

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Embodiment of an Authentic Filipino Art of Self-Preservation and Well-being

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ABSTRACT

The study discussed the cultural and historical significance of arnis, the indigenous art of self-preservation developed by the early Filipinos. As a form of self-defense, arnis, kali, or eskrima is deemed to have evolved in the Philippines during the pre-colonial period through ingenuity, multi-cultural interaction, and friendship between aboriginal Filipinos and Asian traders. Arnis is a graceful yet exquisite hand-to-hand and armed routine intended for combat with a peculiar history linked to rebellion and struggles among commoners who sought freedom from the ruling colonizers. It is interesting to report that the symbolic authentic Filipino Martial Art (F.M.A.), which has been passed on through generations, had eventually reached the pedestal of recognition as a national sport, art, and culture of the Philippines under the Republic Act 9850. Arnis continued to become popular from the local to the international arena, where Filipino grandmasters, masters, and practitioners conduct seminar training and promotional tournaments to brush elbows with their counterparts in high regard and camaraderie. As a sport, it contributed to the physical development, well-being, discipline, and character of the players or practitioners from different walks of life. The Filipino people's sense of nationalism, patriotism, and national identity is reflected in arnis as a part of their rich historical and cultural heritage.

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Introduction

Arnis is an indigenous martial art founded by early Filipino aboriginals for self-preservation and physical development (Sanchez et al. 2020). Historically, arnis came from the Spanish term *arnés*, which means weapon. (Wiley, 2000). Diego & Ricketts (2012) described the connection of arnis to a socio-religious stage play of romance and melodrama, which climaxed a battle between Christians and Muslims known as *Moro-Moro*. The actors usually used replicas of armor and long weapons. This type of play had been part of festivities in the Philippines.

Arnis was also associated with fencing or *esgrima* in Spanish and *eskrima* in its Filipinized term (Federico Lazo. 2008; History of Filipino Martial Arts, 2009; Warriors Eskrima - Worcestershire, 2009), which describes "two individuals fighting using long-range weapons; and *Kali*, which means "to dig" or "to stab," originated from the Ilocano's. Arnis, *Eskrima*, or *Kali* pointed out a weapon-oriented defensive martial art system in which practitioners train on hand-to-hand fighting techniques, knives, bladed weapons, and various improvised hand extensions, usually twenty-three inches long, such as *yantok*, *olisi* which is made of rattan, or *kamagong* (a type of Philippine hardwood), and other indigenous materials. It also incorporates kicking, locking, throwing, disarming, and grappling techniques, making arnis an effective fighting system for its practitioners known as *arnisadors* or *eskrimadors*. Arnis can be traced back to pre-Hispanic Filipino tribal wars, though the modern form was inspired by 15th-century Spanish fencing. Several theories

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suggested that arnis originated and developed with Chinese, Indonesian, and Malaysian merchants who traveled to the Philippines.



Figure 1. A Moro-Moro Performance

Photo credits: <https://mishadaitacio.weebly.com/philippine-theater1.html>

Through interaction with neighboring Asian traders, it was believed that early Filipinos had not just exchanged merchandise. The relationship could have been more than friendship and business and that their self-defense interests may also have blended. This interaction might have enriched the already established arnis combative movements and techniques among the natives who tirelessly developed and practiced the art. According to Draeger & Smith (1980), when the Spaniards came to the Philippines in the 16th century, Filipino aboriginals were already observed practicing arnis.

On April 27, 1521, the Spanish force led by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan set foot on Mactan, Philippines, to bring the Christian religion to the natives. The fleet displayed enormous confidence and bravery with its hard armor and modern arms. Their weapons were superior compared to the fire-hardened sticks, bows, stones, and spears of the natives. But Lapu-Lapu, the native chieftain of Mactan and his men, overpowered the uninvited visitors using their primitive weapons and defeated them. Magellan met his untimely demise in the hands of Lapu-Lapu. The *bolos* and spears of the native warriors won over the guns and canons of the supposed foreign invaders. Unfortunately, Magellan and his men underestimated the strength and power of the natives in Mactan (2001, *The Death of Magellan*, 1521).

