

## Chapter 16

**Black Martial Artists: Modernity in Pursuit of an African Fighting System in the African Diaspora***Latif A. Tarik*

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**Introduction**

"You may not wish to fight me now, sucka! But you will.  
I'm gonna see to that! Sayonara...Who's the Master?  
Sho'nuff—The Shogun of Harlem."

-- *The Last Dragon*<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary martial arts and hip-hop culture, the name *Wu-Tang Clan* is immediately reminiscent of the African American rap group Wu Tang Clan and traditional Chinese martial arts movies. The names Shaolin and Wu Tang were made familiar to urban audiences throughout North America in the 1970s. Asian and Asian American cultures, along with African and African American cultures, were exported throughout the world by the globalization of American popular culture. Chinese martial arts movies, produced by the Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong movie studios, forged an African and Asian

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<sup>1</sup> *The Best Last Dragon Quotes*, <https://sites.google.com/site/lastdragontribute/the-last-dragon-movie-quotes> accessed May 31, 2021. The movie the *Last Dragon* was produced in 1985 by Barry Gordon. It was a comedic version of Black and Asian martial arts culture. The film became a cult classic for youth and young adults of the 1980s.

cultural identity that intersected Black popular culture and martial arts culture.<sup>2</sup> Despite the Chinese migrating to North America in the 1800s and Africans being forced into enslavement in North America as early as the 1500s, both the Chinese and Africans preserved traditional cultural systems while forging new identities and systems through the pursuit of modernity.

The examination of modernity is necessary to understand the relationship between Black martial artists who use African dance and drum culture in the fighting systems developed in the African diaspora. This chapter explores the modernity of Black martial artists primarily in the United States. They were introduced to the fighting arts of Asia while resurrecting the traditional fighting arts of Africa. Black martial artists incorporate traditional African dance, drumming, and culture into new world African fighting systems and reconstruct these traditions to reflect a Black worldview, Africana sensibilities, and cultural hegemony in the African diaspora. Black martial arts societies were organized after World War II and primarily in the urban North of the United States of America during its foundational years (1945-1969).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Shaw Brothers Studio produced Chinese martial arts films for eighty years and introduced those films to urban audiences in the United States of America in the 1970s. <http://shawbrothersuniverse.com/the-shaw-brothers-studio-story/> accessed January 28, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Martial arts were introduced to American culture after soldiers returned from World War II. The Korean War and the globalization of American society during the Vietnam War years brought Asian martial arts culture to the forefront of American society. In the Black community the first martial arts communities developed in the urban areas of the United States of America.

Moreover, during the Black Power era, Black martial artists started looking for a meaningful purpose for their art by exploring traditional African societies, African-based fighting theories, African mythologies, Pan-African fighting societies, and popular culture. By creating their own unique forms and systems, Black martial artists constructed a new African or Black consciousness. In addition, this chapter will utilize Africana methodologies and explore new developments within African-centered fighting systems, Africana dance, and ritual drumming.<sup>4</sup>

Historian and scholar Kim Hewitt argues that there are some major identical cultural traits expressed in African American cultural aesthetics that intersected with authentic Black martial arts training systems and philosophies. Her theoretical analysis is grounded in "the assumptions that the African diaspora contributed an Africanist presence to African American communities, which culminated in a unique African American expressive style, and that many kinds of martial arts have similar underlying philosophical

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<sup>4</sup> The following practitioners have established African-centered martial arts programs. Kilindi Iyi's Tamerrian Institute includes African culture, music, dance, and African spiritual practices. Mfundishi Tayari Casel is the founder and director of the Tayari Casel Martial Arts Academy, Inc., and dances with Kankouran West African Dance Company. Robert W. Young interviewed martial artist Professor Mo in *Black Belt Magazine* (May 2019) titled "52 Blocks Art of Africa, Not 'Art of Incarceration.'" Balogun Ojetade's *Afrikan Martial Arts: Discovering the Warrior Within* (Oakland: Boss Up Inc., 2008) provides examples of documented practices and research not broadly known in the academy. Thomas A. Green's *Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2001) offers some inclusion of a global African presence in martial arts.

guidelines.”<sup>5</sup> She focuses on variations of African American expressive cultures in the visual, kinesthetic, and musical elements related to the interactive characteristics of Black martial artists, contending “if this connection makes sense theoretically...we may understand the appeal of martial arts to African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s in a new light.”<sup>6</sup> The Black martial arts movement was not isolated, but a complementary addition to the values and principles expressed during the Black Power, Black Arts, and African cultural movements occurring during the 1960s and 1970s.

