

Black Martial Arts

When one mentions the term “martial arts”, the first thing that comes to mind is most probably a number of Asian combat sports, namely: Karate, Kung Fu, Judo, Aikido, Tae kwondo, Ninjutsu, Thai boxing, etc. Very little is known about the “martial art” techniques invented and perpetuated by dark-hued peoples of the tropics and the purpose of this article is to serve as an introduction to what I call “Black Martial Arts”, or simply BMA, a term used to denote the various “martial art” forms of Black origin.

By “black” I mean those people of African, Melanesian, Dravidian, and/or Australian Aboriginal origin, including their Diaspora, in various parts of the world and by “martial arts” I mean a physical combat involving daring and risk-taking against any type of adversary. In my definition, the adversary may be another person (as in Capoeira de Angola from Brazil), an animal (as in the Savika bull domination of Madagascar), an object (as in Mallar Khambam pole acrobatics of Tamil Nadu), an element of nature (as in walking on heated stones in Fiji), or even one’s self (as in the painful Sharo flogging ritual of the Fulani cattle herders of Nigeria or the Tamil Kavadee ritual of Mauritius and India).

The important element in the definition here is a competition involving the “risk to life and limb” and thus whereas basketball and soccer are not considered “martial arts” under my definition, rugby (a kind of football where protective padding is not used) and Hele (diving into waves that crash the diver against a sharp precipice) would most certainly qualify.

Among the benefits of engaging in such activities, one finds: 1) combat training for young men; 2) the development of body discipline and endurance; 3) the fostering of guild loyalty and/or village pride; 4) an opportunity for a combatant to acquire fame, prestige, and popularity; 5) an opportunity to demonstrate to friend and foe one’s virility and courage; 6) a source of money and gifts for organizers and performers; and 7) a socially sanctioned outlet for the aggressive tendencies inherent in man.

After completing my Ph.D. dissertation in 1984 dealing with Hausa Combat Literature, I set out on a journey to learn more about these varying forms of “black martial arts,” some of which (e.g. the Fulani stick flogging ritual called Sharo) constitute a rite of passage from boyhood into manhood. Indeed, a Fulani youth who even winces upon being flogged is disgraced and will never find a Fulani girl that would accept him in marriage.

Over the years, I have studied and written a series of books entitled Black Martial Arts which presently is composed of six volumes, namely: 1) Hausa Combat Games; 2) Combat Games of the African Indian Ocean; 3) Capoeira de Angola (from Brazil) & Congo (from Panama); 4) Ladjia (from Martinique); 5) Northern Nguni (i.e. Zulu, Swazi, and Ndebele) Stick fighting; and 6) Tamil Displays of Daring.

The Combat Games of Hausa speakers (the dominant linguistic group of Northern Nigeria) include:

- 1) **Dambe** – a form of traditional boxing practiced by members of the butcher’s guild and increasingly by local toughs who are not guild members. In *dambe* only one hand is “gloved” (i.e. bound for striking purposes), the other hand being used to ward off blows. In some areas, both kicking and head-butting are also permitted;
- 2) **Farauta** – hunting expeditions in which one group snatches prey from another. In *bishi*, a specially convened gathering of hunters, the combatants (armed with knives, bows and arrows, maces, clubs, and other sundry weapons) shout their taunts and praises and engage in mock (but sometimes real) confrontations. Feats of magic, such as the materialization of arrows from thin air, are said to occur at these gatherings;
- 3) **Kokawa** – a form of traditional wrestling practiced mostly by farmers. Though perhaps the safest of the combat games, serious injury sometimes result – particularly when a wrestler is lifted high into the air and slammed to the ground at the foot of a spectator. Unlike American wrestling one does not need to pin an opponent to win. If an adversary’s head, hands or body touches the ground he is considered defeated. There exists in Sokoto the survival of a harsher form of wrestling in which adversaries are equipped with ringlets that can be used to slash the back of an adversary when grabbed;
- 4) **Shanci** – a spectacular and bloody contest performed exclusively by the Maguzawa Hausa in which gallantly arrayed adversaries each armed with two razor sharp iron bracelets and arm-shields engage in pitched battle;
- 5) **Sharo** (also known as *shadi*) – a Fulani man-hood contest involving mutual flogging with a long pliant stick or a short inflexible one. Those who cry out in pain are disgraced and are not considered worthy of marriage;
- 6) **Tauri** – a large gathering of tough-skins (‘*yan tauri*) who (due to their use of traditional medicines) are supposedly impervious to being cut by metals. They shout their praises and taunts while demonstrating their invulnerability by drawing swords or knives across various parts of their body including the tongue. If conducted in a remote area, these gatherings (commonly called *gangi*) produce confrontations which result in serious injury and even loss of life; and
- 7) **Other contests** – a category that includes minor combat games such as *faka* (which imitates the butting of goats), *kwambe* (foot boxing), *wowwo* (communal mock raids), and *wasan sanda* (Fulani stick fighting) as well as those games of courage which do not pit man against man, but rather against nature such as: *wasan wuta* (testing invulnerability to burning), *hawan kaho* (riding the horns of a bull), *wasan kura* (dangerous play with hyenas), *wasan mahaukata* (self flagellation with swords), *wasan macizai* (snake dodging), and *wasan kunama* (permitting poisonous scorpions to roam over one’s skin).

