

FMA

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A Filipino Martial Arts Perspective



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The FMA Informative was very fortunate that Master Teacher Manolo Luis del Rosario, the head of the LSAI in Davao agreed to share some of his writings from the Siningbayan Fieldbook (2nd edition).

Mr. del Rosario wrote for Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Project on Social Change called “Siningbayan.” The chapter concerning the Filipino martial arts was included in the Siningbayan Handbook, to read the chapter in its entirety in the Siningbayan Fieldbook (2nd edition), which is downloadable and can be found at (www.blafi.org).

Manolo Luis del Rosario

Manolo Luis del Rosario has been into the study and practice of various Asian martial arts traditions for the past 33 years, 23 of which focused on the study, practice and teaching of Traditional Filipino martial arts (FMA) commonly known as Arnis, Escrima or Kali. He holds a Master’s rank in the Filipino martial arts, bestowed on him by the late Grandmaster Ben Lema of Lightning Scientific Arnis in 2001. He currently sits in the Master’s Council of Lightning Scientific Arnis-International. Manolo holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Islamic Studies from the University of the Philippines in Diliman where he is also an Advanced ROTC graduate belonging to the Magiting Class of 1993 and a co-founder of the UP Diliman Red Cross Youth (UP RCY).



Each issue features practitioners of martial arts and other internal arts, other features include historical, theoretical and technical articles; reflections, Filipino martial arts, healing arts, the culture of the Philippines and other related subjects.

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Introduction: History and Development

The Filipino martial arts collectively termed “FMA”, is the traditional martial arts of the Filipino people. While the Filipino martial arts is the descriptive term for this martial art tradition, it is also known by other names such as Arnis, Eskrima or in more recent times, Kali. It is a complete martial art system which encompasses the use of various weaponry (bladed, blunt, long, short) as well as empty hands.

While it is very seldom; that one sees a martial arts heritage as a specific tool in cultural development and nation-building, the Filipino martial arts offers opportunities seldom recognized in this field. This is due to the fact that for the most part, the Filipino martial arts as practiced today still reflects traditional cultural traits, values and worldview. Filipino martial arts, while having existed for a few hundred years is, as an “organized” martial art, still very young. Up until a few decades ago, this was practiced and taught in small, informal groups, in backyards and houses, by relatively unknown masters. This differentiates the Filipino martial arts from other more established Martial Arts traditions which mostly feature modern organizational structures and commercial training halls. While many Filipino martial arts organizations are undoubtedly moving in that direction in the hopes of making the teaching of the Filipino martial arts a financially viable option, there are still quite a number of teachers and groups who prefer to maintain the traditional way of teaching, passing on their knowledge the same way they received it.

I will share some of the salient points of this sub-culture of Filipino society and in the process hope to show how the Filipino martial arts can be an effective tool in reinforcing the positive cultural traits of Filipino society.

Theories on the Historical Roots of the Filipino Martial Arts

There are several theories on the origins of this art and this continues to be a hot topic of debate amongst Filipino martial arts practitioners today. One theory suggests that the art predates the arrival of the Spanish in 1521. This theory posits that the Filipino martial arts as we know it today traces its roots from a “mother art” which was widely practiced in the Southeast Asian region now covered by the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. This was first suggested by Placido Yambao and Buenaventura Mirafuente in the book, “Mga Karunungan sa Larong Arnis” (University of the Philippines, 1957), the very first book on Filipino martial arts written in 1957. While Yambao and Mirafuente based this history on oral tradition, the lack of corroborating evidence in historical documents and archaeological findings has put this into question. Needless to say, this was the widely accepted history of the Filipino martial arts until very recent times, as evidenced in the writings of later authors such as Dan Inosanto, Remy Presas, Mark Wiley and Dionisio Canete.

A more recent theory on the Filipino martial arts origins however suggests that this art is the product of the Spanish occupation of the Philippines. This theory was first proposed by Celestino Macachor and Dr. Ned Nepangue in their book: Cebuano Eskrima: Beyond the Myth (Xlibris, 2007). They argue that while there is no evidence both in writing, nor in archaeological digs to support the existence of an organized martial art akin to the Filipino martial arts which predates the Spanish colonial era, there is however evidence of our ancestors learning the rudiments of European fencing from the Spanish. This transfer of fighting technology was born out of necessity. It was the means by which Christian villages could effectively defend themselves against the Moro raids so prevalent in that era. Spanish/European swordplay was adopted and eventually modified to suit the environmental and cultural conditions of the Filipinos at that time.

