

Arnis: Weaving our Identity



by: Edessa Ramos

LIKE many modern cities, Chicago can be a very harsh place. This was especially true for a woman like me who, due to the economic circumstances of a working student at the time, lived in rough neighborhoods and navigated darkened parking lots after late-night classes at the university. Looking back on my life in America, I am overwhelmed by memories, a personal history so precious but nonetheless dotted with long periods of isolation, intense sadness, and at times, even self-doubt. This led me to seek. After several attempts at well-recommended methods for curing anger and self-denunciation, short of clinical therapy, I finally found my answer in the legacy of martial art masters.

People take up martial arts for various reasons, such as sport, confidence-building, and self-defense. In the beginning, self-defense was my only motivation. Later I was surprised to discover a more profound usefulness of this art for me as a woman - healing a wounded soul. I did not find Arnis right away. First I traveled through the paths of Tai Chi, Kung Fu and Seido Karate. Through them, I discovered how to dance on the border between the two opposites, the *Yin* and *Yang*, and to accept both sides as valid. I learned that contradictions need not always be resolved or diminished, but managed and balanced. I learned the significance of harmony. I found the true meaning of empowerment, both personal and social.

This is something beyond intellectual achievement. It is not within the reach of liberation movements and freedom causes, especially if the latter do not recognize that any fight for freedom is, in the ultimate sense, fired by a very personal and individual objective. How can society be free if its members are chained to harmful traditions and decrepit ways of thinking? How can the individual

achieve liberation from himself, if not by first knowing himself - his power, his ability to use or misuse that power, his capacity for compassion and fair play. I will not argue with those who learn Arnis for pure reasons of sport or combat or, sad to say, even mere superiority over others. I speak of a belief that I have sculptured out of eight years of practicing Modern Arnis plus two years of Kung Fu. For me, the true warrior is one who is the master of his/herself, one who prevails over the most difficult of life's battles - the battle within. True peace and contentment come to me on the ground where I train.

After a number of years in Chicago, I returned to Manila in search of answers to new questions in my life. While jogging at the Quezon Memorial Circle, I saw a man performing a very beautiful *anyo* (form) under the ipil-ipil trees. He later invited me to my first training. Thus was my introduction to Modern Arnis. Little did I know that it would be essential not only to my search for the true self, but to achieving a deeper sense of Filipino identity.

Arnis is often described as the ancient Filipino system of fighting whose origins date back to over a thousand years, long before the coming of the colonizers. I dislike the word "ancient" because it implies something that is obscure or no longer exists. Arnis is very much alive and practiced today, thanks to the effort and dedication of many masters and their followers, most noteworthy of whom are the brothers Remy and Ernesto Presas.

The origins of Arnis may be traced to the *Maragtas* which, although believed to be legendary, is the only useful historical record on the subject. The *Maragtas* writings speak of the culture, tradition and organization of the *Aetas* of Panay. They tell the story of ten Bornean Datus who arrived in Panay together with their families and armies, purchased the island, and established a

system of education wherein the fighting art of Kali was taught in a school called *Bothoan*. This art was derived from the native fencing of Indonesia called *Tjakalele*. Kali is believed to be the forerunner of Arnis.

Filipinos are known for their great skill in the use of bladed weapons and daggers. Testimony to this are the Muslims of Mindanao and Sulu. Their special penchant for these weapons is proven by the great variety of their knives. To this day, one will find the most artistic and creative of all knives in the islands of Mindanao and Sulu. The freedom-loving Filipinos are forerunners in the experimentation, systematization and martial use of bladed weapons. Their skill complements their prowess in hand-to-hand combat and is honored by their history of successes in repelling foreign invaders. Such greatness is proven by the valiant resistance of Sultan Kudarat of Maguindanao who repulsed all but the last and most formidable Spanish expeditions to Mindanao.

The classical art of Kali was known as the sport of kings. The first experts of the art were the Rajahs and Maharlikas of the Visayas and Tagalog regions, the Amandakwa in Pangasinan, and the Baruwang of Cagayan Valley. It is believed that Lapu-Lapu was a Kali expert. Pigafetta, Ferdinand Magellan's chronicler, recorded that on April 27, 1521, Lapu-Lapu defeated Magellan with a bladed weapon and that many of the natives carried a pointed hardwood stick which had been hardened by fire. Lapu-Lapu's bladed weapon was the *kampilan*.

The Spaniards discouraged the practice of the art as early as 1596 and eventually banned it in 1764. But the Filipinos hid the art through their dances and other culture traditions. Thus did Arnis and Kali survive to this day. The revolts against Spain were characterized by the use of the *itak* or bolo, a farm implement which doubles as a formidable close-combat weapon. In preparation for the revolution of 1896, Andres Bonifacio was

Across Oceans

by Edessa Ramos

Edessa Ramos has lived in 10 different addresses during the past decade, across oceans and continents, and through countless difficulties which forged her intensity as a writer. She lived in Chicago for some years, then returned to Manila in 1994 to work for the Philippine Centennial Commission, the Asian Women Human Rights Council, and PETA. Some Chicagoans



still remember her from the days of the Philippine Forum, the Alliance for Philippine Concerns, the Friends of Gabriela, various solidarity movements, and most of all, as one of the founders of Pintig Cultural Group. Since moving to Switzerland in 1996, she has published two books and performed in the literary festivals of South Africa and Central America. Though having been away for a number of years, Chicago will always be a place she longingly calls home. Email her at:

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known to have ordered the manufacture of bolos. Although the Spanish forces were better equipped, nothing matched the menace of this weapon.

The American system of education at the turn of the century placed emphasis on sports such as basketball, baseball, volleyball, and football. Over the years, preoccupation with western sports led Filipinos to neglect and eventually forget Arnis along with Dumog (wrestling), Sipa, and other indigenous sports. The American colonization of the Filipino soul, which resulted in a culture with a strong predilection for western sports and cultural activities, did take a heavy toll.

Until a few years ago, the Filipinos' interest in their very own martial art was minimal or entirely forgotten. I remember the masters lamenting the probable decline of this noble art. This is due to our negligence over the care, preservation, and development of many things Filipino, including our very own martial art. But not anymore. While Arnis continues to thrive in many countries today, such as the USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia and more, it is most alive in the country of its birth. In the Philippines today, the practice of Arnis has spread with the speed and zeal comparable to a nationalist movement.

Next month, find out more about how this development took place and how Arnis helps in the development of a Filipino soul and identity.