

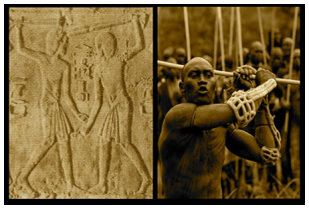
by Guru Scott McQuaid

Stick fighting is as old as man. The very object of the stick has been constantly used as a tool for survival, in hunting, farming, gathering, measuring, laboring and fighting. The martial arts are a blend of cultures and ideas from around the world, there is no singular creation, there will always be influence from somewhere else. There are various terms for Filipino stick fighting but for the sake of this article and my preferred theory I will use the phrase *Kali.*

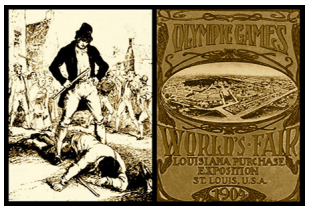
This stick fighting art displays a rich heritage from various sources upon the Philippines shores. To understand this stick style, we must examine the history and importance of stick combat.

In ancient Egypt, a stick was an object of prime importance. The stick would vary in length and style according to the person's occupation. A shepherd's staff was different from a merchant's, whose was different from a priest's. The stick would remain with that person even in death, when it was placed in the coffin beside the mummy to protect the deceased on their travels into the afterlife.

The art of stick combat is seen in all corners of the earth. The first martial art, called Pankration (meaning 'all power') is believed to come from Greece. This was the first combat sport introduced into the Greek Olympic Games in 648 BC. It was a blend of boxing and wrestling but eventually weapons were added and sticks became a part of the art.



African sub-tribes would duel each other to help preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage. The Ethiopian's Suri stick fighting art is used to attract brides. The earliest recognition of stick fighting dated by the West is in the 17th century, brought to the shores of Trinidad by African slaves. During the 16th century in Brazil, African slave groups would engage in stick combat referred to as *Palo do Brasil* which translates to 'Brazil wood'. This is a type of tree that was believed to have medicinal properties. It is believed that African descendants were the creators of the martial art Capoeira incorporating dance, acrobatics, music and native Brazilian influences. The use of bamboo sticks were also included in Capoeira. In Ireland, a hard blackthorn wood known as *Shillelagh* was the weapon of choice to settle any disputes in a gentlemanly manner, much like pistols in colonial America, or the katana in Japan. This Irish art of stick combat was known as *bataireacht*. Single stick fighting was an event at the 1904 Summer Olympics in St. Louis, Missouri in the United States.



Stick combat was very much established in the western world but South East Asia still remains to hold the earliest documented evidence of stick fighting on the battle field and not as a sport. This comes from the Srivijaya warriors from Sumatra in Indonesia. This evidence dates back to 671 AD when the Chinese monk Yijing wrote about his visit to the Srivijaya empire and described the soldiers combative stick training. These warriors were trained in blade and stick fighting and many immigrated to the island of Cebu in the Philippines in the 7th century. As the Srivijaya kingdom began to fall, more of the warriors fled to the island escaping the expansion of the Majapahit empire now known as Java in the 13th and 16th centuries.

It is believed that these stick and blade warriors introduced the early beginnings of *Kali Silat.* Ea rly Indonesian, Malaysian and Chinese settlers are said to have had a large impact on local fighting techniques in the Philippines. These migrants would have practiced *Tongkat.*
This is the generic term used by Indonesians and Malays for stick combat, although the literal meaning of tongkat is 'walking stick' as some Indonesian martial art systems use the walking stick as a weapon. The Chinese immigrants brought their own localized martial arts, which they

called
kuntaw,
better known today as Kuntao Silat. Although this style was also mixed with Indonesian fighting applications.

The word *Silat* is a collective word for indigenous martial arts from Southeast Asia. A theory on the word Silat is that it comes from the word ' *Si Kilat*' or today's version *kilat,* meaning lightning in Bahasa Indonesia. Within all silat styles, speed is key, to move as lightning. Silat is said to have originated in Indonesia and spread across the Malaysian peninsular into Singapore and the South of Thailand as well parts of Brunei, Vietnam and the southern island of the Philippines. The word 'silat' is used by speakers of Southeast Asia but the modern term pencak silat was later introduced in Indonesia in 1948 as a unifying term for the Indonesian fighting styles. The Filipinos refer to the word silat in conjunction with the lower body movement used within kali fighting. While the word silat has become a term used for artistic combat in South East Asia, the particular style of silat often is named after an instructor, a village or animal that has influenced the style.



There are various theories behind the origin of the word Kali that is used in relation to the art. One such belief is that the word comes from *tjakalele* which is a tribal style of stick-fencing from Indonesia. This idea could have some worth as this style of stick combat does show clear similarities in techniques used within the kali style and the Filipino Mindanao island is very close in proximity to Indonesia. However due to the rarity and age of tjakalele and the unknown elements of kali, it is difficult to see which art influenced the other.

