

# **PRACTICE, PERFORMANCE, AND PHILOSOPHY: EXPLORING *KARATE* AS A SITE OF AN INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTER**

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## **Abstract**

*Karate*, a martial art of Okinawan origin, is widely practiced as art, sport, and self-defense. In the Philippines, the term *karate* used to refer to any kind of martial art, pointing to the popularity that it once enjoyed. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that the practice of *karate* lends itself well to various forms and modes of interpretation. As a Japanese martial art, *karate* is informed by a conceptual framework that is specific to Japanese culture, hence the differences between *karate* performances in Japan and elsewhere. Upon the introduction of the art to foreign locations, the art begins to undergo certain changes in its underlying philosophy, as manifested in its practice and performance. In this paper, the author explores *karate* as a site of an intercultural encounter between two cultures, the Japanese Martial Way or *budo*, and the Philippine martial culture.

Key words: Martial Philosophy, Appropriation, Identity, Hybridity, Filipino Philosophy

*Karate* is chosen as a site of an encounter because it is one of the earlier martial arts, along with judo, to be introduced into the Philippines in modern times. It would be interesting to examine modifications and transformations in the art, given the fact that the Philippines seems to have a penchant for transforming arts that are already martial in nature, into a form that may be considered combative as opposed to simply aesthetic. The author seeks to present an initial exploration into how the art of *karate* is practiced in the Philippine urban setting, and how the differences in practice can be framed in terms of the philosophic content of the art. It is argued in this paper that philosophy shapes the practice and performance of a martial art, and that it is the underlying philosophic context that provides the framework for the practice itself. The latter is in turn comprised of a set of performances of certain prescribed forms. In other words, it is the philosophy that informs the nature of the practice, and consequently, the performance.

While this study is informed by the author's own experience in the martial arts, the study takes as its primary consideration the *karate* practice of the Philippine affiliate to the International Shotokan *Karate* Federation or ISKF.

The author initially explores a notion of an intercultural encounter in the martial arts, with a consideration of *karate* as a concept. The discussion then proceeds to the practice and the performance of *karate* in the Philippine urban context. Finally, the discussion turns to philosophy as a framework that underlies martial arts.

### **The Notion of an Intercultural Encounter in Martial Arts**

To be a site of an intercultural encounter is to be located at the point where practices intersect or converge, serving to define a space that is characterized by an exchange of ideas and concepts. There is, in some sense, a dialogue that is often only implied, a dialectics between cultures that does not expressly manifest itself. Instead, the encounter takes the form of an activity that, while conforming to a cultural practice on the outside, is informed by something else on the inside. There is a sense in which the site where the activity is located is not only configured and reconfigured, it is likewise defined and redefined rather continuously. An exchange of ideas and concepts, therefore, characterizes an intercultural encounter, since concepts inform the practice. The practice, in turn, influences the material artifacts in various ways, including the institutionalization of the activity itself. In other words, to be a site of an intercultural encounter is to be the point where an interplay of social and cultural relations occurs.

Any meeting of two cultures makes possible an intercultural encounter. But contact is made in a variety of ways, from trading to raiding, to outright war, as Scott's *Barangay* (1994) illustrates. But the encounter, while indeed occurring at the overt, physical level, is particularly significant when there is contact between and among concepts. It is on this level that the contact can take the form of a clash, conflict, or resistance, but it can also be in the form of acceptance and modification. Interestingly, modifications can happen consciously or unconsciously. When a set of concepts is transferred, a particular practice undergoes various changes.

But what could the nature of such an encounter be? The transfer of a culture can never be in a pure form, as there will always be in operation, a mode of interpretation. When a particular practice is transplanted into a different setting, the host culture will function as a lens through which the transplanted culture is rendered understandable. This interpretation and subsequent reinterpretation can be understood as the workings of appropriation, an exercise in which the signified is made meaningful by the signifier. As a result, there occurs a transformation in and of the transplanted activity, as it is adapted to the local culture. It should be noted however, that to have a practice transplanted does not necessarily involve completely severing the connections to its origins or roots. Often, there are legitimate ties with the culture of origin, but

nevertheless, transformations in practice are inevitable because the host will never be exactly the same as the culture of origin in terms of its worldview and informing sets of beliefs.