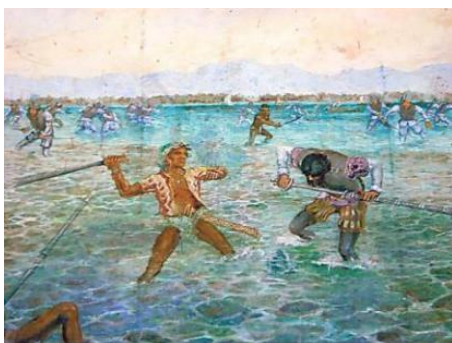


Figure 2. The Battle of Mactan

Photo credits: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Mactan#/media/File:MactanShrinePainting2.jpg

Antonio Pigaffeta, a member of Magellan's Spice Islands expedition, has meticulously recorded these fascinating historical events. Today, Lapu-Lapu is regarded as a national hero. He was an iconic figure with significant contribution to the arnis fighting system, which has played an essential role in the Philippines' turbulent and bloody past. The Filipinos honed their arnis skills by mastering hand-to-hand fighting and weaponry for more than three centuries of Spanish colonization. The Filipinos' evident mastery of the art arouses distrust and fear amongst the Spaniards, who saw how effectively they could fight and stage a major rebellion. So the authorities piqued their attention and advised them to spend more time on the farm, livestock, and other endeavors rather than wasting time on '*nonsensical art*', as the colonizers mocked arnis, bragging about their guns and explosives. The Filipinos were then strongly advised to avoid practicing the art.

However, arnis had always been a part of the everyday life of ordinary people. Their passion for the art was never dampened by such admonition. As a result, arnis practitioners improved and adapted the art to Moro-Moro stage plays. In the eyes of the authorities, it was a convincing disguise. The choreographed movements portraying the fight between Christians and Muslims were patterned from the arnis fighting system, and the audience did not notice. The masters, on the other hand, preferred to remain hidden from the public eye and went underground. In secret, they practiced arnis. (*Eskrimadors documentary*). Back then, each tribal clan had its distinct style. These were closely guarded family secrets passed down over the generations. Arnis, an ancient fighting style, is one of the world's most powerful and deadly martial arts. Its history can be traced back to more than 500 years. It has been one of the most ancient forms of martial arts in the pre-colonial Philippines which has traces of evidence since the 1500s when small warring groups ruled the archipelago.

Objectives

The study aimed to discuss arnis as a symbol of the Philippines' rich cultural heritage from pre-colonial to post-colonial times when it was the commoners' secret art of fighting that became a part of the armed struggle against foreign oppressors. It also describe how this particular martial art progressed from the spectrum of death matches to the mainstream plethora of popular culture, promotions, and sport and has inspired global knowledge and education among people of the values and the discipline of arnis as a national sport, martial art, and culture.

The F.M.A. (Filipino Martial Art) in the Popular Culture

Filipinos and their Southeast Asian neighbors most likely share a common tradition and fighting techniques involving long weapons such as rattan sticks, swords, and the like (Sorilla, 2020). Arnis has been enthralled with Asian-Hollywood films. One was the 1973 martial arts thriller "*Enter the Dragon*." Bruce Lee, the founder of Jeet Kun Do, who fought against the crazy thugs led by the antagonist

Han, used several weapons such as Bo, nun chucks, and arnis canes to finish off his enemies. It was a milestone in Filipino martial art. Arnis has piqued the attention of filmmakers and directors of action films. It has since been well-received in the realms of pop culture and international movies all over the world. It has made well-choreographed fighting scenes in action films that look cinematically stunning and impressive. No other martial art requires as much combative display as arnis, which is why it is so popular in Hollywood.

Action stars Vin Diesel and Jason Statham depicted a breath-taking arnis-inspired fighting scene using pipes in "Furious 7" (2015). Denzel Washington displayed remarkable F.M.A. (Filipino Martial Arts) hand-to-hand techniques or *pangamut* in the movie "The Equalizer" (2014), wherein he portrayed the role of a vigilante who goes after criminals in discrete and "The Book of Eli" (2010) where he showcased his mastery of blades as a warrior and post-apocalyptic survivor. The actor studied under Dan Inosanto, an F.M.A. teacher and a friend of Bruce Lee. Arnis was also prominently featured in Aaron Eckhart's battle scenes in the 2014 film "Frankenstein." The main characters in "Kick-Ass" (2010) used arnis canes and Filipino-inspired knife techniques against criminals.

Meanwhile, Liam Neeson combined the fighting styles of Arnis, Wing Chun, and Silat to pin down French thugs who kidnapped his daughter in "Taken" (2008). In "Quantum of Solace" (2008), James Bond immobilized his opponent armed with a knife using Filipino martial arts. *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and its sequels also showcased the fighting styles of Arnis and Jeet Kune Do. There are also several popular movies that depict Filipino-inspired fighting styles.