Black martial artists’ historiography is not an essentialist or escapist phenomenon solely produced by globalization. Hewitt assumes that Black martial arts fundamentals are a result of the African diaspora, and this viewpoint is supported by Patrick Manning’s theoretical approach to the African diaspora and modernity in the modern world. Manning does not believe that modernity is simply a break from the past. He defines the concept:

Modernity is the condition of life today and in the recent past—a condition filled with triumphs, complexities, and disasters in industry, science, government, and communication, bringing progress, oppression, capitalism, and inequality. Modernity is a condition that is deeply felt and almost universally experienced. Too often, however, it is defined narrowly and then explained in such a fashion as to exclude Black people from it. Modernity is the overall ethos of the modern world, in economic, social, cultural, and other realms; it is an exhilarating but difficult situation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kim Hewitt, “Martial Arts Is Nothing if Not Cool: Speculations on the Intersections between Martial Arts and African American Expressive culture” in *Afro Asia Revolutionary Political & Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans* ed. by Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 265-284.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 266-267.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: A History through Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), xvi-xvii.

Manning contests many of the traditional theories about Africa and modernity and chooses to view the African diaspora in a modern view of modernity that places Black people as agents in the construction of the modern world.<sup>8</sup> He believes African and African diasporic communities should not be reduced to a sociological interpretation of modernity and historical interpretations of the modern world as footnotes, and notes that any form of “the history of Africans and people of African descent, a complex story in itself, lies at the center of the history of all humanity. The tale of modernity cannot fairly be told without full attention to the African continent and peoples of African descent.”<sup>9</sup>

Manning categorizes the history of the African diaspora into four dimensions: the lives of Black communities at home and abroad, their relationship to hegemonic powers (both under the hierarchy of slavery and in the unequal circumstances of post-emancipation society), their relations with communities of other racial designators, and the various types of mixing of Black and other communities.<sup>10</sup> His framework establishes a set of guidelines to examine the dialectical response to how African culture changed over time (causation), its relationship to other cultural motifs (settlements), the social

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xvii. Placing African people and people of the African diaspora as the primary subject provides agency in the discovery of the accomplishments of African people within the culture and society that they occupy.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6. See Joseph Harris, *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982) and Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora: New Approaches to African History* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

construction of race (identity), and the given polity in which Africans have had to navigate.

The examination of Black martial artists in the African diaspora, and in North America particularly, cannot be separated from the foundation of traditional African culture.<sup>11</sup> Manning continues to analyze Black global interactions by framing Black people as the subject being studied by reflecting on the theme of “a history through culture.” African culture is the foundation of African diasporic culture and global Black identity. African macroculture “assumes there is an overall set of practices and identities shared by people of Africa and, perhaps, the African diaspora, the term “macroculture” can be problematic because it often refers to vague generalities, with cultural overlaps, without identifying specific cultural characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

Manning continues to explore Africana cultural production by examining microculture, which is often distinctive from national or elite culture. It is within the domain of popular culture, which is often performed in the village, neighborhood, or societal subculture even when they share traits of the same society. These differences developed cultural variations in values, styles, and worldviews. Manning notes, “With time, changing technology and political values gave steadily greater scope to popular

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout the African Diaspora, particularly in South Carolina and South America, martial arts systems survived from their parent African culture. Most were disguised as dance or games. Knocking and bucking and capoeira are examples with origins coming from Senegal. These systems exemplify cultural retention from traditional Africa culture.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.

culture. Larger theaters, expanded print runs, phonographs, motion pictures, radio, audiotapes, televisions, videotapes, and the Internet have bridged the old gap between elite and popular spheres.”<sup>13</sup> There are four areas of human creativity that Manning uses to evaluate and define the microculture of Black experiences and cultural production in the form of *expressive culture*, *material culture*, *reflective culture*, and *societal culture*. Expressive culture encompasses the artistic realm of Black culture in visual arts, music, literature, and other interpretations such as African dance and the movement of the body. Material culture includes the creative production of physical products in dress, architecture, and tools. Reflective culture embraces the use of philosophy, knowledge systems, theology, and epistemology. Societal culture teaches the person their role in society, traditions, and customs, along with society's modeling based on age groupings from birth to eldership.