It is interesting how the perception of a practice influences its manner of appropriation. A case in point is how Japanese martial arts tend to become romanticized in the public's consciousness, probably because of popular media portrayals of the wise martial arts master who gives sagely advice on life and death. On the other hand, Philippine martial arts tend to be exoticized when portrayed in foreign documentaries, a tendency that is played up by Filipino practitioners and masters simply because the situation creates marketable opportunities. The image of the Filipino weapons expert is reinforced in the minds of the foreign market, a segment of which usually comes from the field of law enforcement. There is a high demand for the Filipino master especially if the art or system that he represents is portrayed as coming from some old lineage. Thus, it comes as no surprise that there are masters and practitioners alike who advance either of two claims: a) that their system is the old, "original" combat-effective system that Lapulapu used to kill Magellan in the "Battle of Mactan", or b) that their system's efficacy in combat was proven in World War II, as evidenced by their grandmaster/founder who survived the war. Such claims are meant to provide some semblance of legitimacy to the martial system that they practice, but the point is that such preconceptions tend to influence how practices are received and performed in foreign spaces. No doubt, a number of foreigners who scout for "authentic" Philippine martial arts consider such "lineages" as useful guidelines for evaluating the efficacy of a martial system.

The question that has implications to the problem of identity is whether or not a transplanted practice is still of a foreign identity. Is the indigenization of an activity enough to give it a local or native identity? In the case of a martial art that originated in Okinawa, does it retain its Okinawan identity if the art is practiced and taught by Filipinos to other Filipinos in a Philippine *dojo* or training hall? Perhaps the answer is yes, the art is still Okinawan, but the performance is Filipino. Indeed, there is some awkwardness with the idea of being taught one's own cultural art by a foreigner. But what happens if the practice has become so far removed from the original form, that it has come to acquire a totally different character? As more and more styles and techniques find their way into a practice, a hybrid is formed. In such a case, perhaps it would be appropriate to see the resulting form as altogether different, and that the original art served simply as a base. Yet the concept of hybridity is also a question of boundaries. It seems that the recognition of a hybrid involves a recognition that there is a consideration of the limits of a particular practice. Nederveen Pieterse (2002) writes:

Hybridity as a point of view is meaningless *without* the prior assumption of difference, purity, fixed boundaries. Meaningless not in the sense that it would be inaccurate or untrue as a description, but that, without an existing regard for boundaries, it would not be a point worth making. Without reference to a prior cult of purity and boundaries, a pathos of hierarchy and gradient of difference, the point of hybridity would be moot. (p. 226)

In Philippine martial arts practice, it is fairly common to encounter practitioners referring to their art as either “pure” or “mixed.” Filipino martial artists also tend to use the term “modern” to refer to a system that incorporates styles or techniques from other systems. But these designations signal the recognition that there is a form that served to define a particular boundary, and that there are ways to cross such boundaries and thereby form a newer style. Note that there is a degree of “Othering” involved in the designations. Practitioners tend to form identities around labels, such as “traditional” vis-a-vis “modern”, “original” vis-à-vis “combat”, etc., along with the implications of these designations. Westwood (2002) suggests that “difference and community are not irreconcilable everywhere and all the time. Similarly, recognition is not for all the time and everywhere” (p. 248). In an interview by Marilitz Dizon (1999), Philippine Karatedo Federation President Manuel Veguillas states:

For those who wish to become competitors in Sports Karate, there is only one advice I could give – join a legitimate karate organization that is recognized by the Philippine Karatedo Federation. For those who just want to train, make sure your instructor has a pedigree that could be traced back to an authentic Japanese master. (p. 13)

It can be noted how identity, recognition, and consequently, legitimacy, can be framed as a political relation. There is emphasis on pedigree and authenticity, leading to a legitimate practice of a martial art. Perhaps the whole notion of an intercultural encounter in the martial arts is expressed best by Morihei Ueshiba. The *Aikido* founder seemed to have a clear insight into the nature of appropriation when he stated that “*Aikido* is becoming established all over, but it will have a different expression in each place it takes root. Continually adapt the teachings and create a beautiful, pure land” (Stevens, 1996, p. 107).

