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Arnis Bill - Will it Finally Build Unity in the Filipino Martial Arts?

By Steven K. Dowd

Throughout the history of the Philippines, there have been fighting arts for survival. This is prominently noted during the time the Spanish dominated the Philippines, along with World War II with the Japanese, and even when other countries had tried to control the Philippines, like the Portuguese, Dutch, and Americans.

However the Filipinos are warriors not to be fully dominated and controlled, yes they have been influenced and adapted to each foreign power that has tried to have a foot hold in the Philippines.

Throughout the history of the Philippines the fighting arts have been for village survival etc, but as time progressed their art became refined to their heritage and surroundings. Many had to take there are underground or disguise it in a dance form during the time the Spanish ruled, and also during the Japanese occupation.

Once the Philippines gained their independence fully, still the Filipino art known as Arnis (Kali or Eskrima in some areas) was still not taught publicly, staying in the province, backyard, indoors, underground etc.

It is in just the last century that the Filipino art of Arnis has come out somewhat and has been taught to fellow countrymen and foreigners. Some of the legends which have passed away such as: Venancio "Anciong" Bacon of Balintawak Eskrima, Jose D. Caballero of De Campo Uno-Dos-Tres Orihinal, Filemon Canete of San Miguel Eskrima, Antonio "Tatang" Ilustrisimo of Kali Ilustrisimo, Benjamin Luna-Lema of Lightning Scientific Arnis, Jose

L. Vinas of Lapu-Lapu Vinas Arnis and the list goes on, did not leave the Philippines, and were known but unfortunately became well known after their passing through their students dedication and teachings. Other legends such as Remy Presas of Modern Arnis, Eduardo J. Pedoy of Derobio Eskrima, Angel Cabales of Serrada Eskrima, Leo Giron of Giron System of Arnis Eskrima (BAHALANA), Isidro Pambuan of Pambuan Arnis Tulisan Caballero and others left the Philippines bringing their art with them and sharing it in the country that they resided in. Also one must not forget the practitioners that head their systems and are still alive and well and sharing their knowledge in the Philippines and also outside the Philippines.

December 11, 2009

Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri who, along with Representative Henry Teves and George Arnais, authored the

law making Arnis the country's national martial arts and sport. The Arnis Bill of Law, Republic Act No. 9850, an act declaring Arnis as the National martial arts and sport of the Philippines was signed by President Arroyo on December 11, 2009, a move that was welcomed by Senator Zubiri and the countless Arnis practitioners throughout the country.

It's quite ironic that Arnis, the traditional martial arts, is being practiced more in other countries than inside Philippines.

In Thailand has Muay Thai Boxing, in Korea they have Tae Kwon-Do and in Indonesia they have Pencak Silat, now the Philippines; has Arnis as the national sport

The long wait is over for Arnis, the traditional Filipino martial arts, has become the national sport. And it took a Senator and Arnis experts as well, to give the sport, around the world, the recognitions it deserves.



Senator Zubiri spoke in front of the Arnis Grandmasters from different styles, clubs, and organizations from across the country as they paid a courtesy call on Philippine Sports Commission Chairman Harry Angpin.

Unifying the Filipino art known as Arnis

With the coming of the Americans, in the beginning of the 20th century the Filipinos were taken in with this new culture, that most indigenous cultures were relegated almost to oblivion. The Filipino art known as Arnis, the Filipino martial art, almost suffered the same fate. Once the martial art of the pre-Spanish natives and the ilustrados of the Spanish era, Arnis almost disappeared in the urban areas and were mostly preserved in the provinces.

The rise to popularity of various non-Filipino martial arts such as Karate, Judo, Kun Fu, and Tai Chi brought the local martial art into the limelight. Suddenly,



The PKA a dominate martial art Organization during the early 70's while President Marcos was in office.

interest in Arnis began to surge. Popular practice of the art of Arnis however, also had its share of problems. For one, there was a dire need to consolidate the various forms, styles and strains of Arnis. Arnis is not just one technique nor just one school, it is as varied as the islands of the country, with its more than eighty (80) languages and about one hundred forty-two (142) dialects in an archipelago of seven thousand one hundred (7, 100) islands. Furthermore, there was also a need for a strong lead-

ership to hold such schools or group together, to steer it towards a direction, so as to prevent Arnis from slipping into oblivion.