## **The Origins of African Martial Arts—Myths, Legends, and African History**

“History is not everything but it’s a starting point”  
--John Henrik Clarke<sup>14</sup>

Knowing the origins of African fighting systems and its relationship to African history provides a discourse for separating facts from fiction while building scholarship based on Africana history and African fighting knowledge. Some may think that mythology

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Roderick Bush, *The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 7.

is based on folklore, fables, fiction, or fantasy. However, Wayne Chandler wrote in *Ancient Future the Teachings and Prophetic Wisdom of the Seven Hermetic Laws of Ancient Egypt* that most of ancient history and its approaches are linear while falling prey to Westernized methodologies. It is within the mythology of a culture where a society tells the stories of their cultural heroes and forms “longstanding cultural and political tenets deemed significant by the constituency of a society. They can be found within the folklore and oral histories of societies throughout Africa.”<sup>15</sup> Chandler believes that scholarship on mythology studies needs a redefinition of the meaning of myths so it will allow a broad historical perspective than is traditionally applied to ancient belief systems. In “African antiquity, mythology was an ancient mode of thinking,” employing African philosophies, spiritual sciences, and epistemologies indigenous to specific African societies.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to understand the relationship between African martial arts, its origins, and its links between antiquity and the present, which created an African historical continuum that can be used to understand the earliest civilizations, including Africa’s Kush, Egypt, and Ethiopia, that brought forth knowledge to the world. Ashra Kwesi explains that the African origins of martial arts were known as “Montu Arts.” During his Kemet Nu “Know Thyself” study group tours to Egypt, Kwesi explained that African-centered thinking should not use the term “martial arts” in the Eurocentric sense because

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<sup>15</sup> Ofosuwa M. Abiola, *History Dances: Chronicling the History of Traditional Mandinka Dance* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Wayne B. Chandler, *Ancient Future: The Teachings and Prophetic Wisdom of the Seven Hermetic Laws of Ancient Egypt* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1999), 23.



it refers to Mars, the Roman god of war.<sup>17</sup> The term martial arts is universally accepted for fighting systems throughout the world; however, the term does not fully define the name of the fighting system used within traditional African societies.

During a trip to the Temple of Rameses III Kwesi explained that ancient Egyptians displayed the first African fighting systems and self-defense postures of African fighting forms on the pyramids' walls. Kwesi believes that Kushite soldiers were known to be from Ta-Seti, referred to the "Land of the Bow."<sup>18</sup> On the historical tour, Kwesi explained that African martial arts history could not be fully understood without starting with the Nuba people of the highlands of the Sudan or the Mursi, who are currently known for their *donga* fighting system tracing back to the earliest African civilizations.

Both Thomas Green and Ashra Kwesi reference the iron bracelets with sharpened edges used by Africans known as *bagussa*. The bracelets are found among groups in Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. The bracelets were used for self-defense using the arms to block the strikes of attackers using sweeping and blocking movements. Green also records traditional African stick-fighting cultures of the Zulus and the unarmed fighting cultures of African fighting systems. In Nigeria, wrestling was associated with sport and agricultural ceremonies.<sup>19</sup> Essential to the origins of African martial arts is its

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<sup>17</sup> Ashra Kewsi, "Ashra Kewsi Explains the African Origin of Martial Arts (Montu Arts)," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHR4ekIq2HQ> accessed January 1, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Without argument, modern mixed martial artists from the African continent are the most notable champions of the last decade. Ibrahim Blessing,

connection to African dance. African martial arts culture, dance, and drum culture developed in the early African societies.

