



Philippine Escrima

## History of Filipino Martial Arts

The history of the Philippines stretches all the way back as far as 900 AD. Examining the history of the Philippines as a nation, it is clear that martial arts have always been an essential part of the Filipino society. Many different cultures and migrants influenced the martial arts of the Philippines, like in many other places.

Settled in about 200 B.C by the Malays, in a first wave of migrations from the Southeast, they brought with them the weapon of the long knife. Although many weapons of different shapes and sizes were brought into the Philippines, the "Kris", a wavy bladed knife from the island of Java, was the first foreign weapon to be transplanted into the Filipino fighting arts. During the two more migrations that followed, these people were actually the ancestors of the present day Muslim-Filipinos of Mindanao and Sulu.

In 1518, Ferdinand Magellan convinced King Charles I of Spain that the Moluccas, then known as the Spice Islands, could be reached by sailing west. Magellan told the king that the Moluccas belonged to the Spanish side of the demarcation line drawn according to the Treaty of Torsedillas. The king agreed to send an expedition to the Spice Islands under the command of Ferdinand Magellan. On September 20, 1519, the expedition sailed southward across the Atlantic Ocean. Magellan reached the southernmost tip of South America, where he crossed the Pacific Ocean strait, otherwise now known as the Magellan strait. On March of 1521, he finally reached the Marianas. After resting, his men and obtaining provisions, Magellan continued his voyage and, on March 17th, 1521, sighted the mountains of Samar, marking their arrival in the Philippine Archipelago.

On April 28th, Ferdinand Magellan and his men waded ashore in knee high water to do battle with Raja LapuLapu and his men. The methodical historian at his side, Antonio Pigafetta recorded that LapuLapu's men were armed with fire-hardened sticks. In this battle, Magellan was slain by the chief Raja LapuLapu with a Kampilan by a blow to the leg and then a thrust to the neck.

In 1542 the group of islands was officially named Las Philippinas in honor of Prince Philip who later became King Philip of Spain (Philip II, 1556-1598). An explorer named Ruy Lopez de Villalobos, one of Magellan's predecessors takes credit for giving the place its name.

Spanish rule in the Philippines lasted until 1898 when Spain was defeated in the Spanish-

American war. During this long period of colonization, the Spanish had some important effects on the Filipino culture. Firstly, most of the population was converted to Roman Catholicism with the exception for the Muslim Moros of the Sulu archipelago. Spanish fencing also had a direct effect on the fighting arts of the Philippines, with the introduction of the angles of attack, and the use of Espada y daga. When the Spanish imposed a ban on the practice of all native fighting arts and the carrying of bladed weapons during their occupation of the islands, the Filipinos were forced to substitute the use of the sword with that of the rattan. In the beginning, the rattan was used to deliver strikes in the same manner as the blade i.e. slashing and thrusting, and the knife or short stick was still held in reserve as a back up weapon in case the opponent closed the distance, typical of its use by the Spanish. It was hardly ever used to block or parry an oncoming strike. However, through time, the Filipinos began to realize that because the stick had different handling qualities, certain lines of attack were open to them that were not available with the sword, for example, the curved and snapping strikes. Once they began to appreciate the combat effectiveness of the stick, the use of the knife also changed and began to be used more aggressively in terms of blocking, parrying, checking, scooping, thrusting and slashing. This in turn led to the creation of "Olisi y baraw", which is the stick and dagger.

One of the other effects to have reportedly influenced the Filipino culture is the colorful costume of the Spanish. The bright and at times tacky colors are said to be the basis of the colorful outfits worn by many Escrimadors today. However, there is no evidence to support this claim.

Filipino martial arts today are even more confusing. Arnis and Escrima are used to refer to the weapon arts of the Philippines today. Kali is actually used outside the Philippines to refer to the same art. The term Arnis de mano is especially misleading. The term Arnis is a varied form of the word Arnes, which refers to the decorative harnesses used by the actors in moro-moro stage displays. De mano simply means hands, and so a literal translation of Arnis de mano turns into 'harness of hand'. The manipulation of these harnesses during the stage plays impressed the Spanish who dubbed it Arnes de mano. The style Arnis, a Spanish term itself, uses many Spanish terms to describe its techniques such as Espada y daga.