The word kali in Bahasa Indonesia language relates to the multiplication of elements, so it may have some connection to Indonesia's language as kali has never ending variety of techniques in its arsenal.

The Indonesian Batak karo language from the Northern part of Sumatra uses the word kali in reference to rivers. Most martial arts natural flow are almost always associated to the flow of a

river. Kali stick work certainly has a very natural effortless flow and the Srivijaya warriors did come from the island of Sumatra over to Cebu, so once again there could be some worth to this word association.

In the Philippines the most popular theory of the word kail is that it is a combination of words from the Philippine language of Tagalog, the word ‘kamot’ meaning hand and ‘lihok’ meaning motion. This would certainly relate to the circular hand motion and dexterity applied in the use of the stick in kali. The rare few Filipinos that do use the word kali usually use it to put emphasis on the bladed weaponry used in the art and set it apart from the practice with the stick. A term for a local blade is kalis and some believe that kali derived from this word. Another notion is that kalis comes from the word *keris* which is a famous Indonesian dagger that dates back more than 400 years used in silat.

The word kali is Sanskrit and refers to a Hindu Goddess. The name kali comes from kala which means black, time, and death. So this relates to *‘the time has come’* as in 'to die'. The Srivijaya warriors came from a Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom so this Hindu word kali could have been incorporated into their culture early on and like so many English language words introduced centuries ago, they become lost in time, growing out of fashion.



Many Filipinos describe the old *kalistas* (practitioners of kali) as warriors that fought to the death, so there could be some connection to the meaning of the word. Kali also means *time*
in Bahasa Malaysia and timing is a vital point in silat training. Many instructors will always stress the importance of timing to move with your opponent and not before or after. This notion is essential in all forms of combat and often mentioned in boxing circles - fighters must get their range and timing for counter punching. So the word kali could relate to the timing aspects of Filipino stick fighting as most of the techniques and drills are performed extremely fast in a lose pattern where timing is essential otherwise you will get hit.

The Manuvu tribe in Agusan del Sur province, located in the Caraga region in Mindanao, claim that their combat system Eskapi dates back to the 4th century. If this is to be true then it pre-dates the arrival of the Srivijaya warriors to Cebu in the 7th century. The Manuvu tribe, spelled today in its hispanicized spelling 'Manobo', meaning 'person' or 'people', were greatly influenced by the Madjapahit Empire. This can be attested through the discovery of the Golden Tara founded in 1960, in one of the towns of the Agusan province, that is Maasam, Esperanza. The 8-inches gold image, that was retrieved along the river of Esperanza, originated from the Madjapahit Empire.

So there is a big discrepancy here with what influence of stick combat was integrated with the Visayan migrants.

There are notable similarities between Eskapi and the Sumatran Minangkabau Ranjau tongkat stick system. The Manuvu tribe state that Eskapi is the original form of Eskrima. This claim is bold and holds little to no evidence, only the word of the tribesmen. However, geographically the Agusan river is the third largest river in the country and served as a highway for the Spanish colonizers in gaining access to inner northeastern Mindanao. So why wouldn't the Srivijaya warriors use this root from the lower and middle part of Sumatra instead of traveling further up to the main island of Cebu? The same can be said for the Madjapahit kingdom's expansion onto the islands.

Archaeological excavations in the lower Agusan valley plains have uncovered evidence of strong relationships between the region and the Southeast Asian states. A golden image of Javan-Indian design unearthed in the 1920s and molten jars uncovered in Prosperidad are indications that the region had commercial and cultural ties with the coast.



The local tribes state that to learn Eskapi is the right of passage for the Manuvu tribes males, much like the practice of Silek for the males in the Minangkabau tribe. And like the practice of tongkat in Silek, Eskapi is very basic in its moves compared to Kali (Eskrima). There are rumors that Eskapi is nothing more than a Manuvu ritual dance with a bolo (machete) and

shield. However many silat systems have been influenced by folk dances, such as the *Balinese Bakti Negara*
silat style that took a lot of movements from Balinese dances and adapted it to combat use.

Eskapi is said to have only four basic moves, charge, thrust, cut and slash. If practiced with a blade they are said to use the Minasbad sword, which is a traditional blade from the Bicol Region in the southeastern peninsula of the northern island of Luzon. The Minasbad sword is one of the few Philippine swords still around that dates back to Philippine pre-history, which is way before the arrival of the Spanish. Many Filipinos say it represents something different. Some say a bat, a dog or a horse. Perhaps it is a combination of all three. Like the Moro Kris sword used in Kali, the applications from blade to stick remain the same for the most part. It would not be uncommon for the design of that sword to travel down to that region as Agusan valley was a trading area. After all the Sumatran Rencong blade was designed and manufactured in the north of the island in Aceh. But the blade is more popular and renown in the Minangkabau province in the west of the island. The most famous Indonesian blade is the keris, which came from Java, and not only spread across many of Indonesia's islands but also into other countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines.