### **Karate as a Concept**

By taking a look at *karate* itself as a concept, important nuances in practice and performance can be seen. As a concept, *karate* is a totality of movements that must necessarily involve the use of the empty hand as a weapon, though in

reality, it is the entire body that performs movements of a combative nature. If a pure form must be identified, an argument can be made for the idea that *karate* is simply pure motion, including all the pauses within its various *kata*. As such, one can say that *karate*, regardless of the practitioner and the practitioner's context, is conceptually universal. When placed side by side however, the Japanese manner of practicing and performing *karate* differs from the Philippine manner, even from the traditional *karate* schools or clubs in the Philippines. Indeed, the limited number of ways to execute or perform techniques, such as strikes (i.e. punches, kicks) seems to point to the purity and universality of the concept. The "punch" does seem to entail a certain purity to it, since it hardly matters whether one gets hit by a punch from a Croatian, a Russian, or a Japanese; the punch simply is. The same point can be made of the kick, or of a throw. But it is in the manner and attitude in which these are performed that manifest the differences in framing the art. Such are significant indices by which the encounter can be demonstrated. It is here along these points of differences that the transformations are expressed.

While there seems to be a tendency for Filipino practitioners to aestheticize, that is, to modify a form through intensification, exaggeration, flamboyance and flair, in order to make it conform to a local notion of beauty and taste, there is also a tendency to intensify a form and turn it into something pragmatic. This latter point is evident in the martial arts. In this author's experience, various instructors tend to scoff at purported techniques that involve utilizing the *chi* or vital energy in the execution of techniques. Some feel that while such capabilities might be true, it is simply not practical to focus one's training and energy into developing such abilities, when one can always make a technique work through simpler, more direct means. Hence, techniques that were originally meant to be performed with a consciousness to *chi* are performed in a manner that is aimed at achieving a specific end. In other words, the focus of the practitioner while performing a technique is no longer simply directed towards the performance itself; it is now also towards a desired goal, and that is to defeat an opponent. This appropriation of performance leads to the birth of a local form of *karate* that, as far as appearances go, differ in no significant way from the Japanese forms, but are framed according to local standards of martial prowess that may be indicative of the Philippines' own martial culture. Rendering an art into a combative system is by no means solely found in the Philippines. In the Philippine context, a combative, self-defense form is often seen as better than a purely aesthetic one. It is interesting that the Filipino term for beauty, *maganda*, is also used to refer to combat-related concepts. An effective strike with the stick, for example, would be described as *Magandang palo* (A beautiful strike) or *Napakagandang hataw* (A very beautiful strike/swing). But what does "beautiful" mean in this sense? There seems to be a difference in nuance between *maganda* and *maganda lamang sa paningin* (beautiful as opposed to simply being good to look at or pleasing to the sight). The former appears to carry with it both an aesthetic and a pragmatic

aspect, while the latter carries only the aesthetic. In other words, there is more practicality than beauty in a beautiful strike. But the truly *magandang hataw* is one that must necessarily involve the aesthetic, because an effective but awkward strike will most likely be seen as *nagkataon lang* or happening by chance, that is, a lucky shot. Again, this implies that in order to be held in high regard, martial prowess must necessarily include an element of mastery, evidenced by efficient yet aesthetically pleasing technique.

### **Practice and Performance**

In this discussion, practice will be understood as a set of movements that are performed by an individual or a group. It is an activity characterized by disciplined repetition that a person engages in. *Karate* practice therefore, is the manner in which the martial art of *karate* is carried out with regularity, comprised of the performances of a set or sets of predetermined movements. A practice can also be understood as a specific regimen, or part of it. In this sense, a practice can be seen as cultural in nature, one that may be reflective of a certain social norm. Such an activity contains the observance of rules governing particular types of movements and behavior, the martial arts precisely being a case in point. Any given martial art carries with it varying degrees of cultural mores pertaining to aspects such as respect, seniority, and the like. The exercise of bowing in a majority of martial arts indicates the emphasis on respect, and is reflective of the attitude towards seniority, i.e. who deserves the highest level of respect, and so on. Such elements found within martial arts are movements that can be understood as performances. In examining *karate*, its practice and performance can give insight into cultural differences.

In the Philippines, the affiliate to the International Shotokan *Karate* Federation, or ISKF, promotes the traditional practice of Shotokan *karate*. There is an emphasis on the basic techniques, on the forms, and on sparring exercises. Referred to as the three K's – *kihon* (basics), *kata* (forms), and *kumite* (sparring) – the *karate* practitioners are trained according to this pedagogical framework. A typical training session begins with warm-up exercises, followed by basic drills in punching, blocking, and kicking. These basic skills are then put together in preset combinations that ultimately comprise the *kata* or forms. The students go through a repetitive performance of the forms, and only after the forms will they engage in sparring. Such is the typical manner of conducting a *karate* class.

