitioner of the FMA, told *The Manila Times* that a good strategy to the historical documentation of arnis is to examine it through three perspectives: sports, aesthetics and combat. Nepangue with another FMA researcher and practitioner, Celestino Macachor, wrote the book *Cebuano Eskrima: Beyond the Myth*.

Felipe Jocano Jr., a professor of Anthropology at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City, and an arnis master, encourages not only professional historians but also the average arnisadors to do research on the history of the FMA.

“Having a sense of history grounds the way we practice our arts—we develop a sense of purpose and direction that we would otherwise not be able to get practicing any other way,” Jocano pointed out.

To prevent repeating what has already been published elsewhere, he advises researchers to look at three areas: 1) oral histories—people’s narratives of past events and how their teachers and seniors passed on the stories from the past; 2) the mass of everyday documents from the specific time frame studied, including photographs, papers, etc.; and 3) familiarity with various frameworks used to analyze history.

On how to make professional FMA historical research, Jocano said, “We have two choices: We can recruit academics that can look at FMA history as the history of a cultural practice. Or we, the practitioners can get into the academe and actually earn degrees in history, sociology or anthropology with an emphasis on the history and practice of the FMA.”