The third theory on the historical roots of the Filipino martial arts, held by some members of the Filipino martial arts community, attempts to merge both. It is a fact that the Filipino martial arts does not resemble European swordplay in the least bit in terms of teaching principles and methodology and that the reality of pre-Hispanic Filipino warfare was characterized by the use of bladed weapons. From here they posit that while pre-Hispanic Filipinos did not train in a manner we recognize as being Filipino martial arts of today, they did have a body of knowledge in the use of various weapons. This was then blended with the European swordplay they learned from the Spanish into what became the Filipino martial arts we know today. The conditions of those times made the knowledge on the use of bladed weaponry a necessity.

Regardless of the actual historical roots of this art, several things are however very clear at this point:

1. This art exists and has existed for at least 300 years.
2. This art is wholly Filipino in that it is unique to Filipino culture. No other martial art tradition resembles its training principles and methodologies in the world.

Then and Now

The contribution of Filipino martial arts and its impact in Philippine history is a fact lost to many Filipinos. During the Spanish colonial period, the Filipino martial arts was the primary means by which seaside villages in the Visayas defended themselves against raids conducted by the Moros from the south. Oral tradition has it that most of the early Katupineros used this art in their uprising against Spain. In fact, all depictions of that era show Filipino fighters brandishing a “bolo” or short bladed weapon. This is so to the point that this image has become the iconic symbol for the Filipino’s fight for freedom in that era. It was so widely practiced at that time, so much so that it deserved mention in Laureate Francisco Balagtas’ epic, Florante at Laura, where he describes his protagonists as showing their skills in the arts of “buno” (wrestling) and “arnes” (Arnis/FMA).

During the Japanese occupation, the Filipino martial arts also played a vital role in the guerilla movement against the Japanese. While history books seldom mention the combat skills of these guerilla fighters, most of the contemporary Filipino martial arts teachers today know this for a fact – most of them (this author included) studied directly from one of these individuals.

These days, Filipino martial arts is one of the most well-known of Philippine cultural exports- probably second only to “Adobo.” It is known all over the world and one would be hard-pressed to find a martial artist from any part of the globe not familiar with the Filipino martial arts. This Filipino art has even found its way to Hollywood. Films such as “The Hunted” (2003), the “Bourne” series and “300” (2007), all feature fighting techniques borrowed from the Filipino martial arts. Apart from Hollywood, many of the world’s armed forces have also adopted this for their close-quarter unarmed combat training. Indeed, it is a cultural element which deserves more recognition and study.

Filipino martial arts Culture in Relation to Filipino Culture and Worldview

As mentioned earlier, the idea of “organization” (particularly the western paradigm) is relatively new to most of the Filipino martial arts community. While some organizations do choose to go the way of belt systems, organizational charts and commercial training halls, others still choose the traditional “closed group” model.

There is practicality in systematizing processes and institutionalizing certain aspects of the art and organization. This is the only way for Filipino martial arts organizations to thrive and make teaching financially viable. Filipino martial arts groups need to compete with the organized approach of Karate or Tae Kwon Do schools. For the most part however, those Filipino martial arts groups who have taken this step merely adopt the paradigms of the more organized martial arts (such as Karate and Tae Kwon Do) lock-stock-and-barrel. This cut-and-paste approach does not take into consideration Filipino culture which becomes lost. In this respect, traditional Filipino martial arts groups- those which have not yet adopted the more modern paradigms- have become vehicles by which Filipino worldview is preserved and even propagated.