Ofosuwa M. Abiola's *History Dances: Chronicling the History of Traditional Mandinka Dance* explains that dance throughout African culture maintains a historical core with a living history that has a "fluid record."<sup>20</sup> African dance systems are inseparable from the African societies that produced them, but are also affected by modernity even while maintaining traditional elements. Abiola contends "that African dances are portrayed within a 'system' adds multilayered dimensions to the potential various uses of this primary resource. These dance systems are comprised of auxiliary items that complement the dance and facilitate a more complete understanding of the dance message." African dance systems are egalitarian in nature and often include music accompanied by singing, drumming hand-clapping, and rituals. Moreover, African martial

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"Top 10 Best African UFC Fighters in the Last Decade" <https://www.africanvibes.com/top-10-best-african-ufc-fighters-in-the-last-decade/>. The Hausa people of Nigeria practice *Dambe*, an aggressive boxing style with military origins. Like other martial arts fighting styles, it also has a pre-fight ritual "before entering the sandpit, fighters began with a traditional ritual of having magical herbal mixture rubbed into incisions purposely made up and down fighters' bodies," which is believed to strengthen the fighter. Senegalese wrestling called *Laamb* has roots in the farming and fishing communities of Senegal. Both the *Laamb* and *Dambe* fighting systems utilizes the use of music played by procession instructions. Both fighting systems use drums and songs during the matches. The playing of instruments is not uncommon to other fighting systems found in Japan or China.

<sup>20</sup> Abiola, 16.

arts must be examined within traditional African societies that incorporated the African fighting system into their specific culture, which will give meaning and comprehension of African systems while demonstrating how African dance, drumming, and martial arts “convey messages from the past while creating and preserving the present.”<sup>21</sup>

African dance and African drumming were not separate from the combative training incorporated into the ethos of African fighting systems. “The African systems used drums and stringed instruments to create a rhythmic beat for fighting. Warriors, either individually or in groups, practiced using weapons, both for attacking and defensive movements, in conjunction with the rhythm from the percussion instruments.”<sup>22</sup> Ritual drumming and percussion usage were essential in training young warriors. African warriors used the dances to develop formational movements, footwork, and effective fighting techniques. “Although these training patterns have been dismissed as ‘war dances,’ expressive movement rather than martial drills, they actually played a central role in the training of African warriors.”<sup>23</sup>

Evidence of African drumming and military campaigns is not heavily documented. However, in the early African communities in North America there were elements of African dance, drumming, and fighting systems that drew their origins directly from continental African societies. The Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 consisted of enslaved Africans who shared elements of Congolese culture. During the early hours of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>22</sup> Green, *Martial Arts of the World*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

the morning on September 9, 1739, hundreds of enslaved Africans formed a military formation along the banks of the Stono River to plan their escape from bondage. While the White community attended church services, the Congolese started a rebellion that lasted into the night. The coordinated Africans were documented as using their “rhythmic cadence of African drumbeats, combined with cries for ‘Liberty!’...as they marched along the river, freeing fellow slaves.”<sup>24</sup>

Patrick Manning has documented that “another remarkable expressive-culture tradition that characterizes the Niger-Congo-speaking peoples is polyrhythmic drumming.”<sup>25</sup> Manning believes the use of polyrhythmic drumming is an African tradition that dates back many thousands of years. Moreover, different drumming societies created modifications in rhythmic forms, drumming patterns, performance styles, and cultural variations. The “talking drum” is one of the most distinctive drums found in Africa and throughout the African diaspora. The talking drum is used to send signals and messages to neighbor African communities. The talking drum produces a tonal sound with different inflections that imitate intonations using a call-and-response style between the drummer and the receiver or the audience.

During the Stono Rebellion, African drums were used to communicate with other Africans to join the rebellion. The beating of African drums served as a form of literacy

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<sup>24</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1999), 1786.

<sup>25</sup> Manning, 49.

and a common African vernacular understood by different ethnic groups from the same region. Within Bantu-speaking groups “ngoma” is used as a generic term for drums. “The ubiquity of this term indicates that the Bantu-speaking migrants had drums four or five thousand years ago. Since the Niger-Congo languages are far more ancient than their Bantu subgroup, it is likely that drums go much further back, as does the tradition of modifying drums and rhythms.”<sup>26</sup> The power and the strategic use of African drums in organizing rebellion among Africans led to the enactment of the Negro Act of 1740 that led to the abolition of the talking drum and the use of drumming during the gathering of enslaved Africans. “With the across-the-miles communication that talking drums gave Africans, those who rose up against slavery and utilized that technology stood a good chance of success. To destroy that military power, Europeans said drums—all drums—had to stop.”<sup>27</sup>

The study of African martial arts, including that connected to drumming, and Black martial artists in the United States of America must be understood, researched, and studied using an African diasporic methodological approach. Africa must be the intellectual starting point for Africana subjects. Black martial artists in the United States look toward Africa as a source of real or imaginative culture. Black martial artists in North America must be studied within an intersectional paradigm including race, class, gender,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>27</sup> Sule Greg Wilson, *The Drummers Path: Moving the Spirit with Ritual and Traditional Drumming* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1992), 21.

sexuality, and context within its environment.<sup>28</sup> Black martial artists and their specific martial arts systems were developed and formed due to the globalization of Asian martial arts while pursuing the knowledge of Africanity. It is during this junction of syncretized culture that Black martial artists developed authentic Black martial arts systems and Pan African fighting societies incorporating African and Africana cultures.