In 1975, the National Arnis Association of the Philippines (NARAPHIL) was formed by Gen. Fabian C. Ver. This Organization acted as the first National Organization for Arnis in the Philippines. Its existence however, faded after the radical change and total revamp in the Philippine government caused by the Philippine Revolution of 1986.

In the meantime, in many



parts of the world, popular names and groups had been busy propagating the Filipino martial arts, pushing their teachings and techniques. Some people successfully made their way into martial arts schools, police academies, military schools, educational institutions, government agencies, and even in the entertainment world.

On July 11, 1986, Mr. Raymond Soriano Velayo, a young civic-minded and noted sportsman, convened a group of men truly devoted to the art at the Sulu Restaurant at Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines. They formed the Philippine Arnis Federation, which was later renamed as Arnis Philippines (ARPI). Succeeding meetings saw the joining of more distinguished men who were bent

on making Arnis a pillar in the world of martial arts.

Because of the vacuum and taking advantage of the much preferred democratic space and of course, the renewed enthusiasm of the Philippine society, these Founders decided to bring together the various Arnis clubs and styles in the spirit of unity. This was preceded by the observation that Arnis, which was fast becoming a dying art in the country, should be revived and promoted. Thus, with the firm objectives of promoting, propagating and preserving the Filipino martial arts, the Philippine Arnis Federation was born.

On August 20, 1986, the Organization was formally recognized as Arnis Philippines Incorporated. Arnis Philippines received immediate recognition from the official sports bodies in the Philippines. On January 12, 1987 Arnis Philippines was solely accredited Arnis arm and association in the Philippine Olympic Committee and was accepted as the 33rd member of the said Olympic Committee.

Also to note; always one to contribute and assist in the preservation and promotion of the Filipino martial arts, Roland Dantes held the position as Chairman of International Affairs of Arnis Philippines, and the International Arnis Federation, Arnis Philippines



for those who do not know, are the official governing body recognized by the Philippine government are in fact the 33rd Member of the Philippine Olympic Committee. As the Chairman of International Affairs Roland Dantes worked not just with Organizations within the Philippines, but also with different countries to promote and bring unity to the Filipino martial arts.

With the Southeast Asian Games being held in the Philippines in 2005, a historic event took place for Arnis/Kali/Eskrima it became an official event and not simply a demonstration sport. So this in its self was a monumental moment and is noted in history. This came about not only through the efforts of Arnis Philippines and its President, Mr. Raymond S. Velayo and all officers and staff. The 23rd South East Asian Games were held in December 2005 in Manila and other locations, all around the Philippines.

For Arnis they had six



events, namely: men's full contact sparring (up to 71 kg), women's full contact sparring (up to 52 kg), men's anyo one stick individual (single stick forms), women's anyo one stick individual (single stick form), men's anyo two sticks team (double stick synchronized team

forms), and women's anyo two sticks team (double stick synchronized team forms).

With the conclusion of the 23rd South East Asian Games as time passed, many practitioners moved on their own way, not being a part of Arnis Philippines and instead continued to support their art, club, organization etc. Arnis Philippines is still in existence but the unity cannot be noted as when first started.

Roland Dantes passed away March 16, 2009, leaving the Philippine Council of Kali Eskrima Arnis Masters without a figure head of his capabilities and it is still not widely known who has taken the reins and is in charge of the Organization. It is hoped that the Organization will continue with the same spirit that it was formed with.

What is the purpose of the Arnis Bill besides bringing recognition and establishing the Filipino martial art known as Arnis? As has been put to the FMADigest by several sources it is to promoting, propagating and preserving the



Roland Dantes

In Roland Dantes quest to bring together the Filipino martial arts throughout the world he formed The Philippine Council of Kali Eskrima Arnis Masters.

The Philippine Council of Kali Eskrima Arnis Masters was incorporated under the laws of the Republic of the Philippines in 2005 and registered with the Securities Exchange Commission (Registration # CN200519278).



A gathering of Grandmasters and Masters with Roland Dantes and the author. This was the afternoon of March 15, 2009 in Manila.

Filipino martial art known as Arnis. It is to bring together and unify all Filipino martial arts of Arnis / Kali / Eskrima and establish a uniform set of rules and regulations for competition.

The Bill is also to establish an educational program for schools from elementary to universities that are of the basics of Arnis that does not single out a particular art, but will teach the basics and leave it to the student if desired to seek outside the school if interest is of a particular style.