The Roots of F.M.A. Legacy

During the American occupation, Filipinos were encouraged to practice their craft. The grandmasters felt compelled to come out in the open to share their art with those interested. Several arnis groups of different styles exist today to keep the art alive for future generations.

Arnis de Mano is known for the weaponry and empty-hand techniques that the Filipinos engaged with during the Spanish occupation. According to some accounts, Arnis de Mano had a significant influence on Chinese and Indonesian fighting techniques. Jose Rizal, a national hero, according to Wiley (2012), was an Arnis de Mano practitioner. The style is thought to have originated in Luzon.

Doce Pares Eskrima was founded by the Saavedra and Cañete families in 1933. The fighting system is a distinction of several arnis styles that these families aimed to preserve and promote. For example, Eulogio Cañete was credited with developing the *Largo-Mano* style; Felimon Cañete and Jesus Cui have specialized and perfected the *Espada-y-Daga* also known as sword-and-dagger style; Teodoro Saavedra, Venancio Bacon, Delfin Lopez, and Timoteo Maranga were well-known for *Corto-Linear*; Felimon and Iluminado Cañete were very much known for their high level of mastery in *Corto- Orihinal/Media-Largo*. While Vicente Carin and Ponciano Ybañez were exceptional icons of *Hirada and*

Retirada; Maximo Cañete and Jesus Cui have been masters in *Mano-Mano* and *Baraw*, and Ciriaco and Felimon Cañete were recognized for their mastery in *Corto Kurbada* and *Abaniko*. The name *Doce Pares* which stands for "twelve pairs," was meant to honor the twelve individuals who formed the group. In history, it relates to the famous twelve bodyguards who have fought and killed hundreds of enemies in battles with French emperor Charlemagne (AD 768-814).

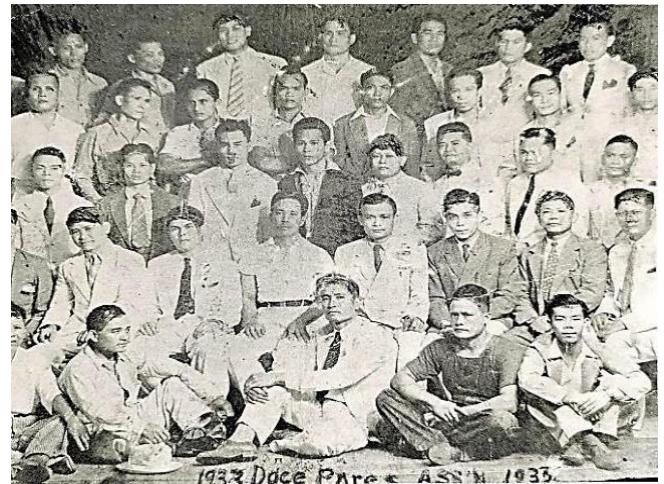


Figure 3. Doce Pares Group 1933

Photo credits: <https://martialartscultureandhistory.com/en/a-brief-history-of-eskrima-in-cebu/>

Balintawak Eskrima was a club established by Venancio "Anciong" Bacon in Balintawak Street, Cebu City, in 1951 (Navarro, 1996). Anciong Bacon was a former member of Doce Pares who was well-versed in various Eskrima styles and other self-defense techniques, including Jiu-jitsu, Judo, and Boxing. Because of his experience in these disciplines, he integrated them into his students' classes through various methods. The style was given the name Balintawak at the time, after the street where it all started. Due to its precise and fast movements, Balintawak Eskrima is known to be a realistic and practical offensive and defensive single-stick fighting art. While the right hand executes quick and fatal stick strikes, the left free hand performs grabbing, punching, pushing, pulling, and other similar movements. With attorney Jose Villasin, Anciong improved his techniques by using a single stick as his primary weapon. The system's twelve basic strikes and blocks were established later due to Anciong's continuous teaching to Atty. Villasin. Other Balintawak groups known for promoting arnis and are still active at present are *Nickelstick-Balintawak* of Nick Elizar. *W.O.T.B.A.G. (World-Original-Teovel's-Balintawak-Arnis-Group)* of the late Teofilo Velez, whose sons Chito, Monnie, and Eddie were the master instructors. *Taboada-Balintawak* of Bobby Taboada, *Balintawak-Sugbu* of Carlo Veloso Campaña, *Tabimina-Balintawak* of Bobby Tabimina, *Arnis de Caballes* of Maximo Caballes, and many others.