The organization seeks to uphold the vision of Shotokan *karate* founder, Gichin Funakoshi. Spearheaded in the Philippines by the *Karate* Development Arts and Sports, or KDA, the organization sponsors workshops and training seminars conducted by ISKF founder and Shotokan *karate* figure, Teruyuki Okazaki. This is one of the many ways by which the group maintains

strong ties with the headquarters, or *Hombu*, of Shotokan *karate*. This ensures a clear lineage that leads all the way to the founder of the art, Master Funakoshi. To an extent, this preoccupation with genealogy is meant to signify the legitimacy and “authenticity” of the practice. In conversations with the Philippine representative to the ISKF and Head of the KDA, David Lay Sensei, he states that having a clear lineage is important in order to make sure that the style of *karate* being practiced has a clear identity. This in turn, translates to the integrity of the style and school, since it is easy to pose as a teacher of *karate*, and certainly there is no lack of unscrupulous practitioners marketing themselves as masters, who later turn out to be poseurs. An affiliation somehow assures the quality of the teaching as well as the teacher of the art.

Funakoshi understood the value of raising practitioners who will eventually be in a position to continue the legacy of *karate*. This entailed getting *karate* to be practiced in schools, to encourage educated individuals to engage in *karate*. By doing so, the likelihood of *karate* being propagated by those who have the requisite skills to articulate the art is higher. Following this framework, ISKF Philippines is always seeking to spread the art of *karate* in schools as well as in the numerous commercial malls in urban settings. According to Lay, to have good business sense is just as important as having good martial sense. He makes clear however, that this view is by no means an affront to those who are less privileged, nor is the statement an indication of the commercialization of a traditional art. Instead, it has more to do with ensuring the survival and the eventual flourishing of the art. Indeed, in practical terms, the organization needs the resources to fund not only the regular sessions, but the training seminars and workshops abroad. It needs to be able to send for recognized masters of the art, such as Teruyuki Okazaki, if the art is to be established as a thriving practice. It is in the schools and the commercial malls where people who can afford the price of practice can be found, hence the conscious choice to penetrate the urban market.

An article written by Emmanuel Querubin for *Sikaran*<sup>1</sup> Philippines portrays the Philippine form of *karate* as primarily combat-oriented and tournament effective<sup>2</sup>. In martial arts circles, there is general agreement that combat and sport should be treated as separate or distinct from each other, since a life-and-death conflict will always be different from the controlled atmosphere of a sporting tournament. What is interesting is the tendency of Philippine *karate* schools to emphasize the combative side of the art, with the exception of a few. The practice of this form of *karate* tends to be framed

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<sup>1</sup> *Sikaran* is taken from the Filipino “sikad” which means “kick”. *Sikaran* therefore connotes an activity comprised of kicking. *Sikaran* practitioners claim that the art is an indigenous Philippine martial art, and that the only reason for their participation in *karate* tournaments is for recognition. This points to the interesting fact however, that the art is similar enough to *karate* to be allowed and recognized fit for participation. Furthermore, *Sikaran* was referred to during the 1950s and 1960s as “Philippine karate” because *Sikaran*’s Grandmaster, Meliton Geronimo, founded the Karate Brotherhood of the Philippines.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Querubin, *Karate in the Philippines: The Golden Years*.

according to the practicality of the techniques, translated for the market as “street-effective” or “self-defense” *karate*. This type of training is often contrasted with schools that emphasize the performance of *kata* over tournament drills or self-defense techniques. Such schools or clubs are referred to as “traditional schools. Hence, there are “traditional *karate*” schools on one hand, and “combat *karate*” schools on the other, in the same manner that there are “traditional aikido” schools and “combat aikido” schools, and so on. Ruben Acueza, head of the Acueza Martial Arts Training Center, refers to such traditional schools as *puro* (pure), pointing to the idea that it is possible to retain the art’s original form (Master Acueza, personal communication, 2009). *Arnis*, the stickfighting tradition of the Philippines, does not seem to have this dichotomy, simply because the various masters of the art believe in daily practice only for its value in developing combat efficiency, and not as a means to pursue some metaphysical or religious ideal. This author has yet to encounter or hear of an *arnis* practitioner who espouses the practice of his style as a path to enlightenment. More often than not, the practice is informed by the need to develop street effective skills.