## **Ritualistic African Drumming, Martial Arts, and the Movement of the Force**

"1989 the number of another summer...sound of the funky drummer"<sup>29</sup>  
--Public Enemy

Ritualistic drumming and martial arts cultures have existed for thousands of years. T.J. Desch Obi places ritualistic drumming in the category of performance rituals. He believes that the drumming and dancing by "enslaved Africans and their descendants in North America united and defined themselves as a new community via performance rituals." He contends that "performance activities were nothing short of African-based community-forming and individual-empowering rituals."<sup>30</sup> Babatunde Olatunji states in the *Drummer's Path* that the role of the drum has played a vital part in the history of African people and the "lifestyle of African people at home and those brought to the 'New

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<sup>28</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan and James H. Sweet, eds., *The African Diaspora and the Disciplines* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Yusuf Jah, ed., *Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary: Times Rhymes & Mind of Chuck D, Vol. I: Public Enemy (1987-1994)* (Santa Monica, CA: KingDoMedia, 2005), 158.

<sup>30</sup> T.J. Desch Obi, *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2008), 93.

World' generations ago. *The Drummer's Path* reminds us that Africans came across the waters with more than one instrument, and that these music and Spirit sciences were used to continue the African celebration of life and sense of unity under strenuous (to say the least!) circumstances in a strange and foreign land."<sup>31</sup> Africa is not the only culture that used drums in its martial arts or societal cultures. In Japan, the taiko drum is characterized by its energetic playing style. The taiko drummer plays hard and fast, involving syncretized movements often identified with Japanese martial arts. In China, the lion and dragon dance also uses Chinese drums to create a combative approach to rhythm. The lion and dragon dancer uses drum patterns to coordinate movements and maneuvers while demonstrating a combative performance.<sup>32</sup>

African culture has also developed long-term drum cultures using a variety of drums. Even though there are unlimited types of African drums, this section focuses on two West African drums called the *djembe* and *dundun* because both of those drums were replicated in the African diaspora. The djembe is dated to the Malian Empire in the thirteenth century, and it was created by Numu blacksmiths. The djembe drum corps includes several drummers and a lead drummer who signal the other drummers with breaks: "Breaks are a signal, a call, or a break in the rhythm, that signifies that something different is to occur next."<sup>33</sup> Rhythms are played simultaneously and in polyrhythmic

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<sup>31</sup> Wilson, *The Drummer's Path*, xi.

<sup>32</sup> Colin McGuire, "The Rhythm of Combat: Understanding the Role of Music in Performances of Traditional Chinese Martial Arts and Lion Dance" in *MUSICultures*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2015), 1-23.

<sup>33</sup> Abiola, 52.

structures. The drummer has an established bond with the dancer. In martial arts, the dancer is a martial arts practitioner who uses ritualistic movements or katas, while following the energetic drummer's rhythms.

Ritualistic drumming and martial arts in the African diaspora were greatly affected by modernity. Modernity can be viewed as a societal shift away from traditional culture and values. However, both traditional African and African American cultures faced societal changes powered by a shift from an agrarian economy toward systems of capitalism, globally competitive markets, and globalization—all of which contained explicit and implicit forms of racism. After World War II, traditional African cultural traditions, Asian martial arts culture, and Black consciousness collided as Black identity became more defined with an emerging cultural movement of civil rights. Master drummer Sule Greg Wilson explains several guiding principles for performing traditional African and African diaspora music. He believes that there are striking parallels in martial arts and African drumming, including the use of breathing, posture, ambidexterity, peripheral awareness, and energy (chi).<sup>34</sup> Wilson also believes that there should be exploratory paths created between martial artists and drummers so that the practitioners can learn from each other.