Balintawak Self Defense Club 1952
Cebu City, Philippines

Figure 4. Balintawak Self-Defense Club 1952

Photo credits: <https://stickfightingsport.com/balintawak-arnis-2/>

Lapunti Arnis de Abanico was founded in 1972 by Felimon Caburnay and Prudencio Ondo Caburnay. The name "Lapunti" came from the combined names of Labangon, Punta, and Tisa. These barangays were proximate to where the Caburnay's lived. Lapunti Arnis de Abanico's system features a fast "fan-like or *abanico*" strike using a single stick. It also includes double stick techniques, stick and dagger, and hand-to-hand combat techniques. The system's footwork is a trademark, as it is a combination of classic forward-backward movements, an offense and defense triangle system, and a cross-legged, twisting Kung Fu-like stance. Lapunti places the main emphasis on long-range, but the combination of tight footwork allows the practitioner to achieve excellent mobility and can also deliver the fast strike at close range.

Bakbakan International was founded in the Philippines by Christopher Ricketts, Antonio Diego, and Rey Galang. They were Tatang Illustrisimo's senior students (Diego & Ricketts, 2012; Nepangue & Macachor, 2007). The Filipino Martial Arts Association promotes the Tulisan-Knife-Fighting-System, which is mainly focused on practical techniques; the Sinawali-Fighting-System, which targets weapon mastery; the Lameco- Escrima, Sagasa-Kickboxing-System, and Hagibis-Combat-System, as well as other systems that employ a variety of combat techniques for single and multiple opponents. Bakbakan International is a brotherhood of martial artists who practice several martial art disciplines. It promotes information, concepts, and self-defense strategies.

De-Campo-Uno-Dos-Tres-Original was founded by Jose Caballero. The system is known for its one-of-a-kind training routine, which emphasizes direct offensive and defensive movements. The rule of exercise, according to Thorndike, is the relationship between stimulus and response. Repetition or practice strengthens the skill (law of use), while discontinuation weakens it (law of disuse) (Singh, 2009). This leads to superiority with the right inspiration. 1-2-3 De Campo In the 1950s, the Original, a.k.a. *Juego-Todo-Fighting-System*, was part of a series of *Juego Todo* (deathmatch) challenges. Jose Diaz Caballero always came out victorious. The system provides an excellent curriculum that develops combat strategy, self-defense skills, and

well-being. Jose Caballero's trail-blazed it for the first time in 1925. His son, Mawe Caballero, continued and taught the system to the public, and Jong Caballero continues the system's legacy.

Kombatan system is known for its double sticks, stick and blade, and empty-hand techniques founded by Ernesto Amador Presas. This Filipino fighting system is very comprehensive as it is the product of the founder's solid dedication to modernizing the classical arnis, unlike the old-school systems that were often taught with actual contact and hitting that eventually discouraged students. The experience stifled their desire to continue training arnis because not all can withstand pain (Presas, E.1996; Presas, R. 1994). Remy Presas developed the system by researching various arnis styles, techniques, and methods from masters such as Antonio Tatang's Kali-Illustrisimo, the Lightning-Scientific-Arnis of Ben Luna Lema, and Jose Mena's *Doblete-Rapilon*.

As a teacher and a fighter, Ernesto Presas developed and became his system's mentor to his students, whose influence is attributed to the three masters who taught him. He was also helped by Cristino Vasquez, who specialized in *Espada-y-Daga*, *anyo*, and *mano-mano*; The Freestyle fighting and practical application of Federico Lazo and Pepe Yap; The art and teaching methods of Benny Quitalig; The *anyo* and teaching methods of Dave Labiano; Edgardo Kawada knew very well about *bankaw* and *balisong*; Mark Matthew Santos, an expert in knife techniques, *mano-mano*, locks, and takedowns; and Bambit Dulay, master of freestyle fighting applications, *anyo*, weapon-locking and takedowns, *mano- mano*. He also contributed to the development of the Kombatan sub-systems (Buenaventura et al. 1957)