Combat Games of the African Indian Ocean with examples from Madagascar, Reunion and the Comores (see photo gallery) include:

- 1) **Moringue** (Reunion) / **Morengy** (Madagascar) / **Mrengé** (Comores) – a form of traditional boxing accompanied by music and song which is practiced by Creoles, Malagasy and Comorians alike. This sport (of presumed mainland African origin) is essentially a spectacular form of bare-knuckle boxing though in some areas both kicking and head butting are permitted;
- 2) **Ringa** – a form of traditional wrestling (similar to Nigerian wrestling but with many more techniques) practiced by Malagasy farmers and herders. In Toamasina (eastern Madagascar) **toho-body** (a form of wrestling in which one competitor begins the fight with his back facing his opponent) is practiced;
- 3) **Savika** – a form of ceremonial Zebu bull riding practiced by the Betsileo of Madagascar. This sport (like Jalli Kattu in Tamil Nadu, India) requires the combatant to grab the hump of an enraged bull and cling to the bucking creature for a specified period of time;
- 4) **Malaso** – a tradition, the object of which is to steal someone else's cattle. This thieving incorporates many of the elements associated with other combat sports including the performance of rituals, use of magic, songs, dance, combat, and daring;
- 5) **Hele** – a spectacular water sport in which naked or scantily clad Comorian youths leap off rocky crags into a turbulent ocean where they are carried by powerful waves either back to the very crag from which they jumped or into another rocky crag;
- 6) **Mixed Genres** – the grafting of Asian Martial Arts to Traditional Malagasy Games (i.e. *daka*, *diamanga*, *ringa*, and *morengy*) resulting new and powerful hybrid forms. This is somewhat similar to what Mestre Bimba and Mestre Sena did to Capoeira Angola to produce *Capoeira Regional* and *Capoeira Estilizado* respectively.

Capoeira, a patrimony of Brazilians of African descent, is a spectacular form of acrobatic fighting which is said to be derived from an Angolan ritual where males (imitating Zebra fighting) squared off to determine who would wed the girl of his choice. The combat resembles a battle between two cocks and is accompanied by music and songs. Congo, on the other hand, is a remarkable dance ritual from Panama which takes the form of a mock-combat between a man and a woman.

Although these two arts are superficially as different from another as “male” and “female”, they have a great deal more in common than meets the eye. Whereas Capoeira is a mock-combat between two men, Congo is a mock-combat between a man and a woman and in both “games” the aim is not to defeat the opponent, but rather to cue the adversary to defend himself/herself. Moreover in both games:

- 1) the combatants must stay in rhythm with the music which is played throughout the contest;
- 2) a combatant tries to anticipate the movements of his/her adversary and tries to oblige her/him to break rhythm;
- 3) there is a “call and response” singing with music and evocative lyrics played throughout the match;
- 4) there are a prescribed number of characteristic attacks and defenses, but the performance is spontaneous and not choreographed;
- 5) both cunning and *malicia* (treacherous deception) play a more important part in the development of the contest than strength;
- 6) both games are of supposed Bantu (Congolese) origin that were further developed in the context of slavery in the American diaspora – Capoeira in Brazil, and Congo in Panama;
- 7) both dances incorporate many bird movements and motifs; and most importantly
- 8) the two arts can be seen as complementary aspects of a mating ritual (Capoeira to select the male who will mate and Congo the male’s attempt to seduce the female) both having the same “raison d’être” - the preservation of the species.

Ladjia (also known as Danmyé and Wonpwen) is a martial art of probable African origin that took root on the soil of the Caribbean island of Martinique. It is performed to rhythms produced by the *tambour* (drum), *ti-bois* (sticks) and choral response singing. Here, agile fighters deliver blows with the hands, feet, elbows, knees, or head and [unlike Capoeira] also employ grappling techniques to best their opponent.