In the practice of Eskapi, they flank their enemy and sever the arm high before swooping down into a crouching low posture similar to a Minang Silek Harimau stance to slice a leg. This weakens and disables the opponent's mobility. Then the Eskapi practitioner continues to move around their opponent cross leg stepping one over the other, exactly like the movement used in silat. As they do this move they cut under the arm pit before killing the enemy with a slash to the neck as they pass beyond them.

This type of movement is almost identical to many silat styles yet for the most part Kali is practiced in an almost head long front to front engagement. The movement of shifting the entire body is limited to back and fourth with a small side step parry but nothing like flanking past your opponent and beyond them.

If Eskapi is indeed the first version of Kali, this makes more sense in its evolution as a silat form from Indonesia because of its simplicity with only four basic principle moves. Most silat styles have very few core basics and various techniques work off the initial principals in variations. Like the silat jungle tribes of Indonesia, the Eskapi practitioners of the Manuvu tribe are said to train on various terrains such as forest foliage, river streams and uneven mountain grounds. This makes sense as this is their environment.

The more popular terms for Filipino stick fighting is Eskrima and Arnis. These words come from the Spanish during their colonial times of the country. Eskrima is a Filipinization of the Spanish word 'esgrima', meaning fencing, and arnis comes from 'arnes' which is old Spanish for armor. These terms are used more frequently than kali, but even these phrases only resurfaced globally in the late 1940s.

Eskapi is a Esperanto word meaning 'to escape or evade'. This makes sense as the physical movement of the Eskapi style ties into the word, in escaping your opponent's initial attack. Esperanto is a international language created in 1887 and its usage is highest in Europe, East Asia, and South America. So the Agusan tribes could have renamed their combat arts that they said date back to the 4th century with this word Eskapi. But the problem with this assumption is that the Spanish arrived in Cebu conquering the island in 1565, so part of their colonization is their language that is still heard in many Filipino words today. This would result in the word esgrima to eskrima which has been present in the country for over two hundred years before the Esperanto language was even invented. Perhaps the isolation of the Agusan province from Mindanao mainlands such as Cebu prevented their unembellished basic traditional stick combat to evolve and also to be named until much later when travelers ventured into the territory using the Esperanto language to communicate. A more likely theory is that this sudden emergence of Eskapi is a combat form has been created with influences from Eskrima, Silat and the tribe's folk dances. This type of practice mixing combat styles and changing the pattern and mindset has been going on for centuries, which is why we have so many different Silat systems. The most recent martial system to be created in the 21st century is MMA (mixed martial arts).

What has happened over the years is a categorization of Filipino stick fighting, using these different terms. Arnis tends to refer to the competition sport stick fighting, whereas Eskrima is the stick fighting you learn with the the structured forms and training. Kali is mentioned as a historic point, whereby the stick fighting is used in reality to fight for survival, using only one stick before its configuration.

Kali in its present and structured form today is known as Eskrima and the fundamentals were designed by the Doce Pares group. Doce Pares means twelve pairs or twelve equals. It is a Visayan / Cebuano phrase from their native language of Cebu that has kept many Spanish words within their dialect. The name came about due to the twelve stick fighters that came together to form and structure the art of stick combat into the style of Doce Pares (Eskrima). These practitioners claim that they can trace their history back to the Filipino warrior Lapu-Lapu, which in theory is probably true as Lapu-Lapu is himself a descendant of the Majapahit empire. But the anatomy of Doce Pares is way too advanced for a direct legacy to Lapu-Lapu. This personal connection between Doce Pares and Lapu-Lapu is unverified as Doce Pares was only founded in 1932 and the legend of Lapu-Lapu dates back to 1521.

The warrior Lapu-Lapu was the ruler of Mactan on the island of Cebu. He is said to be the first native of the archipelago to have resisted Spanish colonization. He along with his tribe was responsible for the death of Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. He is now regarded, retroactively, as the first Filipino hero. Statues and painting of the warrior Lapu-Lapu always depict him holding a large sword known as *kampílan*. This style of sword is used within kali today. It is quite possible that Lapu-Lapu was a warrior that learned tongkat stick fighting and sword play from his great ancestors left over from the Majapahit empire as Cebu is the very area they settled.



During the 1950's a member of the Doce Pares group named Venancio Bacon broke away from the club as he was concerned that the art was being watered down by other styles of Philippine martial arts. He developed his own style of stick fighting and called it Balintawak, which was the name of a small street in Cebu where he held his classes in the backyard of a watch shop.

The main differences between the Doce Pares system and the Balintawak style is that the Balintawak art uses only one stick and fights in close quarter combat making use of their free hand and other body parts to attack. The Doce Pares style uses the traditional two sticks and tends to attack from a mid or long distance. The Balintawak system is perhaps closer to the original form of tongkat brought to the shores in bygone years, only much more advanced.

During the 1950's and 1960's, *eskrimadors* (stick fighters) from Doce Pares and Balintawak, tested each other's skills in all-out challenges. These resulted in injuries and sometimes deaths. Venancio Bacon got to test his Balintawak methods when he was ambushed in the dark while walking to his home in Labangon. He managed to kill his assailant.