It can be noted that while the traditional schools do try to conform to the art of origin, the Philippine practice of traditional *karate* is nevertheless, informed by cultural values and norms. David Lay (2008) states that indeed, the Japanese way of practicing *karate* cannot be fully adopted in the Philippines because some values are simply different and, therefore, difficult to translate into local practice. Speculating that perhaps Filipinos tend to be ‘relaxed’ by nature, he added that *dojo* behavior will be different because of cultural differences. He added that if the Japanese manner of instruction is used, *mayroong masasampal na bata* (a child will get slapped), considering that children enrollees are often not the ideal disciplined students. Lay notes that the parents usually enroll their children in *karate* to learn discipline. Hence, such students are also usually looking for play, instead of the demands of the martial arts. Japanese practitioners of the art, because of the very strict cultural code, will refrain from any behavior that they feel is disrespectful to the “Place of the Way” or *dojo*. Examples of such behavior would be lounging on the practice area, laughing or even simply smiling, fixing one’s uniform without turning around and away from the *kamiza* or front, and other such actions that, while appearing mundane and trivial, are in fact laden with meaning because of the cultural context. David Lay relates an incident when, during training under the instruction of a Japanese *karate* master, he and some of his fellow practitioners unconsciously leaned on the wall out of sheer exhaustion. As a result, the Japanese master had them do a number of push ups as punishment.

In a training session for black belt ranked practitioners that the author observed, there were noticeable behavioral nuances. Informed that the practice was typical of their training, the author observed significant areas that seemed indicative of Philippine cultural norms. Insofar as the art itself was concerned,

training is ideally strictly formal, with all of the practitioners performing and executing the techniques with focused intensity. Instead, the training proceeded in a relatively light atmosphere, indicative perhaps of Lay's speculation regarding the Filipinos' relaxed and naturally informal disposition. There is no doubt that all of the practitioners were serious with their performances, as there was no lack in technical proficiency. Neither was there a lack in physical intensity, as all of the practitioners were breathing heavily by the end of the initial exercises. In terms of *dojo* behavior however, the nuances can be found in the manner itself of performing the practice. At one point in a drill that required maintaining *zanshin* or unwavering awareness during a pause in the movements, a female practitioner rather unconsciously pushed her hair out to one side in order to clear her vision. Some of her fellow practitioners, while holding the position, fidgeted slightly: a small shrug of the shoulder, a slight twitch of the foot, and so on. During those moments, *zanshin* seems to have been lost. It should be clarified that in no way do these instances indicate a sub par performance; what they do indicate, is the fact that there are factors other than the *Do* or "*Tao*" that operate in the practice and performance of *karate*. Subtly, there were movements that seemed to be incongruous to the movement of the *hara*, or center of the body. This observation will be discussed in more detail in the context of *Tao* philosophy.

There were other nuances as well, such as engaging in conversations during training. In Japanese practice, such conversations are deemed out of place in the *dojo*. In the experience of the author as a practitioner, however, Filipinos are generally not averse to engaging in small talk during training, evidenced by the fact that even the one who conducts the class chooses at times to converse with the other practitioners. There are limits, of course, to the amount and type of conversations allowed. Matters that are not relevant to *dojo* affairs are discouraged. As with Japanese conduct in the *dojo*, joking around and rough-housing are not allowed. But as far as conversations go, Filipinos find nothing expressly wrong with discussing *dojo* matters even during the preliminary exercises. It appears that training is seen as a shared, communal practice, characterized by a familial network of relations. Lay notes that the practitioners are literally like a family. According to him, there are instances when life outside the *dojo* is influenced by the familial relations found inside. Members of the club tend to offer help and even professional services for free, because they feel that they are related to each other at a deeper level than just fellow practitioners of the art. For example, there were instances when practitioners who are medical doctors by profession offered their services for free to their fellow *karateka*.

Similar to most training sessions that this author has both observed and experienced, the presence of the chief instructor in the above black belt session did not lessen the familial atmosphere. Instead, the presence of the sensei seemed to inspire, not intimidate, the practitioners to a higher level of intensity.

The idea that the sensei is present to watch over the training seemed to provide comfort instead of fear. Perhaps this is indicative of an attitude of Filipinos towards familial authority, generating a feeling of being under the wing, or *nasa poder*, as Filipinos are wont to say.