Throughout the combat, drummed binary rhythms are accompanied by evocative solo singing and enthusiastic choral responses. In choreographed versions of this art the agile fighters perform a mock-fight following the commands of the drumming – each beat of which is known and decoded by the performers. Thus, when the drummer executes the *kassé* stroke, the fighters stop abruptly, and when the drummer executes the *oulé* stroke, they just as suddenly resume fighting.

The primary reason for the continued existence of this art form is the result of the effort of certain Black Martinicans (particularly members of AM4) to rescue and preserve this unique element of their culture which was passed down to them by their African ancestors. In addition to being a regional patrimony and a great source of black pride, the practice of Ladjia serves as a means to: 1) develop skills in self defense; 2) test one’s (newly acquired) combative skills against those of an adversary; 3) stay in good physical condition; 4) put on shows as a form of spectator entertainment; 5) earn money; 6) receive acclaim; 7) impress women; 8) release frustration; 9) identify with one’s culture; and 10) simply have fun.

It, too, can be compared to a mating ritual, but here one need not travel to Panama for the dance of seduction. Indeed, the Martinican Belé dance – which utilizes the same instruments as Ladjia - plays the role of the Panamanian Congo admirably well.

Northern Nguni (i.e. Zulu, Swazi and/or Ndebele) stick-fighting is an African “celebration of masculinity” (dating from time immemorial) that involves a contest between two adversaries each of which is armed with two sticks. The attack stick (usually held in the right hand is used to strike with; whereas the stick held in the left hand is used to parry strikes made by the opponent. The blows may be delivered from any direction (i.e. down-swing, slashing swing, up-swing, or side-swing) to any part of the body; but neither striking with the stick used to parry nor jabbing with the attack stick is permitted. Moreover, fighters must refrain from injuring the eye of an opponent and strikes to the head and knuckles are discouraged. Depending upon the nature and venue of the contest, the left hand may be either unprotected or protected by a small shield.

Nguni children learn stick-fighting from an early age with relatively harmless light reeds. As in Capoeira, sparring is used to teach and train a companion rather than to defeat him. After learning the basic rudiments of the art, the boys then begin to employ harder sticks and/or war clubs that are very lethal. Boys typically engage in stick-fighting with other herd boys while grazing their cattle or sheep. More serious competitions typically take place at weddings and/or other ritual events such as puberty celebrations. Though stick-fighting is considered a game (*umdlalo wezinduku* = “game of sticks”) rather than a “fight”, it can result in serious injury and (in some cases) even death.

The Tamil - a dark-skinned race from southern India – have several “Displays of Daring” (see photo gallery) which I classify as martial arts, namely:

- 1) ***Silambam*** – which primarily involves stick fighting using long bamboo poles. This combat requires a great deal of hand, leg, and eye-co-ordination to strike an opponent and prevent one’s self from being struck and there are a number of techniques employed to force an opponent to drop his pole. Bare hand techniques and weapons other than sticks are also learned and employed. This art has been largely preserved in southern Tamil Nadu – particularly in Tirunelveli – a district that gave birth to many experts like Marudupandi, Kattabomman and Umaithurai. During festivals the art is performed as a game accompanied by both music and song;
- 2) ***Malyutham*** – one of the 64 arts listed in ancient literature, this sport (similar to wrestling) reached its zenith during the Pallava dynasty. During the mid-Chola period, local champions traveled to other communities and even to Sri Lanka to participate in tournaments there. In ancient times this art was the patrimony of the Malliga Chetty community.
- 3) ***Kai kuthu sandai (Gushti)*** – a kind of boxing where the adversaries “rain blows on each other” in an attempt to floor the opponent. Skilled practitioners of this art are known to be able to easily defend themselves against an armed opponent with their bare hands;