End of Deathmatches: The Transition of F.M.A. into Sport

In a documentary, Dionisio Cañete emphasized that unlike other forms of martial arts practiced by monks and nobilities, arnis came from a more humble origin. It was the art of the poor people and the derelicts from the very poor segment of society. He added that in the early 1970s, F.M.A. began emerging into the martial arts world's consciousness. For instance, *Doce pares* got a series of local and international invitations to perform in demonstrations, which trailblazed the arnis or eskrima awareness to other races. Demonstrations were exciting to observe, which surely bring motivation in propagating the art. Cañete thought that the best way to introduce and propagate the art of arnis is through a legitimate sporting event. In 1976, headgear, body, and hand protectors were designed for the first time. In Cebu, a committee was formed to draft tournament rules in order to modernize and civilize sparring. On March 24, 1979, Cebu City hosted the first invitational Open Arnis Tournament. The crowd assumed it was just another "Juego todo," but the *arnisadors* were already wearing protective gears following the N.A.R.A.PHIL's rules.



Figure 5. SGM Dionisio Cañete.

Photo credits:

<http://wekafinternational.com/index.php/referees-and-judge/>

The rivalries between arnis groups and organizations were common in the past when *arnisadors* would engage in deathmatches, also known as *Juego todo*, a quick form of sparring that could result in serious injury and death to the protagonists due to the lack of protective gear. However, after the arnis tournament on March 24, 1979, *arnisadors* shifted their focus from deathmatches to organized games and competitions. It brought an end to the era of savage rivalries and deathmatches. The advent of arnis as a sport took place.

The A.R.P.I. Tournament

Following the historic E.D.S.A. (Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue) revolution in 1986, the National Arnis Association of the Philippines (N.A.R.A.PHIL.) ceased to exist as the dominant Arnis organization founded by General Ver in 1975. He was exiled to Hawaii. The great Arnis Masters subsequently introduced another prominent group. With the same aim as N.A.R.A.PHIL., Arnis Philippines (A.R.P.I.) has been created. Mr. Raymond Soriano Velayo, a young and well-known sportsman, convened Roland Dantes, Mario Malicsi, Ernie Presas, Alex Cruz, Bienvenido Orlanes, Ramon Enrille III, Guy Tacorda, Jerry Dela Cruz, Atty. Ulan Sarmiento and Rene Tongson were genuinely committed to arnis on July 11, 1986. They established the Philippine Arnis Federation, later renamed Arnis Philippines, Inc., (A.R.P.I.) to make arnis a cornerstone in martial arts and combat sports at Pulu Restaurant in Cubao, Quezon City, Manila Metro. In a short time, Arnis Philippines was recognized by the Philippines' official sports bodies. It was the solely accredited arms and arnis organization of the Philippine Olympic Committee (effective from January 1987 to 2019) and was the 33rd Olympic Committee member. Through its formal membership as the National Sports Association (N.S.A.). A.R.P.I. had the full authority to formally oversee all Arnis affairs in the country formally. Soon after, it was added to the Gintong Alay Project's support roster, and the Philippine Sports Commission (P.S.C.) provided financial

assistance (A.R.P.I. 2019). A.R.P.I. organizes events such as the Arnis National Encounter held annually since 1986. The goal is to hold a competition in which the best Arnisadors from various clubs in the Philippines compete for the chance to play with the Philippine team. The Women's Martial Arts Festival, the Philippine National Games, the Batang Pinoy Tournaments, and DepEd's City, Regional, and National Meets in which arnis is played (A.R.P.I., 2019).

The P.E.K.A.F. Tournament

The World Eskrima Kali Arnis Federation (W.E.K.A.F.), the largest governing body of the F.M.A. promotion through sports, espoused the Philippine Eskrima Kali-Arnis Federation (P.E.K.A.F.) as its member organization. Currently, Senator Miguel Zubiri is the active chairman and president of the organization. He has the sole authority to appoint officers to his transitional administration. (Manlosa, 2017). "P.E.K.A.F. is writing a unified basic curriculum that will be taught to school coaches, trainers, and students. Since Arnis teaching is mandated by law, P.E.K.A.F. will take over what Arnis Philippines has done," said Gerald Cañete, a member of the P.E.K.A.F. Board of Trustees. Cañete emphasized that the original Filipino martial arts would regain their former prominence thanks to the unified basic moves of arnis, which were created by his father and W.E.K.A.F. founder Dionisio Cañete. P.E.K.A.F. eventually took over as the sole N.S.A. for Arnis, which the Philippine Olympic Committee (P.O.C.) recognized earlier in 2019.



