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Steeped in Filipino history, warrior tactics find modern application

By **Leezel Tanglao**
The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Police officer Jared Wihongi has a special weapon when it comes to apprehending suspects. It is not his training from the police academy, but his expertise in a martial art once deemed so dangerous that the Spaniards banned it for 400 years.

Wihongi is one of many to discover a modern use for the ancient warrior arts of the Philippines. More commonly known as Kali, Arnis, and Escrima, the Filipino martial arts have a long history of secrecy and evolution.

Wihongi constantly uses techniques from Kali on the job.

"The Filipino martial arts are some of the best suited martial arts for police officers. I have utilized techniques frequently on the job. More than anything though, I think the confidence that I have gained from training in Kali has been my biggest protection. People you deal with on the street can feel whether you are confident, afraid or overcompensating for a lack of confidence. Seasoned criminals will exploit your weaknesses," he said.

Used by Filipino warriors for centuries to defend themselves from foreign enemies, the warrior arts are a time-honored and cherished tradition of the culture. Before Spain's colonial rule over the Philippines, indigenous people have been practicing and perfecting sword-fighting. It was not until the death of Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan at the hands of the sword-wielding Filipino warrior Lapu-Lapu that the world got its first glimpse of this deadly art.

As a result, the Spaniards banned the practice of the earliest form of the ancient



RoseAnn Glade, middle, and Michael Enriquez receive instruction from Louis S. "Zuki" Gadduang at his studio in West Valley City. Gadduang teaches the Villabrille-Largusa system of Kali, a form of martial arts from the Philippines. "You're not just kicking and punching. You are building your character," he said.

art, Kali, from the entire archipelago for 400 years. Any written records of the origin were destroyed. But the art survived as Filipinos continued to practice Kali in secret.

The majority of the world remained in the dark about Kali until World War II, when the empire of Japan occupied the Philippine Islands. Filipinos trained American and Filipino soldiers to use the sword-fighting techniques against the Japanese.

Like most martial arts, there is no single system to represent the entire art form. The Filipino warrior arts are commonly categorized into three areas. With a focus on blades, Kali is an ancient word used in Mindanao and the southern islands of the Philippines. An emphasis on stick-fighting, Arnis is a Spanish term often translated as "hardness of the hand," and is found in the northern island of Luzon. Escrima is a Spanish term for fencing or sword-fighting, particular to the central islands or the Visayas, and its focus is on stick and dagger training.

From those categories come more divisions; variations arise as grandmasters perfect their own styles. There are more than 100 systems in practice.

Unlike other traditional Asian martial arts, most Kali systems begin training with weapons such as knives, swords and bamboo sticks. By mastering the use of weaponry, students becomes better prepared to fight with open-hands methods.

Most practitioners start with bamboo sticks in place of real sharp-edge swords. As students become more proficient, they usually advance to swords and knives.

In the Salt Lake area, there are several guros or teachers of Kali, each teaching a different system. Although it sounds violent, guros emphasize that Kali is not a defensive martial art. From the Kali perspective, when one attacks another, the person attacking is on the offense.

Wihongi is a guro for the Dekiti-Tirsia-Sirada Kali, a system that uses a strong striking foundation and footwork development. He tells his students the importance of not attacking unless necessary.

"When someone is attacked for whatever reason, it is usually with a blade or similar weapon. The Filipino martial arts were not developed with self-defense in mind, but rather as offensive arts of war. These principles are extremely effective when applied to self-defense, or as we say in Kali 'counteroffense.' The best defense is a good offense," he said.

Despite the differences among the systems, the common thread is using the mind along with the body.

Louis S. "Zuki" Gadduang of West Valley City is a guro for the Villabrille-Largusa system, which emphasizes the mind-body connection.

"The body can't function without the mind. You're not just kicking and punching. You are building your character," he said.

Katie Kormanik, a sophomore at Skyline High School who has been studying under Gadduang for a year, says she has gained self-confidence.

"I've learned to focus not only in Kali but with other things. It has taught me patience and discipline," she said.

In other parts of the country, the same principles are taught. Arnold Noche of Los Angeles, a guro for the Lameco Eskrima system, teaches his students elements beyond the physical.

"What separates Lameco Eskrima from all other contemporary systems is its emphasis on the totality of the human being -- the mind, the body and the spirit -- not just the physical elements alone. Attention, intention, visualization and complete focus are the integral components of Lameco Eskrima," he said.

After work, Celina Taganas-Duffy drives two hours in rush-hour traffic to a small studio in the outskirts of downtown Los Angeles. For several hours she practices Lameco Eskrima.

Taganas-Duffy uses the warrior arts to protect herself.

"The primary reason I took Kali was for self-defense. The lessons I have learned thus far have taught me some applicable traditional techniques and systems, but I have learned so much more," she said.

Today the Filipino warrior arts are being practiced by more non-Filipinos than Filipinos themselves. The reasons behind this vary, but many guros explain that the Spaniards' ban sent many to practice this ancient fighting style in secret.

Noche believes the secrecy surrounding Kali contributes to the anonymity of the Filipino martial arts.

Sent to the Philippines for his mission by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Wihongi, a New Zealand native, became fascinated with the warrior arts.

"Living in the Philippines at first was like being in another world. But after two years I came home loving the culture, the people, the language and considered myself a Filipino at heart," he said. Gadduang says the warrior arts were not meant to be a commercialized medium as other martial arts have become.

"The warrior arts are not meant for beating people up. It goes deeper than that," he said. "Parents have to understand that I'm not here to discipline their kids. I teach because I want my students to learn not only about the art itself but about who they are and the culture. No one forces them to be here. They are here because they want to be here."

Reynaldo S. Galang of New Jersey, a master teacher for the sparring-based Bakbakan Kali, hopes to see the warrior arts rise above obscurity.

"The world has barely scratched the surface of what the Philippine martial arts has to offer. The first to recognize its true value are the true warriors of the world, the soldiers. Ultimately, as the knowledge and awareness of the art grows, I see the warrior arts of the Philippines taking its rightful place among the established martial arts of the world," said Galang.

Today, Kali is finding modern usage from the military to self-defense.

Galang's organization, Bakbakan International, now trains the U.S. Special Forces stationed in the Philippines.

Taganas-Duffy has gained more than self-defense.

"Kali has also contributed to and enhanced other facets of my life," she said. "The artform has taught me patience, humility, discipline, focus, balance and commitment: intangible qualities that I would have never imagined I would gain from studying Kali. Most of all, it has given me a deeper understanding of my Filipino heritage. Understanding the strengths of our culture has tapped into a warrior spirit that hopefully will carry and guide me through uncharted paths."

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