### **Material culture**

The KDA *dojo* is quite typical of most training halls in urban Metro Manila. Also doubling as a dance hall and sharing the space with other martial arts, the design is necessarily bare except for a heavy punching bag in one corner and stacks of padded mats towards the back<sup>3</sup>. The laminated wood floor panels are worn from the regular pounding they receive, both from martial arts training and dance practices. To one side of the area is a shelf containing commercially produced punch mitts and kick pads instead of the traditional *makiwara*, while on the other side are the separate male and female dressing rooms. *Makiwara* are wooden posts wrapped in rope where *karateka* traditionally practiced striking techniques. Mirrors cover the entire front wall of the training area, and a framed picture of Gichin Funakoshi hangs at the center, above the mirrors. The latter is a standard feature of traditional Japanese martial arts. A framed photograph of a system's founder signifies strong ties with the originator of the system or art, and all practitioners bow to this photograph as a sign of respect and gratitude towards the master for sharing his art. The entire area is well lit, and any type of footwear is prohibited in the training area.

The uniforms worn by all practitioners are standard issue *gi*, common to *karateka* everywhere. In the KDA *dojo*, all *gi* have the word *Karate* printed boldly at the back. As with most *karate* schools, the *gi* is worn the same way by both male and female practitioners: the upper jacket is worn with the left side over the right, secured by an obi or sash that functions as an indicator of rank. Inner garments such as undershirts are not required, but are usually worn by female practitioners since it is not uncommon for the *gi* to come loose during the course of the training.

It is an option for practitioners to wear extra protective items, such as wrist, elbow, or knee supports, but open-fingered gloves are necessary for sparring practice. Shin guards are also optional, though these are often used only by beginners and intermediate level practitioners, and seldom by black belt level *karateka*.

The effect and influence of the material artifacts on the practice of *karate* is worthy of exploration. It must be noted that the presumed instances of lost *zanshin* mentioned earlier could be due to the presence of mirrors.

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<sup>3</sup> The basic reason for sharing the space is to generate additional income during the periods when there is no *karate* training.

Likewise, the sparring and its intensity can be influenced by the protective gear worn by the practitioner. Having protective gear can give the *karateka* a false sense of security, thus inciting the practitioner to train with a higher level of intensity than that which he/she would otherwise choose not to attempt had there been an absence of such gear.

### **Curricular differences**

When asked about differences and changes that the local *karate* organization initiated, Lay (2008) noted that the curriculum being followed by the Philippine ISKF is the same as the one being used in Japan, with the exception of tournament or sport training. Training for competition is modified to include only the techniques that are specific to sport *karate*, dropping the more dangerous or potentially lethal techniques. Sport *karate* generally includes techniques aimed at scoring points on the opponent's torso, with limited contact to the head and lower extremities. Training for competition entails the development of reflexes and relevant techniques to achieve such an end. Moreover, body conditioning is given emphasis, and not just the form. The potentially lethal strikes and highly injurious techniques, such as elbow strikes, strikes using the edge of the hand, as well as some joint breaks, are necessarily excluded. Targets that are highly vital, such as the eyes, throat, and groin, are considered off limits. The distinction between lethal and non-lethal techniques appears to be an extension of the distinction between sport *karate* and "true" *karate*.

### **Language**

Language is an interesting area to explore, albeit briefly, especially in a transplanted activity such as *karate*. In the Philippine practice of *karate*, the predominant language used in instruction is Filipino and English, but the techniques, forms, and exercises are referred to in Nihongo. For example, the *kata* are referred to as *heian shodan*, *heian nidan*, *heian sandan*, and so on. A training session begins and ends with a shout from the most senior student, "Rei!" to signal the beginning and the final bow. Likewise, in the KDA *dojo*, the Shotokan training principles or *Dojo Kun* are recited after the training session in both Nihongo and English:

Hitotsu! Jinkaku Kansei Ni Tsutomuru Koto!  
Hitotsu! Akoto No Michi O Mamoru Koto!  
Hitotsu! Oryoku No Seichin O Yashinau Koto!  
Hitotsu! Eigi O Omonzuru Koto!  
Hitotsu! Ekki No Yu O Imashimuru Koto!

English translation (traditional):

Seek perfection of character!

Be faithful!  
Endeavor!  
Respect others!  
Refrain from violent behavior!

What is interesting is the role that this plays in the practice of the art. In referring to the techniques in their original language, the practice becomes legitimized because the links to the art's origin appear to be strengthened. To the uninitiated, hearing the instructor refer to the moves in a foreign tongue gives the impression, correctly or not, that the instructor received instruction directly from an authentic master of the art. Language therefore, no longer simply serves as a mode of communicating the name of a movement, but of communicating a whole set of meanings which include notions of authenticity and legitimacy pertaining to the art. In some martial arts *dojo*, the exercises and the techniques are given English names to make the references easier for the students. In the experience of the author, English names are given alongside the Nihongo names.