Ofosuwa Abiola also reiterates the importance and impact of the drummer and dancer bond. African dancers and their "interaction is considered fruitful when the drummer anticipates which steps or body movements the dancer is going to implement before he/she executes them and the drummer plays accents for the movements

<sup>34</sup> Sule Greg Wilson, "Spirit, Drum, Martial Arts, and Time," 9/16/2018, [www.sulegregwilson.com/babas-blog](http://www.sulegregwilson.com/babas-blog), accessed December 1, 2019.



simultaneously as the dancer performs them."<sup>35</sup> Martial arts dance movements are performed in katas, which contain a depth of rhythmic energy. Wilson believes the drummer-martial artist relationship is laid by a rhythmic foundation that creates an energetic flow that allows the martial artists to transcend both time and space. Martial arts rituals are used to create group norms and to promote spirit across the ranks (unity), while instilling discipline and strengthening the subconscious mind.

Wilson defines rituals as a set of practices that institutes an elevated state of mind enhanced by a particular vibe: "Ritual changes brain waves, altering (expanding or narrowing) one's perception of interior and exterior reality. It is a universal power that unifies and instills significance."<sup>36</sup> Some drums are used to enhance spirituality through meditation and concentration. Wilson also believes that "some [drums] are 'born' through ritual."<sup>37</sup> Some drums are made using ritualistic methodologies, such as the Japanese taiko drum, which is created from particular trees, covered with special cattle skins. The Yoruba bata drums can only be played by initiated drummers.

Wilson has witnessed that traditional African music played with string instruments, drumming, or dance invokes a state of stillness similar to Zen Buddhists who uses chants and bells to generate stillness to reach their subconscious mind. Wilson also believes that African dancing can invoke the spirit through the use of music. The vibration of the music subconsciously controls the dancer. If the dancer releases the conscious mind and allows

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<sup>35</sup> Abiola, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, "Spirit, Drum, Martial Arts, and Time," 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.

the subconscious mind to flow, the movement of the dancer becomes effortless. The martial artist's kata is similar to dance; when the kata is performed with a Zen mindset, the energy of the martial artist flows through the kata beyond the conscious mind.

Ritualistic drumming and its connection to martial arts movements create a flow of movement. All martial arts forms or dances require rhythm because without rhythm, the martial arts forms will appear to be disjointed or artless: "Rhythm is an inherent property of movement where, even in daily activities, its coordinating factors are highly and frequently utilized to make work less arduous, go faster, or become pleasant."<sup>38</sup> The work songs of the chain gangs and the Negro spirituals sung during slavery are examples of semiotic movements and rhythm. The drummer inspires the martial artist to concentrate on the meaning of the kata or dance while embracing a deeper meaning of the movements performed. The relationship between the drummer and dancer creates a three-dimensional union consisting of energy, space, and rhythm.

## **BLACK POWER AND BLACK AGENCY IN MARTIAL ARTS**

"Tiger style Tae-Kwon-Do a style, the Black Panthers practiced  
—a lens in understanding the Panthers"<sup>39</sup>

The rise of Black consciousness in the 1960s influenced the institutionalization of Black martial arts programs in the United States. The Nation of Islam and the Black

<sup>38</sup> Omofolabo S. Ajayi, *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>39</sup> Richard S. Raya, "Might for Right: Martial Arts as a Way to Understanding the Black Panthers." *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*, volume 4, Issue 1, Article 7, 2015.

Panther Party advocated for self-defense programs in the Black community. Mary Aziz contends that the call for unarmed self-defense became necessary for the Black community development and for establishing community self-defense programs. Aziz believes the "Nation of Islam used martial arts and unarmed self-defense training to build autonomy in the United States" and the "Nation of Islam was the first Black organization to standardize martial arts training in its programming."<sup>40</sup>

During the years between 1955 and 1965, self-defense imagery, Black martial artists, and Black community self-defense organizations "received great invisibility in African American communities, government briefs, and press coverage."<sup>41</sup> The Nation of Islam served as the model for creating unarmed self-defense in Black Power organizations, community survival programs, and martial arts training academies. After 1965, Black nationalist groups incorporated martial arts and unarmed self-defense as a key feature in community programs. *In the Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X was asked "why is your Fruit of Islam being trained in judo and karate?" Malcolm X sensed the underlying influence of White supremacy and recalled saying: "An image of Black men learning anything suggesting self-defense seemed to terrify the white man. I'd turn their question around: 'Why does judo or karate suddenly get so ominous because Black men