Traditional Filipino Martial Arts Culture

a. *Social Structure/Hierarchy*

Social Structure and Hierarchy in traditional Filipino martial arts groups is characterized by informality. In most groups, there are only 2 recognizable hierarchical classifications: The “Guro” or Teacher, and the “mag-aaral” or student. While students can call their head by other titles such as “Maestro” (Master) or “Grand-master, the reality of how individuals within a group relate to each other reflect this basic hierarchy. In fact, in more diminutive groups, students refer to their teacher as “Tatang” in reference to the kind of respect afforded to individuals in a community who are perceived to have acquired wisdom through age and experience. Under

the head teacher, there may or may not be senior students. Most Filipino martial arts organizations these days adopt additional ranking structures, such as that of the “Katuwang Guro” or Assistant Instructor. This is however seldom observed in the interaction of individuals within the group. Unlike other Martial Arts traditions from other countries whereby the uninitiated can readily recognize the seniors the moment they step into the training hall just by observing social interactions, this distinction is much more subtle and unrecognizable in most of the Filipino martial arts groups. This is because unlike other martial arts traditions, social interaction is not characterized by rigid adherence to protocol and sub-culture social norms such as “Bowling” to those of higher “rank” (among others). In most cases, showing respect to others is something afforded only to the teacher. Even then, a lot of traditional teachers choose to dispense with requiring it anyway. Students most of the time bow out of a genuine respect for the individual and not because it is required.

This peculiarity in traditional Filipino martial arts culture harkens back to pre-Hispanic Filipino culture. In “Barangay: Sixteenth Century Philippine Culture and Society,” William Henry Scott notes that there was no word describing a primary Datu or Paramount Chieftain (connoting that technically, all “Datus” were equal), there were however those who were considered “primus inter pares” or “first among equals.” These individuals were commonly referred to as “Pangulo” or “leader.” The relationship between the Pangulo and other Datus was characterized by loose ties of personal allegiance and its continuity depended upon whether or not the Pangulo dispensed responsibilities and services expected of him. ¹

b. Relational Imperatives and the Concept of “Respect”

The social structure in traditional Filipino martial arts organizations demonstrate how most Filipinos view “Respect” and the corresponding allegiance that comes with it - that it is something earned and not demanded and that it is something freely given amongst equals. Being a martial art, teachers initially gain respect due to his prowess in the Filipino martial arts. This is insufficient however in the long term, unless that individual also embodies other aspects of Filipino culture perceived to be important.

1. Landa Jocano, renowned Filipino anthropologist, noted that central to Filipino relationships is the concept of “Kapwa:”

This term refers to the perceived state of “being part of” or being on equal terms with others as in being members of the same organization, peer group, nationality or race.”

Kapwa refers to the shared identity and “pakikipag-kapwa” (being one with others) serves to demonstrate this unity with other selves. Pakikipag-kapwa is characterized by several behavioral norms such as: “pakikisama”- desire to go along with an individual or group, a norm designed to provide a support structure for individual or group endeavors, “pakikitungo”- how an individual adapts to situations and his corresponding behavior, and “pikikiramay”- the ability to condole, express sympathy, show compassion or pity. ²

These traits are expected of each and every individual within the group, including the teacher. The strength of the bonds between individuals, either between the teacher and his or her students or amongst the students themselves is usually determined by the existence or non-existence of these traits.

c. Communal Approach and the Concept of “Ecology”

The Filipino concept of Kapwa gives us a glimpse into how we Filipinos view ourselves in relation to the world. We see ourselves as part of a bigger ecology. This is in contrast to the western paradigm of seeing oneself as a distinct individual wholly apart from the rest. Filipinos recognize the inter-relatedness of each and every individual, to each other and to the world at large. From this view comes the need for specific social norms which ensure harmony and balance within the system and the corresponding value the culture gives to concepts such as “Kapwa.” How an individual conducts himself within the context of the greater whole will determine whether or not this harmony and balance is maintained. This is one reason why many traditional Filipino martial arts groups choose to maintain small, close-knit communities where individuals carefully select those invited to join the group, ensuring that newcomers share in the same values collectively adopted by the group.

Reference:

1. *Barangay: Sixteenth Century Philippine Culture and Society*, William Henry Scott
2. *Working with Filipinos*, F. Landa Jocano, pp. 66-67

d. Time and Space

This cultural trait, that of seeing the “whole” rather than “individual parts” extends to the concept of “Time” and “Space” as well. Filipino culture sees time in a polychronic fashion- that is, in terms of cyclical continuums. This is in contrast to the western perspective which tends to be more linear in nature. The same can be said to be true for the concept of “Space.” While westerners view space in terms of boundaries and compartments, Filipinos think otherwise.

