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'Arnis' boosts Fil-Ams' sense of pride

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CROSSING land bridges that once linked the Philippine archipelago to the Asian mainland, ancient fighters introduced to Filipinos a form of martial arts believed to have come from India and now called kali, eskrima and arnis de mano.

Yes, those rattan canes -- and the graceful moves that make them lethal -- are that old, according to generally held notions as to the origins of the Pinoy warrior art.

With a deep sense of history, a Filipino-American based in California since the late '60s considers his mastery of kali (considered the pre-Spanish name for arnis or eskrima) as a bridge to the country of his birth -- and hopes that more Fil-Ams would join him in paying ambidextrous homage to their shared cultural roots.

Arnold Noche has been taking time from his business each week, driving up to 48 kilometers from his home in the Gardena suburb, to conduct two-hour training sessions for kali enthusiasts of all ages at Filipino community centers in Los Angeles.

"There's something about a stick in the hand that is very Filipino," noted Noche.

Noche and other "backyard" eskrimadors started the Kali Klub project in 1999 and have since taught an average of 250 students a year, around 90 percent of them Fil-Ams aged 5 to over 40.

Since 2004, Kali Klub has been conducting classes in partnership with FilAm Arts (Association for the Advancement of Filipino American Arts & Culture), a nonprofit, multidisciplinary arts organization located on N. Vermont Avenue in LA.

Dealing with confusion

"I could have taught my (Fil-Am) students something else to help them deal with whatever confusion they may have about their cultural identity. But I am an eskrimador, and this is my way of helping them understand the complexities of being a Fil-Am," Noche said.

His family moved to the States when he was only 2 years old. At age 8 he began studying karate and, at age 12, picked up his first kali sticks -- henceforth earning bruises and scars in a discipline that would "control my life."

At 40, Noche runs his own management consultancy and multimedia firm ATF1898 -- a proud reference to the year Filipinos declared their independence from Spain. But in a recent Inquirer interview in Manila, he said he would rather be counted as a member of the "Filipino warrior class."

He was referring to the disciples of an ancient art that had been in progression long before foreign powers reached Philippine soil. Employing real swords or knives in its original form, kali survived by being "secretly practiced" during colonial times when Filipinos were prohibited from carrying weapons.

"It has been handed down from one generation to another, and has eventually made its way around the world. Now it is not only practiced by thousands of martial artists but also favored by elite military and law enforcement groups," Noche said.

Action flicks

Further proof of its global appeal, he noted, is the growing number of Hollywood action flicks that feature kali movements in their fight sequences.

Matt Damon, for example, in an interview on the hand-to-hand combat style of his "Jason Bourne" character, pronounced it as "kay-lee," he said. Vin Diesel had also acknowledged training in kali for his sci-fi flick, "The Chronicles of Riddick."

"Mission Impossible 3" and "Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life" featured brief fight scenes with the lead stars Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie, respectively, "using Filipino fighting sticks," Noche said.

And Noche has this to say about Star Wars' Yoda: "My impression was that his moves (with the dazzling light saber) were more Filipino than samurai."

Through the centuries, the kali system -- believed to have started in the Visayas -- diversified through many individual masters around the country who continually added to its repertoire of attacks and defenses.

Basic principle

But the basic principle remains: "For weaponry to serve as extensions of the hand for maximum impact and reach," Noche explained.

And the weapons refer not only to the more familiar canes, but also to daggers, whips, chains, "a mere pen or a rolled newspaper." The movements would remain the same, with the fighter merely adjusting his range.

"Filipino martial arts (FMA) is the only one I know where you train on day one already with a weapon in your hand. Other martial arts begin training empty-handed and you get to use more intricate weapons as you progress," he said.

While maintaining that no particular combat method can be theoretically considered superior to another since it all depends on a fighter's skills, Noche pointed out: "In (FMA) I do have weapons in my hands, but losing them doesn't mean I could no longer do damage."

Take note, he said, that a hand that holds a rattan stick also forms a closed fist -- which means that this hand can be used either to strike an enemy with the stick or, at closer range, to punch him.

And even with the hands full, the kali system is fluid enough to incorporate maneuvers for tripping or throw-downs (just as in judo or aikido) or for choking an opponent. This is an example of how the method, from being fundamentally based on frontal blows, has "evolved" with every master who improved on it.

The Noche style

Noche's own style -- the Lameco Eskrima -- is just one of the many branches in this evolution. Before he became a "guro" (teacher) to his students, Noche found his own, much revered "punong guro" (master) in another California-based Fil-Am, the late Edgar Sulite.

Founded by Sulite, Lameco stands for largo (long-range fighting), medio (medium-range) and corto (close-range -- or what Noche called the "synthesis" of these three orientations).

"We were part of Edgar's backyard group," he recalled, referring to his two fellow guro now running the Kali Klub, Arturo "Dino" Flores and Hospicio "Bud" Balani. "When Punong Guro died (of natural causes) in 1997, it would have been easy for us to bury the art with him."

"Keeping it alive is one thing, how to keep it alive is another," he said. "We can either go the commercial route (become full-time instructors, charge for private trainings, or hit the seminar circuit), or go the community route."

Noche had obviously taken the latter path, charging no personal fees for Kali Klub. "Everything we charge (as tuition) goes back to the program," he said.

The students are asked to provide their own black training attire, rattan sticks and safety goggles -- "in addition to dedication, discipline and an open mind."

No mainstream draw

But for all that he's willing to share about his passion, Noche easily sensed during his recent visit to Manila that kali -- even as a sport or fitness regimen -- had never enjoyed a mainstream draw in the very nation that supposedly developed it.

"As a balikbayan, I can see that it has a following here but you still have to find it. It is not commercially available; it's taught in some schools but it can still go far," he said.

Last year's Southeast Asian Games in Manila finally included arnis -- but this "new" event hardly got any media coverage. While Filipinos won three gold medals in arnis, the home crowd still reserved its loudest cheers for the other more popular fighting disciplines, especially tae kwon do.

Also, no local movie star has been able to popularize arnis the way a Bruce Lee or a Jackie Chan brought Chinese martial arts to the world. And yet here now is Noche reporting that "kay-lee" has entered Hollywood lore.

But Noche has made sure no student of his mispronounces anything; even with non-Fil-Ams in the class, Kali Klub preserves the original Filipino terms for specific drills and maneuvers ("armas" for weapons, "salok" for uppercut, "sagasa" for run over, etc.)

And with every "palo" (hit) or "ilag" (evasion) that he teaches his fellow Fil-Ams, this guro helps them rediscover their now distant ancestral heritage lest this kinship, like the primeval land bridges, erode in time.

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