Now there are programs established already in some of the schools of the Philippines; however they are of a particular style

or system and not of the pure basics of the art. These programs have been in existence for many years, and that are also in certain colleges and universities and are accredited.

But what must be done as stated before is to establish an educational program for schools from elementary to universities that are of the basics of Arnis that does not single out a particular art, but will teach the basics and leave it to the student if desired to seek outside the school if interest is of a particular style.

In unison with the many Grandmasters, Masters, Instructors, and Organizations, who

constantly shared their knowledge, promulgation, promotion and continuously worked hard for this to come about. It is hoped that all practitioners of Filipino martial arts will set aside their differences, petty squabbles, and will unite and come together to share this most special time when the Filipino arts will bring forth the basic education of the Filipino martial arts and then the specialties of each art from all and then in competition showing the art to its fullest tradition, skills, and beauty. Not just as a sport, but as part of the history of the Philippines which has been continuously handed down from generation to generation.



December 11, 2009 the Arnis Bill was signed and Arnis became the National martial arts and sport of the Philippines. It has been one year. You may have asked yourself:

1. Has it brought unity to the Filipino martial arts in the Philippines?
2. Has an executive board been established?
3. Are programs established for education?
4. Is there one set of rules that is fair to both traditional and modern tournament competition?
5. Is this all still in the works?
6. And when will it be officially announced so outside the Philippines, all Filipino martial arts practitioners will know?

Some Observations of the Filipino Martial Arts

By Steven K. Dowd

I have been a practitioner of the Filipino martial arts for over 40 years. In fact the Filipino martial arts are the only martial arts that I have truly trained in. I know people in other martial arts such as Karate, Tai Chi, Kung Fu, Judo, Ju Jitsu etc. . . . , but have never truly trained in these arts to consider myself a student or practitioner.

To me the Filipino martial arts practitioner is honest, forthright, reserved (do not want to use the word humble), knowledgeable, confident in their art, not afraid to share the knowledge, their word is their bond (unless unforeseen circumstances), skilled, and is a professional. They are a teacher of their art and culture not an instructor.

Through the 7 years I have published the FMA Digest this has been my observation. Though as I said at the beginning of this article what I believe a Filipino martial arts practitioner is, of course there are those that possess all the qualities and some that are very close, but overall I would most definitely put them in that category. No names will be mentioned, and these thoughts are not of just one individual that represents the Filipino martial arts, but what I have found in several incidents concerning Honorable, Ultimate, Supreme, Great, Grandmaster / Tuhon / Datu (did not want to miss any titles) down to the Guro, and I will just use the term practitioner so not to pin point any particular rank or individual.

First there is the practitioner who is a student of one art and then switches to another to

be established and then makes alliances with a Organization or maybe a couple. Now there is nothing wrong with this and the individual is gaining knowledge and skill. However, it seems that this individual goes to one style or another and from one Organization to the other on a whim, depending on what will make that individual more popular or produce monetary value. If none of these changes really do much for that individual, of course they have their own self-created system on which to fall back.

Next is a practitioner who was a student of a well known practitioner who has passed away, and who moves on either because they do not agree with or do not have the confidence in the successor. They establish their own Organization using the styles name and continue to develop and support the art from which they came, which is commendable and perpetuates the art for others to experience and learn.

Then there are the practitioners that are dismissed (*banned*) from a style by the highest ranking practitioner. Then they continuously bad mouth the style, but still use the name of the style in conjunction to whatever they add so it will be their styles name. They also use some parts or all of the styles logo in conjunction to what they add so it is their logo and continue to use the forms / anyos learned in that style calling it their own. So was it the style that was bad or the practitioner that dismissed them from the style?

There are others who

Teacher or Instructor:

In the English language, the terms teacher or instructor are used interchangeably and are synonymous with each other. In Filipino, these terms are both translated as Guro.

However, in Filipino, the term teacher is normally used in an educational institution, and carries a deeper meaning. A teacher builds character and attitude. A teacher invokes virtues that make a good individual great.

In martial arts, the term usually used is instructor. An instructor drills students in techniques and maneuvers. An instructor's goal is to make a better practitioner of a particular system or art.

establish their own Organization using whatever name, relying however on the art or arts that they have learned to bring credibility to themselves and their Organization. Some of these practitioners to whom I have talked really do not need to use the names of others, as their skills are credible in their own right, but still feel the need when establishing their Organization to have a prominent practitioner's name attached to be accepted or popular.