It is from this mindset that Filipino martial arts practitioners also view practice sessions and training spaces. To most of the Filipino martial arts groups, “time” and “space” hold existential value. While all groups have standard times and locations where they meet and practice, this is by no means the complete story. “Practice” sessions are viewed as part of a continuum and not confined by time and space. This can happen anytime and anywhere granting conditions permit. Many Filipino martial arts practitioners will even declare that more than the set schedules in the training hall, it was on those unscheduled informal gatherings outside of the training hall that they learned the most.

Filipino Martial Arts Teaching Principles and Methodology

While the Filipino martial arts is viewed as relatively undeveloped in terms of organizational structure when compared to the more established martial arts traditions of countries such as Japan, Korea and China, it nonetheless reflects a highly sophisticated understanding of the learning process. This came out of an obvious necessity. Early Filipino martial arts practitioners were ordinary folks. They were farmers and fisherman folk who lived ordinary lives. Yet, these individuals were tasked with the defense of their villages. They had other responsibilities, such as that of planting and harvesting, hunting and fishing and providing for the day to day needs of their families and communities. They did not have the luxury of time to develop the necessary skills required to survive the realities of hand-to-hand combat. Due to this, the early teachers had to devise ways and means by which the learning curve could be accelerated. One way was to tie this in with what was already familiar to the common-folk, the culture.

a. Scope of Training

The scope of training in the Filipino martial arts is extensive. This involves training in various types of weaponry each with its inherent characteristics. This includes bladed and blunt weaponry such as bolos and swords as well as sticks, long and short weaponry such as long poles and daggers, as well as a plethora of empty-hand techniques mostly designed to defend oneself from an armed opponent. Practitioners also mix these weapons up in combinations. A rundown of the scope of Filipino martial arts training is as follows:

1. Single and Double Sticks
2. Single and Double Swords/Bolos
3. Single and Double Daggers
4. Stick and Dagger/Sword and Dagger (also known as “Espada y Daga/Baston y Daga”).
5. Two-handed pole and Spear
6. Empty-hand techniques collectively termed “Pangamot” which includes: Panuntukan/Suntukan (hand techniques), Sikaran (Kicking techniques), Trankadas (joint manipulation, locking and breaking) and Dumog/Buno (wrestling/grappling).

There are the also more exotic formats practiced by a few of the Filipino martial arts systems. These include the use of flexible weapons such as handkerchiefs/scarves as well as projectile weapons such as blow guns and bow and arrows. Many Filipino martial arts groups however choose to specialize in the first four components with a few specializing in even less. The choice to specialize in the first 4 components is practical in nature. These are objects readily available for use by the individual. Even in these modern times, one cannot help but notice bolos/bladed implements hanging by the sides of farmers tilling their fields.

b. Progression

The learning progression in the Filipino martial arts holds a unique place when compared to Martial Arts traditions in other parts of the world. In the Filipino martial arts, beginners are taught the use of weapons first, before eventually moving on to empty-handed techniques. The most common weapon taught to beginners is the “baston” or stick. This is the most recognizable image of Filipino martial arts - that of stick-wielding fighters squaring it off against each other. This is of course understandable as the stick is the most forgiving of Filipino martial arts weapons when it comes to practice apart from it being the most readily available. After all, you can always find a stick “lying around” in the rural regions of the Philippines.

Once sufficient mastery of the stick has been achieved students then move on to the use of a bladed weapon, usually a bolo. Eventually the bolo gives way to shorter weapons such as daggers and palm sticks. Most Filipino martial arts systems train in the various ranges of combat. These ranges are “Largo” (long-range), “media” (medium range), and finally, “Corto” (short-range). Dagger training, indicative of sufficient skills in the “corto” range, usually signals the beginning of the use of the empty-hand. Training in other formats such as the long pole or spear and the more exotic formats such as flexible and projectile weapons comes almost as an afterthought and is usually reserved for those who inquire or show interest.

At this point, you may be asking: “Why the focus on weapons?” The answer to this is again primarily practical in nature. As mentioned earlier, you will be hard-pressed to find a person living in the rural parts of the Philippines who did not have some form of bladed implement on him. This was more so in the past before the advent of agricultural machinery. It would therefore be logical to know how to use it and how to defend against it. In terms of self-defense, a person who knew how to use a weapon would have had an advantage when defending against it. That person would have been familiar with that particular weapon’s range, striking speed and potential to cause injury. He would have benefitted from his intimate knowledge of weapon characteristics- its advantages and limitations.