- 4) **Sword fighting** – this art reached its zenith in Tamil Nadu during the period of the Chola dynasties. Victory came when the adversary was wounded or when he lost his sword. Swords were sometimes used for parrying during these competitions;
- 5) **Jalli kattu** – in this competition ferocious bulls with sharpened horns are released from an enclosure one at a time. When the bull rushes into the arena, one or a number of courageous youths try to slow it down by holding down its horns, grabbing its hump, or climbing on its back. In the old days a prize of gold or money was attached to the horns awaiting he who was bold enough to snatch the prize. In those days it was (like Sharo of the Fulani) also used as a test for youths seeking a bride. This competition between man and bull (which is quite similar to Savika of Madagascar) typically takes place during the second day of the *pongal* festival;
- 6) **Urimaram eruthal** – considered an activity of great courage - involves an attempt by youths to climb a tall greased pole at the top of which is tied a pot filled with colored water. As a youth attempts to climb the pole, people shout and throw water on him to thwart his efforts. The first one to reach the pot and break it is rewarded with gifts. The danger here consists in the risk of falling;
- 7) **Deer-horn fighting** - - involves the use of a weapon made from razor-sharp deer horns in which the practitioner (using twisting and turning movements) defends himself against an adversary armed with a staff, knife, dagger, etc. He may choose to use one deer horn or two (one in each hand);
- 8) **Mallakhamb** – Here, a youth utilizing exceptional body flexibility, quickness, balance, strength, and perfect timing, pits himself against a pole which he climbs and then executes various yoga postures (usually) at its summit. Traditional martial artists and soldiers trained in this art to strengthen their muscles, discipline, co-ordination, body control and daring. Soldiers who underwent this training were held to perform better in combat;
- 9) **Curled swords** – this weapon consists of a number of thin tensile steel blades which are attached to a strong handle. When it is swung at an adversary, “the blades unfurl slicing through the flesh”. It is a very dangerous weapon and a great deal of skill is required to use it properly;
- 10) **Burning torch** – here the practitioner plays with fire and (according to M. Shahul Hameed) becomes “one with it”. In one type of performance a long flexible pole is selected and both ends are wrapped in cloth soaked with oil and set afire. The performer holds the pole in the center and twirls it around (like a baton) creating a magnificent display of light and fire. Two burning torches can be held (one in each hand) and twirled in a similar way. Sometimes a lighted wheel or star is used and the performer spins it from various positions (standing, seated, prone, kneeling, etc.). Performers also use chains to produce the same effect. The chain can be twirled with the chest, mouth, or even hair;

- 11) ***Kavadee*** – an awesome ceremony of apparent great pain and sacrifice (similar somewhat to Fulani Sharo, for which see above) that clearly demonstrates the physical and spiritual heights that man can reach when forgetting self and taking refuge in god. Here devotees become one with god by purging passion, pride, hate and envy from the soul by means of a ten-day abstention period followed by participation in an arduous barefooted *kavadee* procession during which their bodies are typically transfixed with metal needles, skewers, and weighted-down hooks as they carry a *kavadee* (arc) over a long distance. This abstinence from physical gratification is said to lead to self-liberation;
- 12) ***Teemeedee*** – is a ceremony in honor of a Warrior Goddess in which devotees, after undergoing austere preparations, walk bare-foot across a bed of burning embers to obtain the goddess's protection from adversity (cf. Fijians who walk on stones which have been heated red hot); and
- 13) ***Kathi poosai*** – Here, certain Tamil men, after undergoing a ritual of austerity, mount a ladder, the rungs of which consist of sharp swords with the blade side facing up. They do this as penance for wrongdoing or to seek a boon against ills that might befall a family member or the community as a whole.

It should be noted that although I have identified all of these forms as “martial arts”, I have also occasionally referred to some of them as “combat games”. According to the Collins Dictionary a game is defined as a competitive activity involving skills, chance, endurance on the part of two or more persons who play according to a set of rules usually for their own amusement or for that of spectators. As such Northern Nguni stick-fighting, Ladjia, Capoeira, and the other competitions discussed above can also be called games.

What distinguishes a “game” from a “fight” is mainly the existence of rules designed to lessen the risk of serious injury (e.g. no jabbing with the stick in Nguni stick-fighting, no head strikes in Silambam, etc.). Note that in the more spiritual *kavadee*, *teemeedee* and *kathi poosai*, described above, the “rules” that must be followed in order to be able to tolerate the pain involves adherence to sixteen do's and don'ts (for which see pg. 177 of my [Dravidian Displays of Daring, Part I: The Tamils](#)).

Nevertheless, despite these rules and regulations, risk taking and daring are such that the possibility of serious injury is not only possible, but frequently occurs, and it is for this reason that they are all considered – according to my definition – to be “martial arts”. Indeed, despite all precautions, several people typically die each year in the *jalli kattu* competition and painful injuries during silambam sparring matches (despite the use of masks and headgear) also occur.

There are no doubt many other BMA forms that have not been mentioned in this article and I invite everyone who reads it to submit a description of those “black martial arts” with which he or she is most familiar. The best articles will be selected for inclusion in the Black Foundation's first journal which I hope will be published by year's end.