

Reflections from the World African Martial Arts Conference

From Friday October 19 to Sunday October 21, 2007 I attended the World African Martial Arts conference in Detroit, MI. This conference was hosted by Ahati Kilindi Iyi and the TaMerrian Institute. It was attended by a wide range of luminaries including Shaha Mfundishi Maasi (Kupigani Ngumi), Nganga Mfundishi Tolo-Naa (Kupigani Ngumi), Mestre Preto Velho (Os Malandros de Mestre Touro), Baba Balogun (Egbe Ogun in Atlanta), Daniel Marks (52 Handblocks) and numerous other martial arts masters. I hoped to attend this conference to network with other practitioners and supporters of the African martial arts.

The first workshop that I attended was Baba Balogun's presentation on Egbe Ogun-African Wrestling. According to Baba Balogun, Egbe Ogun is a warrior society. He noted how the idea of "wrestling" or subduing one's opponent is central to all African fighting. That is, whether one subdues their opponent via arrow, spear, hand strike, kick, or takedown they have still in effect "wrestled" their opponent to the ground. During the hands-on segment of the workshop we got into some ground fighting.

The panel discussion that followed was on modernization or adherence to tradition in the martial arts. This panel featured Baba Balogun Mwanzo Mwalimu Umeme Mpingo (Vita Sanaa), Onyaka (Mashufaa), Mestre Preto Velho, and Khalil Maasi. This panel was quite energetic and insightful. Bro. Onyaka's comments in particular contained a great deal of depth and clarity.

After this I attended Bro. Onyaka's workshop on Martial Arts and the survival of African people. Bro. Onyaka emphasized the importance of martial arts as an essential component in the African socialization process (i.e., rites of passage). He maintained that martial arts imparted vital skills and understandings consistent with the African imperative for survival and empowerment in the world.

Friday night concluded with demonstrations by the TaMerrian Institute, Capoeira Angola Sao Bento Grande, Khalil Maasi, Vita Sanaa, and at least one other school dealing with the Asian arts.

Saturday Morning I attended the morning training at the conference site. Baba Kenny Moody of the TaMerrian Institute facilitated this training. He taught various dance movements and demonstrated their relevance to fighting. This session gave me some movement principles to reflect on and incorporate into my repertoire. It also helped me see some deficiencies in my current training.

The group of workshops following the morning training presented me with a difficult dilemma. I had to choose between Mestre Preto Velho's workshop on Capoeira Angola Sao Bento Grande or Daniel Marks' 52 Handblocks workshop. I chose the latter session and joined a roomful of other people who waited patiently for this late workshop to begin. Once things got started Daniel Marks gave a conceptual overview of 52 Handblocks' development. (Note: Daniel Marks and I actually had a very interesting conversation about this same topic during the prior evening). Subsequent to this brief overview Daniel fielded questions and attempted a hands-on workshop. Regrettably there was too little space and too little time for us to substantively get into any significant movement (i.e., the applied science). The richness of my conversation with Daniel from Friday night, the added information from the lecture, and the two DVDs that I got will hopefully assist me in learning more about this fascinating art.

That afternoon Wayne Chandler did a lecture on the African/Black foundations of Chinese civilization and the importance of expanding our human consciousness via meditation and holistic living. I also attended Brother G's lecture on his Legend of Memnon series. After having seen Brother G around Chicago over the years it was finally good to learn more about his project. Afterwards I got into a very engaging conversation with Mestre Preto Velho. I also managed to catch the end of Dr. Germon Miller's workshop on women's self-defense. This was followed by a brief but informative conversation with Bro. Adeboye Adegbenro on the Yoruba martial arts.

The last workshop that I attended was Khalil Maasi's workshop on Congo Cosmology. This workshop was well conceived and provided some sound philosophical and practical approaches that I'll have to integrate into my martial studies. Saturday concluded with an award's ceremony where Nganga Mfundishi Tolo-Naa, Shaha Mfundishi Maasi, and others were honored. Bro. Khalil Maasi accepted his father's award in his stead.

Sunday morning began with an intriguing lecture by Mfundishi Salim, creator of the Aha Kemet system of Kupigani Ngumi. He began with a discussion of the objective of his work Spiritual Warriors are Healers. He maintains that martial arts are a tool to heighten consciousness. He said that the martial arts are a gateway to culture and that culture situates you within a matrix. There are, he explained, two types of matrixes. There is the artificial matrix of white supremacy and the natural matrix, which is the African way-our way. He said that culture is our key power source. In fact he argued that our fear to overcome of enemy is born of our having become too much like the enemy, and in destroying them we fear destroying ourselves. Hence we see them (the enemy) in ourselves. With regards to healing Mfundishi said that culture is our medicine.

He proceeded to explain the power and symbolism of the lotus flower. Passing around lotus oil, which people were asked to rub on their hands, he stated that in ancient Kmt lotus oil was used to open people's spiritual consciousness. He said that the power of the lotus is reflected in its growth behavior. He said that the lotus would grow in water, and that it would grow roots of varying lengths in order to remain above water. Hence if the water was three feet deep, then the lotus would adapt by growing roots that were three feet long. However, if the water was fifteen feet deep, then the lotus would adapt by growing fifteen foot long roots. The lotus teaches adaptability and perseverance.

He also had one of his students Heru Ur Nekhet demonstrate a form/dance of Simba (lion) and Nyoka (snake) techniques. Mfundishi went on to talk about his own martial arts background in Hung Gar Kung-Fu and his eventual transition into and development of African fighting arts. He noted his observations of fight dances in Tanzania and his eventual initiation into a secret society there, which allowed for him to learn their martial science. Unfortunately I had to leave 30 minutes into his presentation to catch my plane.

Overall however, this was an exciting and productive conference. I look forward to next year.

Kamau