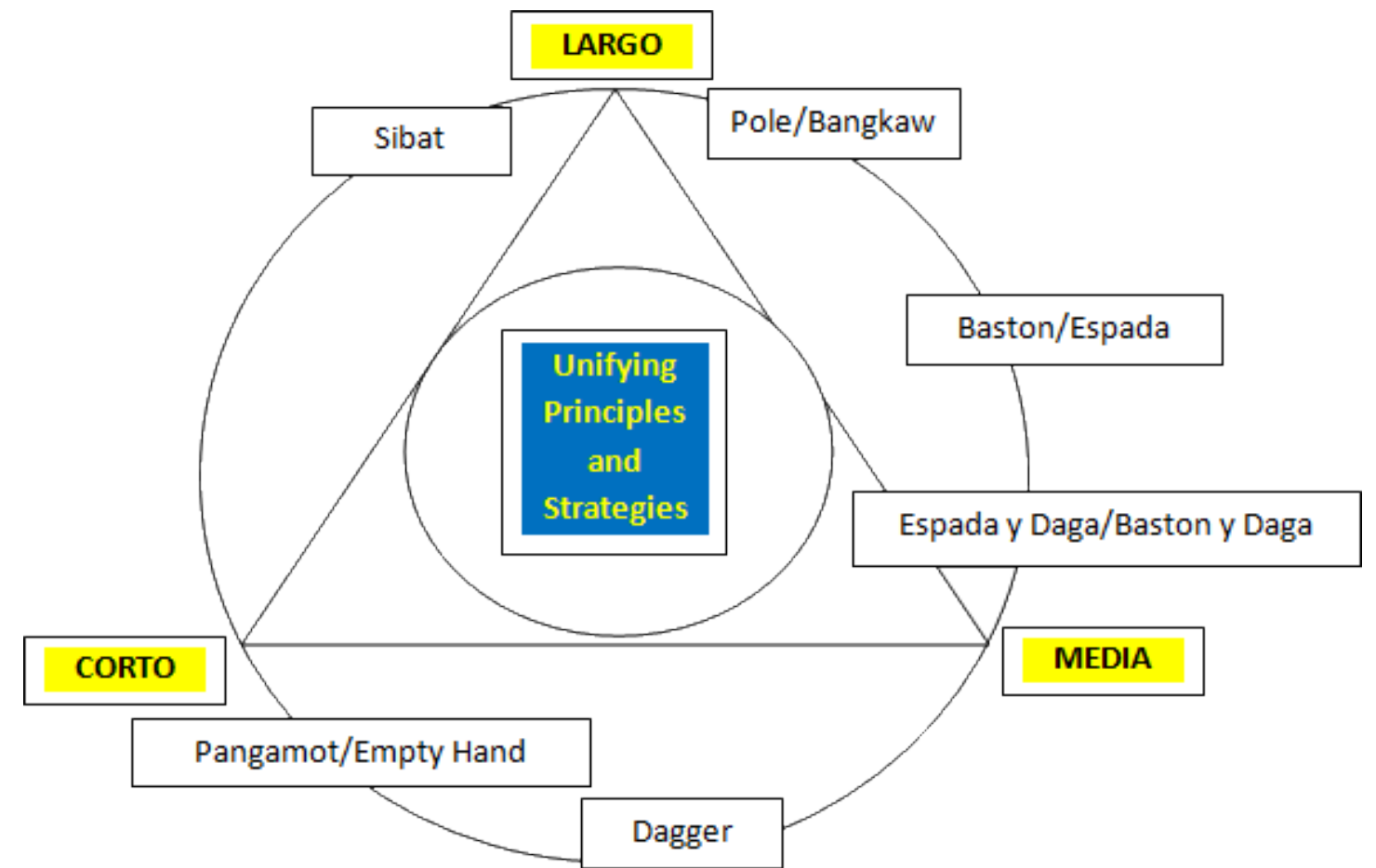
c. Teaching Philosophy: Principles and Inter-Relatedness of Components

At face value, the scope that the Filipino martial arts covers may seem daunting. It is a lot after all. However, the genius of the Filipino martial arts approach to teaching lies in the way these different formats are unified by underlying combat principles. Filipino martial arts teaching methodology is “principle-based.” This is in contrast to “technique-based” teaching formats practiced by other traditions. A principle-based methodology creates a solid base for readily applicable techniques since a thorough understanding of the principles makes it possible for a practitioner to respond to varying situations granting the general conditions which will make the principle effective are met. For technique-based formats, the situations have to be very specific for it to be of use.