Of course there are those practitioners that visit the Philippines, train in particular style or attend a few seminars that the senior practitioner teaches in a country outside of the Philippines and pay or whatever and become a ranking practitioner of that style and think they know everything about the style and have no problem in putting their 2 cents in with senior instructors that really have trained with the senior practitioner a considerable amount of time.

Another is the Filipino practitioner that has left the Philippines and teaches another martial art which they learned in the Philippines and this is understandable for the Japanese, Korean, and Chinese martial arts where very popular in the Philippines for a long time and the Filipino martial arts was either non-existent in their area or teachers were not easy to find or accessible. Then all of a sudden these practitioners, see the light after attending a Filipino martial arts demonstration or attend a seminar, workshop, or come upon a practitioner teaching in his home, park, or school, etc... and then all of a sudden they wish to get back to their roots and culture. **Now understand** this is great (better late than never), and some become very dedicated under the system they choose and even take all of their knowledge that they gain and develop their own system. What makes me chuckle is the practitioners that as I say sees the light and wants to bring their roots and culture in to themselves all of a sudden claim that their family had a system and now they are the head of their family's system.

Of course money is a factor in the livelihood of some practitioners and that is understandable as long as (in my opinion) the student is gaining knowledge and is becoming skilled in that art. However I have witnessed and heard of practitioners where money is the key factor and promotion is given to keep the student, or given if the practitioner needs to go on vacation or whatever, I understand as anyone would, money must be obtained to pay the bills whether for the school, personal needs, house, food, etc... for that is the case with Filipino martial arts practitioners

that make a living in teaching, however I have come across a couple that it seems that ranking exams and promotions are given when they just happen to be going to places like Atlantic City, Reno, Las Vegas, or other vacation spots.

Since I have brought up the money factor, what I have found which is amazing, is the practitioner that has degrees in more than one or two arts. This is great if that practitioner really knows all the arts he is recognized in fully to the degree which was awarded, however if they really are not fully accomplished in all those arts and just know a fraction of what they should really know in being fully accomplished in one or more of the arts they claim, then you have to ask. Did they buy or sweet talk a degree here or there? Which is good for the one that gave them the degree and made money or got a sense of importance, but will the art suffer in the future due to having practitioners running around that really do not fully know the art and cannot really represent the art as it should be. And then does that practitioner who received the high ranking degree give out degrees? And what worth is that degree they gave in reality?

Now I am not talking of the practitioner that experiences or trains in many arts but does not have a high ranking degree and then combines what they believe are the best techniques, which usually for them and their body structure and mental abilities are great, and if they are a good teacher can change a thing here and there to fit their students, since each individual is different on one way or another. Then it is usually a Mixed martial art and cannot be counted as a full Filipino martial art.

And of course there are so many titles in the Filipino martial arts. As soon as someone comes out with a title that maybe higher than another then the other starts using the title or comes up with one they think is unique or will out due the first. And of course it is good (I guess) that seniors make a title above the one before that they had, does it mean they got better, or is it so they can promote others to their old title to keep them dedicated to them, make money, or is it that the junior practitioner has developed so much that something must be done to recognize them?

Brotherhood - *“The state or relationship of being brothers. Fellowship. An association of men united for a common purpose. All the members of a profession or trade”*. This is a word that I really am beginning to find useless in dealing with many practitioners that I have come in contact with. Yes there is a brotherhood if you are part of their click or face to face with them, or are doing something for them that benefits them, or haven't pissed them off.

Instead I rather use the word **Friendship** *“A person whom one knows, likes, and trusts. One who supports, sympathizes with, or patronizes a group, cause, or movement”*.

A friend's word is their bond, a true friend you can discuss anything and there is understanding and if not then communication for understanding to continue the friendship and conversations are kept between them.

“Friendship isn't about who you have known the longest. It's about those who came and never left your side”

Anyway, as said at the beginning of this article, there is

no mention of individual practitioners. It is just an observation. And there are many, many, many Practitioners throughout the world that come under what the FMAdi-

gest said at the beginning of this article which was honest, forthright, reserved (do not want to use the word humble), knowledgeable, confident in their art, not afraid to

share the knowledge, their word is their bond (unless unforeseen circumstances), skilled, and is a professional. They are a teacher of their art and culture not an instructor.