### **Martial Arts and Philosophy**

It is argued in this article that it is the philosophy beneath the movements that gives shape to the structures of the practice itself. Without the underlying philosophy that informs the movement, the practice is nothing more than a random set of exercises that form no coherent whole. It is the philosophy that gives meaning to the practice, and this in turn influences the performance. This enframing characteristic of philosophy provides the context within which the movements become meaningful. In *tai chi chuan*, or "Grand Ultimate Fist" techniques, the careful shifting of the weight from one leg to the other is rendered meaningful when contextualized within Taoist thought. The load-bearing leg is the "full" leg, and the other leg is the "empty" one. By "filling" the empty leg with the full one's load, the harmonious relationship of the entire body is not only maintained, but manifested in a powerful, stable stance. This entire process becomes understandable once it is framed against the background of *Yin Yang* philosophy, or the power of harmonizing with the natural way. There is a reason why this particular martial art is called "Grand Ultimate Fist", taking its name from the principle of the *Tao*. In short, *tai chi chuan* as a martial art is shaped and enframed into a meaningful form through the philosophy that gives it structure. Almost all of the movements in a *tai chi chuan* performance are based on the principle of harmonious movement, as espoused by the *Tao* principle.

*Karate*, much like *tai chi chuan*, is also framed by an underlying philosophic framework. In the case of the Shotokan style of *karate*, it is the belief of the founder of the system that influences the practice of the art.

However, this belief system becomes modified when the art is transferred to a different locality. The founder, Master Gichin Funakoshi, was a school teacher who was steeped in the Confucian classics since early childhood (Funakoshi, 1975). As a result of this influence, Shotokan *karate* philosophy emphasizes the development of the self not only physically, but morally as well. Such an emphasis on character development is subtly reflected in the “Twenty Guiding Principles of *Karate*” or *Niju Kun*:

1. *Karate* is not only *dojo* training.
  2. Don't forget that *Karate* begins with a bow and ends with a bow.
  3. In *Karate*, never attack first.
  4. One who practices *Karate* must follow the way of justice
  5. First you must know yourself. Then you can know others.
  6. Spiritual development is paramount; technical skills are merely means to the end.
  7. You must release your mind
  8. Misfortune comes out of laziness.
  9. *Karate* is a lifelong training.
  10. Put *Karate* into everything you do.
  11. *Karate* is like hot water. If you do not give heat constantly it will again become cold.
  12. Do not think you have to win. Think that you do not have to lose.
  13. Victory depends on your ability to tell vulnerable points from invulnerable ones.
  14. Move according to your opponent.
  15. Consider your opponent's hands and legs as you would sharp swords.
  16. When you leave home, think that millions of opponents are waiting for you.
  17. Ready position for beginners and natural position for advanced students.
  18. Kata is one thing. Engaging in a real fight is another.
  19. Do not forget:
    - (a) strength and weakness of power;
    - (b) expansion and contraction of the body;
    - (c) slowness and speed of techniques.
  20. Devise at all times.
- (Funakoshi, 1975, p.3)

Clearly, Shotokan *karate* as conceived by Funakoshi was meant as a way to develop oneself and not merely as a physical exercise for combat. The emphases on bowing (Principle 2), the prerequisite of knowing oneself to know others (Principle 5), the development of self (Principles 6, 9 and 10), all reflect

Confucian thought. The idea that a martial art is a way to develop character is not limited to *karate*; a host of East Asian martial arts frame themselves in such a manner. Morihei Ueshiba conceived of his art as a way to unite mankind:

War must cease. We are all members of one big family; now is the time to eliminate fighting and contention. This world was created to be a thing of beauty. If there is no love between us, that will be the end of our home, the end of our country, and the end of our world. Love generates heat and light. That is the spirit of Aikido training. (Stevens, 1996, p. 105)

*Judo* founder, Jigoro Kano, sought to introduce *judo* in the universities as a way to promote character building. He did this by moving away from the harsher, more combative form that is *jujutsu*. Modern *taekwondo* upholds certain principles that are presented as components of virtue. In the midst of these frameworks, there is the idea that martial arts practice provides a path towards an absolute principle.