Figure 6. A fight between two arnisadors wearing protective gears

Photo credits: <https://www.mauinews.com/sports/local-sports/2018/07/wekaf-championships-continue-at-lahaina-civic-center/>

After slowly fading from Southeast Asia's consciousness shortly after the Philippines hosted the sport in the 2005 edition of the games, arnis received little attention and visibility. To get arnis back to where it is now, changes and consolidation were needed, which initially came in the form of the Philippine Eskrima Kali Arnis Federation (P.E.K.A.F.), an all-inclusive federation founded in 2017. With a

functioning organization in place, efforts to resurrect sport in the region have begun. P.E.K.A.F. developed a standardized set of rules to bring together and accommodate 27 different arnis styles in organized competitions (Villanueva, 2019). According to Miguel Zubiri, "We set it up to unite all factions because there were many factions in arnis before. It's challenging to unite arnis because we're all based on different styles, but we've all come together because of our love of martial arts and sport." When arnis sport was hosted at the 2019 Southeast Asian Games (S.E.A. Games), where the Philippine team dominated the *labanan* and *anyo* events and garnered gold (14), silver (4), and bronze (2) medals, P.E.K.A.F. saw its international milestone and prestige.



Figure 7. Filipino medalists in the 2019 Southeast Asian Games with Sen. Miguel Zubiri, president of Philippine Eskrima Kali Arnis Federation (PEKAF).

Photo credits:

<https://sagisag.com/article/1549/Sports/philippines-to-host-arnis-world-tilt-in-july-2020>

The F.M.A. and Philippine Culture

As the Philippines' national sport, under the Republic Act 9850, arnis reflects the rich history and culture, and perhaps the Filipino people's philosophy. The cultural legacy of the ordinary people who witnessed the advent of arnis forged by the turbulent past and how its deep roots manifest in their diverse society is the best way to understand the art of self-preservation. They developed the 'curriculum' of empty-hand combat and fighting with bladed weapons such as *kampilan*s, daggers, swords, and spears to defend their domains, rights, and identity against the ruling colonizers, despite their lack of a scholarly background. The natives continued to practice arnis through ritual performances and dramatizations of battles despite oppression and war. Our forefathers have made it. Arnis had lived through a bloody history of oppression. In the Pearl of the Orient Seas, this is proof of racial resilience. The Filipino Martial Art (F.M.A.) is becoming more popular as a combat system, and it is spreading its influence through sport throughout the archipelago and around the world. The Filipino culture and traditions included stick fighting. It is just one aspect of the more extensive evolution of the martial arts system, which has been practiced in the Philippines for more than three centuries, despite the influences of those who colonized the country. It is also befitting to say that arnis is holistic, influencing the mind, body, and spirit, not just a weaponized system held or executed, as those with a better understanding of martial arts history

have always pointed out. It is thought to have spiritual significance dating back to antiquity.



Figure 8. Arnis for physical well-being
Photo credits: *Dominum Eskrimadom Sanctum*

Early arnis grandmasters and practitioners had opted for amulets or *habak* (usually objects considered sacred and powerful). They believed that amulets would make them invincible from physical attacks of any weapon and protection against any danger that evil spirits were thought to have brought about (*Eskrimador documentary*). Arnis is more than just an indigenous fighting system. It is part of the Filipino people's distinct traditions and survival. Worthy of recognition as an authentic Filipino cultural heritage (Vicente, 2018).

Conclusion

Filipino martial art continues to thrive and still catches the attention in the world of sports and self-preservation to this day. Arnis had been the commoners' underground and hidden art that victoriously emerged as a sporting phenomenon in the modern arena of sports. Although arnis has been identified and practiced in several countries, the sport is most authentic in the Philippines. It is carried out with pride and dignity among clubs and its integration into the school curriculum at all levels as mandated by the Republic Act 9850.



Figure 9. NagaNHS Arnisadors
Photo credits: *Dominum Eskrimadom Sanctum*

Arnis is an essential part of Philippine history and culture that deserves to be promoted consistently and vigorously through competitions and education, lest the long history of this Filipino martial art will be lost to future generations. Regardless of origin, style, and peculiarities, *arnisadors* in clubs, school teams, and organizations continue to grow in numbers extending greater awareness and undisputable recognition worldwide. More importantly, arnis is a symbolic representation of the country's historical and cultural identity that has spread far and wide as a popular sport and martial art.



Figure 10. NagaNHS Arnis Team 2013-2019

Photo credits: *Dominum Eskrimadom Sanctum*

Dedicated to all Arnisadors, Pugay Po!

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