A specific example of this is with regards to the manner of striking. While strikes are initially taught as having specific angles and anatomical targets, these are more of angles of attack into which most attacks fall into regardless of range or type of weapon. Thus, a practitioner who has learned the first 2 angles and all its permutations in terms of attack and defense is theoretically equipped to handle similar situations regardless of the variable factors. After all, the most common attack - an angled slash towards the left side of the head is the same, whether it is done with a knife, stick, bolo or fist. With slight adjustments, the same can be said to be true for strikes which come from the same side at a different angle.

This methodology gives the Filipino martial arts practitioners a level of adaptability which far exceeds those from other martial arts traditions. He can pick up an object, assess its characteristics, and put it to use when needed, the otherwise daunting extensive Filipino martial arts training scope then becomes simplified. By unifying the various weapons formats through a principle-based center, Filipino martial arts practitioners are able to learn and even create the “new” by relating it to the “familiar.” Just like the Filipino’s view of the world around him, to a Filipino martial arts practitioner, all weapon formats are inter-related.

A visual rendering of the Filipino martial arts looks somewhat like this:



d. Applications Methodology/Skills Development: Interactive Approach

The Filipino penchant for relationships is likewise part and parcel of the training program. Filipino martial arts practitioners develop their skills mainly through inter-active partner drills which are meant to develop aspects such as footwork, body positioning and striking accuracy. Through these drills, instinctive responses are developed. There are practically hundreds of inter-active drills in the Filipino martial arts world depending on the developmental needs of the practitioner but these can generally be categorized into 3 types:

1. Sequence/ Choreographed- Drills which are based on the memorization of a pre-determined sequence of strikes and responses between partners.
2. Semi-Free Style- Drills in which the feeding may be random but the responses set.
3. Freestyle- Drills where strikes and responses are random. With the exception of actual sparring, free-style-types of drills are the closest individuals get to an actual fight as practitioners rely purely on instinctive responses.

Through these drill, practitioners “learn by doing.” This characteristic of Filipino martial arts, the reliance on inter-active drills, makes it distinct from other martial arts traditions (except probably for the grappling arts which rely on sparring). This is in direct contrast to other martial arts traditions which features solo practice using forms known as “Kata” or “Hyungs” and pre-determined fighting sequences (apart from sparring). While this is undoubtedly a strength for the Filipino martial arts, this has also become its limitation. It is because of this training characteristic that Filipino martial arts cannot be taught on a mass basis similar to Japanese Karate or Korean Tae Kwon Do. Filipino martial arts teachers need to interact with their students on a one-on-one basis if proper skills are to be developed. This means each Filipino martial arts teacher can only take on a limited number of students. Senior students capable of performing the drills can and do also help of course.

Training in the Filipino martial arts is a one-on-one affair. It is relational and intimate. Individual skills are developed through interaction with others and never alone. Thus practitioners feel the need for others and

are aware of their importance in his or her development in the Filipino martial arts and vice-versa.

e. Teaching Goals: Visualized End-product

At a fundamental level, teaching is a creative process. Through teaching Filipino martial arts, the teacher hopes to transform an ordinary person into a warrior. He or she hopes to create an “Escrimador” (Escrimador is the term used to describe individuals proficient in Filipino martial arts). Whether consciously or unconsciously, every teacher holds to an ideal he or she hopes to re-create through his students.

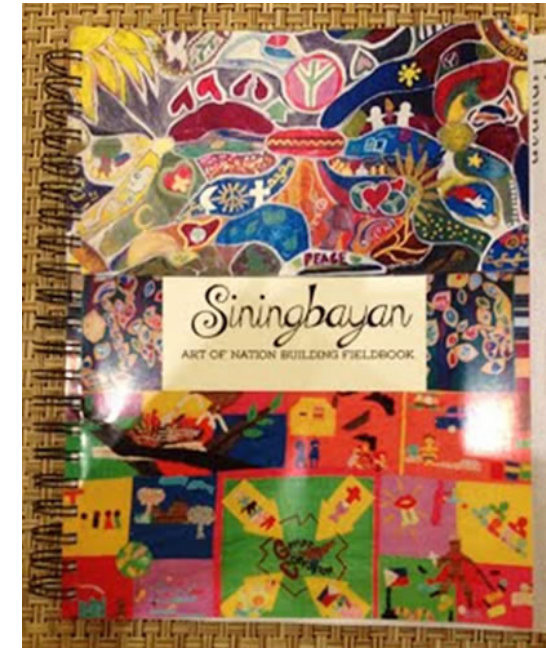
In the advanced stages of training, practitioners are encouraged to “find their own way” in the art. Students are encouraged to express themselves and involve themselves in the creative process instead of merely mimicking their teachers. Oftentimes one will find the teacher use the term “laro” (meaning “to play”) more often. This is his way of saying “go according to how you feel.” At this point, the art becomes more than just a method of fighting- it becomes a means of expression.