From the *Tao* philosophy stems the notion that such martial arts practice is a *Do*, or “Way”, that is in consonance with the Path mandated by the heavens. This is the reason behind the reference to *karate* as *karatedo*, the “Way of the Empty Hand”. As a spiritual practice, it is the path that the practitioner can traverse in order to attain Enlightenment, that is, a state wherein the individual has an immediate grasp of the oneness or unity that he/she has with the universe. What does the *Do* connote? It is the harmonious state of affairs that characterizes the movement of the universe, or the equilibrium that all things seek to attain. Zen philosophy takes off from this aspect of the *Tao*, thus the emphasis on discipline or practice as the Way to a state of higher consciousness. *Kata* training in *karate* appears to be best suited to express the *Tao* philosophy of balance and centeredness. In performing a particular *kata*, the practitioner seeks to embody, both physically and mentally, a balanced state. This state is manifested through the lowering of the *hara*, the point just below the navel. This point is the physical center of gravity, and any movement that springs from the *hara* is a powerful and coordinated movement. Metaphysically, the *hara* is supposed to be the area where *ki*, or the life force is stored, hence movement from the *hara* is movement with *ki*. To “cut the *hara*” or *hara kiri/giri* is, therefore, to end life both physically and spiritually. *Karate*, as with various other martial arts, utilizes body mechanics that maximize movements through the *hara*. Conceptually, this emphasis on the *hara* is an expression of the recognition of the *Tao* in daily life. Ideally, the balanced individual is the one who lives a harmonious, therefore, virtuous life (Durckheim, 1962, p.110). At any point in the performance of a *karate kata*, therefore, attention is paid to the *hara* as the wellspring of movement.

The philosophical framework that underlies martial arts practice is obviously not insulated against the force of an intercultural encounter. Contact between and among martial cultures results in transformations, modifications, and appropriations of concepts. In the case of *karatedo* in the Philippines, it is the *Do* concept that easily becomes the subject of change. When this author was training in a local urban *aikido dojo*, the name *aikido* was explained as *ai* = harmony, *ki* = inner strength, and *do* = way of life. In conversations with David Lay, this “*Do* – as – way of life” interpretation was again used. While it is true that the *Do* concept does involve permeating an individual’s life with the consciousness of the *Tao*, presenting *Do* as a way of life tends to reduce the concept to a lifestyle that simply involves the everyday practice of the martial arts. In this case, any activity that is done everyday as part of an individual’s routine can be appropriated as a *Do* practice, something that has rather moved farther from the original concept. But it is possible to integrate this “way of life” concept in a manner that promotes meaningful moral relations. In other words, the said interpretation of the *Do* is not completely bereft of the possibility for moral content and value similar to the Taoist *Do*. What should be kept in mind is the fact that such interpretations are not exactly informed by the Taoist *Do* concept.

## Conclusion

This article presented an exploration into the peculiarities of *karate* practice in the Philippine urban setting of Metro Manila by approaching the art as an activity that is framed by an underlying philosophy. It is in this sense that *karate* is seen as a site of an intercultural encounter between the Japanese framework of *budo* and the Philippine martial culture. It can be seen that the Japanese practice and performance of the art is informed by the philosophy of the *Tao*, hence the consequent expression of this concept in the Japanese *karateka*’s strict and rigid attitude towards training. In contrast, the Filipino *karateka*, despite a conscious adherence to Japanese *budo* tradition, will be informed by a different interpretation of the art’s philosophy. It is not that the Filipino *karateka* is incapable of having a conceptual understanding of the *Tao* philosophy. Neither does this observation imply that the Filipino is an inferior *karateka*. Rather, it seems to be the case that the *Tao*, conceived as a universal principle that permeates and encompasses all creation, is a concept that is far removed from the consciousness of the Filipino that it is subjected to the local cultural lens and thus rendered understandable. Such is the effect of appropriation in a martial art like *karate*. While there is no conscious intention to modify the practice, the performance, and the philosophy of the art, there are subtle yet inevitable changes because of the context provided by the host locality. Differences in *dojo* attitude and behavior manifest a different conceptual framework adopted towards the art. This modification is not necessarily a negative thing, for it is in such an environment of change that new

forms arise. What is interesting is that even in spaces where there is a conscious effort to stay true to the “original” form, cultural expressions will necessarily appear. But one can very well ask, is it meaningful to talk about forms in terms of originality? What should be noted is that to frame the situation simply in terms of originality and authenticity might not be the best approach, for while the art is Japanese, the performance is already Filipino. To insist that the latter is no longer authentic is to miss the identity of the performance itself. The Philippine practice of *karate* therefore, manifests a distinct performance of the art, and gives insight, albeit needing further exploration, into the philosophy of the Filipino *karateka*.

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