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<sup>40</sup> Maryam K. Aziz, *Built with Empty Fists: The Rise and Circulation of Black Power Martial Artistry during the Cold War* (Dissertation: University of Michigan, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

study it?"<sup>42</sup> Judo and karate were studied across America in the Boy Scouts, at the YMCA, and throughout sports facilities in America. Black Nationalism and the Nation of Islam martial arts training provided a catalyst for promoting a self-sustaining martial arts culture.

Aziz considers "the Nation of Islam [to be] the first Black community and Black Nationalist organization to systematically practice martial arts. It was a progenitor and incubator for martial artists who filtered into other organizations such as the Congress of African People."<sup>43</sup> Other Black revolutionary groups such as the US Organization (1965), the Black Panther Party (1966), and the Black Karate Federation (1969) followed the advice of Malcolm X and the martial arts foundation provided by the Fruits of Islam. Martial arts and self-defense programs were designed for the protection of the Black community and individual self-defense. Aziz made the distinction that "Martial arts did not qualify as combat sports in the Nation of Islam."<sup>44</sup> Self-defense was not a sport; it was intended to be used as a tactic to protect the Nation of Islam against the United States policing forces. More importantly, martial arts training provided the preparation for securing an independent polity, allowed Black men to gain agency over their bodies, and enabled them to attain a sense of physical awareness. As a result, Aziz concluded,

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<sup>42</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), 245-246.

<sup>43</sup> Aziz, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

"Martial arts lessons became central for the vision of embodiment and Black Power."<sup>45</sup>

The Nation of Islam's mantra provided guidance for Black martial arts organizations.

Black Power scholar Richard S. Raya provides insight into the use of martial arts as a tactic of self-defense in the Black Panther Party. Raya was trained and practices Tiger-Style Tae Kwon Do, a style the Black Panthers practiced. Tiger-Style Tae Kwon Do is different from the Olympic style of fighting, particularly because Grandmaster Yun developed it to be a combat-oriented fighting style. Raya considers himself an insider because Tiger-Style Tae Kwon Do is found only in the Bay Area of California. Raya's introspective understanding of Tiger Style is based on the triad of Black Panther knowledge, Bay Area culture, and martial arts training-philosophy. He attests, "there are several ways in which my positionality affords me something of an 'insider' perspective, as well as numerous other ways in which my positionality renders me 'outsider.'"<sup>46</sup>

Raya provided a "historical and philosophical links between the foundations of Tiger-Style TKD and the martial arts/martial philosophy/conception of identity present within the Black Panthers." Raya believes that Tiger-Style Tae Kwon Do connects the historical experiences of the Tiger martial arts community, along with the Black Panthers' attempt to highlight "how the many aspects of the Black Panthers exist as manifestation of unified philosophy: 'The right to exist unassailed.'"<sup>47</sup> Raya's archival research shows

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>46</sup> Richard S. Raya, "Might for Right: Martial Arts as a Way to Understand the Black Panthers" in *Tapestries: Interwoven Voices of Local and Global Identities*, volume 4, issue 1 (2015), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2.

that the Black Panthers implemented a martial arts program in the Intercommunal Youth Institute as part of its curriculum and community-based programs. The program offered youth physical fitness, self-defense, and self-discipline. More importantly, Tiger-Style Tae Kwon Do influenced a Black fighting style unique to Oakland.

Black Power martial arts culture in California provides a West Coast historical narrative unknown to the general public. Community-based martial arts and Black Power identity also entered popular culture in the 1970s. A scene from *Enter the Dragon* featured famed Black martial artist Jim Kelly with Steve Muhammad and Donnie Williams, the founders of the Black Karate Federation (BKF). Their unique style of kempo karate is also represented by their mission and iconic Black nationalist karate patch. BKF promoted Black pride within Black martial arts culture and was formed to provide advocacy in sport karate tournaments to fight against racism in the sport. Steven Sanders also has links to the Nation of Islam where he became a member in 1972 and changed his name to Steve Muhammad. BKF is best known for the iconography of their Black Power karate patch. The patch is a gold fist with a red, black, and green band with a cobra at the forefront. The initials BFK are in red and black at the bottom of the patch symbolizing Black power and pride. Black martial arts culture did not start with the Black Power Movement. However, the rise in Black consciousness provided the foundation for forming unarmed self-defense communities and institutionalizing a Black martial arts culture.