The term Eskrima is another wide-ranging term derived from the word Escrima, which is again derived from the Spanish term Esgrima that is the term for fencing. It is also believed to mean to skirmish but there is no evidence to support this.

The last term Kali is always the most controversial. Many martial arts schools and instructors believe the word Kali to be a combination of the words Kamut, which is hand, and Lihok, which is movement. It is also believed to be the mother art of Arnis or Escrima but there is a lack of evidence to support this. Kali or Kahli as it is sometimes written, in Visayan as a type of stick, but not used to refer to the fighting art. Kali is also the Hindu Goddess of destruction, and the Moros of the Sulu archipelago would often go into battle dressed like the Goddess of Destruction. The more believable explanation is from the Tagalog word for a large bladed weapon, Kalis. This was shortened simply to Kali to refer to all bladed weapons. Its use in the West stems from the use of the word by Floro Villabrille who used this term to describe his art, and Dan Inosanto eventually popularized this. An interview with Antonio Illustrisimo in 1993 revealed that he only used the word out of convenience because foreign students recognized it, although he preferred the term Escrima because this is what it was called when he was learning from his uncles.

Whatever term is used to describe the Filipino fighting arts today it is clear that they offer deep and rewarding training for those involved.

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## **The Origin**

Filipino martial arts training traditionally starts with weapons then transitions into shorter weapons and so on to empty hands. The reason for this is of a historical and practical nature

given the environment of the Philippine Islands. Throughout the Philippine history, unending wars between rival tribes and invasions from foreign aggressors have imposed the need for combat readiness. Survival did not depend on the strongest, but the smartest. Man used whatever it could to secure the advantage and to fend off and protect themselves against animals and other aggressors. This could have meant throwing an object, using a tree branch, and perhaps poking at their enemy with a sharp object. The weapon was used to equalize the differences of strength, speed and aggression between man and other enemies. Imagine the general make up of the Philippines. There are over 7,000 total islands, and these are divided into the three major island groups consisting of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. There are over a hundred different dialects throughout the country. However, the national language spoken is Tagalog. This means there is a lack of central communication and organization yet there is central theme in the Filipino Martial Arts, which revolves around fighting concepts. Looking at the different styles and systems, the techniques used are somewhat different, but the overall concepts of combat and winning remain the same. The Filipino Martial Arts is not a compassionate art; it is a vicious and dangerous form of self-preservation. There are hundreds of unique styles of the Filipino martial arts throughout the Philippines. Regardless of the controversies behind the origins of systems and the various styles of Filipino martial arts, it remains that the "Arnis", "Kali" and "Escrima" are the most commonly used names for the indigenous Philippine Martial Arts. Whatever the name, style or system, Philippine martial artists often chose the best available weapons in order to gain the best advantage over their opponents. These may encompass a variety of bladed weapons, projectile weapons, all sizes, length and shapes of hardwood and rattan weaponry. In other words any object held in a person's hand is a potentially dangerous weapon. Most Filipino martial arts systems have empty hand techniques that resemble a blend of western boxing. These techniques are actually derived from the weapon applications. Because of many innovations and the creativity of Filipino Martial Artists, many of the systems have become personalized and unique.

The Filipino art of weaponry, Escrima or by its many other names, has a long and colorful past. A lot of its history has been lost since little was recorded in writing prior to the 1900's, but rather taught from father to son or daughter. Masters and teachers of the art would pass their knowledge and secrets to only those select few who were deserving of such training. In these modern times we are lucky to have some masters who have been and are currently willing to share their art with others. These masters are concerned with promoting the Filipino culture and demonstrating to the public that the Filipinos have a martial art of their own.



Philippine Escrima

The development and history of Escrima parallels the development of the Philippines as a nation. The various immigrants and invaders alike have had an extensive impact on the Philippine national history and its martial arts.

Around 200 A.D. Arab traders brought bladed metallic weapons and a fluid style of fighting to the islands. These Moslems, who settled on the southern islands of Mindanao, were noted for their tenacity and their ability to fend off invaders.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese began trading with the Philippines, bringing their flowing influence to Escrima. Trade was also heavy with Japan in the pre-Spanish years (around the 15<sup>th</sup> century) their blade methods and joint locking martial art systems effected additional changes in the Filipino martial arts. The Spanish merchants who followed Magellan in the mid-1500 have brought their styles of "Espada y daga, which natives were also quick to adopt. All these outsiders have had a drastic effect on all the Filipino blade and stick fighting arts.