For every Filipino martial arts teacher, the ideal Escrimador is someone who has gained proficiency in the art. Proficiency cannot be gained without a deep understanding of the art. This understanding is expressed in how that individual responds to situations thrown at him by the teacher. He or she must be able to solve problems and execute solutions in a spontaneous and unrehearsed fashion. More importantly, he must be able to respond to situations he has never encountered and come up with solutions he hasn’t learned. The teacher hopes to guide students to the point whereby the art they are learning becomes “their” art. It has become something owned and personal and not merely something they learned from someone else. Everybody works towards the ability to distill a wide and comprehensive body of knowledge into a few principles and strategies and express this understanding in physical movement.



Siningbayan Fieldbook (2nd edition)

By: Joey Ayala and Pauline Bautista



Note From The Editors:

In 2009, we published Siningbayan Art of Nation Building Field Book and have since shared this material as readings and process experiences with Academe (NSTP Instructors, UP and SUC Teachers, DepEd Teachers), Business (Corporate Social Responsibility), Civil Society (NGO Workers, Youth Leaders, Young Professionals), Government (CSC Human Resource Management Practitioners, LGU workers), Artists and Culture-Bearers. We have received feedback on its role in bridging gaps-pag-uugnay, ugnayan.

With the goal to contemplate and articulate the “values that transform the inner life of Filipinos” and operationalize the “reawakening of the Filipinos’ capacity to overcome poverty and transform corruption” through conscious experience of the prosperity of our social and natural environment and the integrity of our being and our relationships, we have evolved activities now included this second edition of the Siningbayan Art of Nation Building Field Book. Salundiwa, SuriDiwa

We have enriched Pagsalob with chapters on governance and culture, yoga, and Philippine martial arts, Pagsalinaw with modules from our workshops in Conspiracy and PalayigasKanin writeshops with teachers, and Pagsaganap with a Filipino-oriented human resource paradigm and non-traditional contributions to governance. In the words of the late Br. Roly, here is “a collaborative work-in-progress which you will enrich with your own experiences”.

Download: [Click Here](#)

School Submission

The schools listed teach Filipino martial arts, either as the main curriculum or an added curriculum.

If you have a school that teaches Filipino martial arts, or you are an instructor that teaches, but does not have a school, list the school or style so individuals who wish to experience, learn and gain knowledge have the opportunity.

Be Professional; keep your contact information current. - [Click Here](#)



Event Submission

Submit your event whether - Seminar, Workshop, Training Camp, tournament, or Gathering - [Click Here](#)



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Article Submission

Finished manuscripts should be accompanied by color or black and white photographs. Though we take care of materials, we can not be responsible for manuscripts/photographs and accept no liability for same. Every photograph or graphic must be accompanied by a caption Carefully key photos to caption information with a letter or number.

We reserve the right to use any photo(s) as cover material or additional compensation. We also reserve the right to edit material and to crop photographs.

We reserve the right to use articles or parts of articles that are given and approved from time to time as needed to promote the Filipino martial arts and the Culture of the Philippines.

Physical manuscripts should be typed in black, double spaced, and set to 1-1/2 margins (right and left).

Emailed manuscripts should be typed in Ariel or Times Roman, on programs such as Notepad, Wordpad, Microsoft Word, Word Perfect and can be sent as an attachment. Photo(s) can be sent as a .jpg, .gif, .bmp, or .tiff - to submit material for either the FMA Informative Newspaper or an Issue [Click Here](#)

We welcome your article, ideas and suggestions, and look forward to working with you in the future.