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### **Development in Secrecy**

The Spanish effort to control the people was the primary reason the art of Escrima was driven into secrecy. During their move to Christianize, claim and exploit the Filipinos, the Spanish officials decided that the existing Filipino martial arts were too dangerous to their efforts to control the natives. Therefore, they announced that practicing Escrima was banned and the penalty for violation of the law was death. Escrima became a covert martial art for over 400 years. Many moves, countermoves and techniques were lost during this period. However, many of the movements that were lost were replaced with movements that the Spanish brought with them. It should be noted, the Spanish did not control all the land in the Philippines, only the vital coastal and fringe areas; they dared not enter the forest and jungles, which were inhabited by countless snakes and the ferocious natives whose martial arts they had banned in the cities. By the 1900s, the Spanish oppression of the people had really taken its toll on the practicing of Escrima. Few remained who knew the revered blade and stick movements.

In the 1900's the Americans came into the picture after defeating the Spanish in the Spanish American war of 1898. For five years, the Filipinos fought the Americans, who desired peace but resembled the Spanish too closely to be readily accepted by the Filipino people. However, the Americans brought their martial art of boxing which no doubt have influenced some of the more modern movements of Escrima.

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### **Migration to Hawaii and the USA**

When peaceful coexistence finally came, the Filipinos learned of the tremendous wealth of the American nation and many flocked to Hawaii and the USA hoping to strike it rich and return home wealthy. Once in America, however, the immigrants found that the streets were not lined with gold and that hard work six to seven days a week was the only way to earn a living, usually of low wages.

Modern Escrima (1920-1950) took a giant step forward at this point because Escrimadors from all over the Philippines were brought together to work and live. Past suspicions and ethnic barriers were dropped as each ethnic group of plantation workers were responsible for their own section of land and their profits depended on the yield of their section. Competition for jobs was high because other immigrant workers were there competing for the same jobs as the Filipinos.

When Filipino men were not working in the fields in Hawaii and California, they gathered to practice Escrima to keep up their timing and movements. Lasting friendships developed between masters who, were it not for immigration would never have been brought together much less become friends.

Some of the elderly Filipinos in Hawaii remember the days when you could go to the old Civic Auditorium in Honolulu and watch full-contact matches: two men with sticks but no protective

gear fighting it out until one could not continue. Combatants were devoted to their masters and their styles, each believing his style was better than his opponents and ready to prove it in the ring. In 1929 the matches were outlawed in the territory of Hawaii because of two deaths and constant serious injuries suffered by the participants.

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## **Studying Escrima**

A student is first introduced to the art by learning basic stick exercises. He or she is shown the basic twelve offensive strikes. These are practiced extensively before the student is permitted to advance to the twelve basic defensive blocks. After the student becomes comfortable with the basics the more advanced forms are practiced, "doblebata", which is the two sticks, "espada y daga", "saboy", which is one long stick, and staff, which is the two handed stick.

One of the more exciting forms is "one for one" in which a strike is delivered, blocked by the opponent who follows with a strike to the closest area immediately after the block. This form of fighting can continue for long periods and is the closest thing to actual fighting. There are many variations such as hand-against-weapon and hand-against-hand. The most advanced forms of Escrima are the counter-for-counter movements. The loser is determined when he/she cannot counter the other's move.

Emphasis is placed on the student's ability to learn and progress, advancement in the ranks is based on ability, and the observation of the instructors rather than merely the length of time spent in class. One student may advance quickly while another may be slow to advance, but everyone is given the same chance to learn.

The three key elements to learning Escrima are fluidity, rhythm, and timing. There are few sharp, sudden movements, only smooth flowing transitions from each movement to the next. The flowing skills are the most important and most difficult to learn and apply.

Respect for the master, the instructors, and all other martial arts schools are a very important part of the training. The physical and spiritual aspects of Escrima are nurtured simultaneously. As in the former days of Escrima, secrecy and self-control are stressed. It is only in public demonstrations that the student is encouraged to share their martial knowledge. In days of past, many of the old Escrima Masters would choose to die with their martial knowledge rather than teach it to someone that might disgrace the Master. Remember to always respect the art and the master.