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## The Authenticity of Black Marital Arts Systems in the United States of America

"like a swordfight. You must think first, before you move"  
 -- "The Mystery of Chessboxin"  
*Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers*<sup>48</sup>

Black martial art systems and practices have a long heritage and legacy rooted in traditional African fighting systems. Some Black martial artists have adopted or rediscovered traditional African fighting systems and implemented them into new martial arts systems with defined Africana fighting philosophies. In the book *Black Heroes of the Martial Arts*, acclaimed Black martial artist and actor Ron Van Clief asks the question, "Who are the Black heroes of the martial arts?"<sup>49</sup> For most Black martial artists, this question could be answered in two ways. First, they would name the teachers and masters they personally know and then identify with those they saw in the movies.

The 1970s witnessed the impact of Chinese martial arts films and the rise of the African-centered thought movement. Bruce Lee's 1973 release of *Enter the Dragon* featuring African American martial artists Jim Kelly and the 1979 release of the *Game of Death* featuring Kareem Abdul Jabbar placed Black martial artists in the "latest instances of popular cultural revolution as well as its aesthetic link to the decolonizing subjectivity

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<sup>48</sup> Wu-Tang Clan, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* "Da Mystery of Chessboxin"  
[https://ohhla.com/anonymous/wu\\_tang/enter\\_wu/mystery.wtg.txt](https://ohhla.com/anonymous/wu_tang/enter_wu/mystery.wtg.txt).

<sup>49</sup> Ron Van Clief, *The Black Heroes of the Martial Arts* (A & B Publishers Group, 1996), inside front cover.

in the latest stage of globalization."<sup>50</sup> Both films intersected the imagination of Black youth coming of age in the embryonic years of hip hop culture. Rap group Public Enemy used martial arts dance drills in the music video "Fight the Power," in which the drill team Security of the First World (S1W) used drill formations learned from the Nation of Islam (Fruits of Islam), while implementing martial arts dance moves. Rap group Wu Tang Clan also frequently utilized martial arts forms in their music videos.

M. T. Kato explained that the art forms of both *Jeet Kune Do* and hip hop share the same cultural expressions: "The flourishing individual expressions in hip hop and *Jeet Kung Do* are well embedded in the cultural foundations and historical legacies: the African culture for hip hop and Chinese culture for *Jeet Kung Do*."<sup>51</sup> Black martial artists were introduced to Asian martial arts by the post-World War II transnational Asian communities. However, by the end of the 1960s, a younger generation of Black martial artists had begun to implement Black consciousness into their worldview. Black martial artists used Asian martial arts to transition into African-centered martial arts and created authentic Black martial arts systems. At the intersection of Black martial arts exploration with traditional African dance, drum, and fighting cultures, a new authentic African-centered martial arts culture emerged in the United States of America.

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<sup>50</sup> M.T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 171.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.



Before I started to pursue a scholarly exploration of Black martial arts systems, I purchased a VHS tape titled *The World of African Martial Arts* from a Black bookstore in Norfolk, Virginia, in the early 2000s featuring the teachings of Kilindi Iyi, master instructor of the Ta-Merrian Institute in Detroit, Michigan. I had no idea at the time that the study of the VHS tape would inspire or expand my interest in the relationship between martial arts, African drumming, martial dance movements, and African philosophy.<sup>52</sup> Iyi's examination of African fighting systems reconnects Black martial artists to the traditional African fighting systems through dance, African drumming, philosophy, and the medicinal sciences of African traditional herbal medicine. Iyi's unique perspective infuses African traditional fighting cultures with Black consciousness.

In 2016, Jared Ball interviewed Iyi on his podcast *I Mix What I Like*. Iyi explained that his interest in the African martial fighting sciences coincided with the Black Power movement and influenced his interest in seeking an African identity.<sup>53</sup> Iyi attests that one of the most impactful teachers he met was Baba Ishangi, the founder of the Ishangi Family Dancers. It is during that connection in his pursuit for authentic African culture where his African consciousness was elevated by learning the foundation of African

<sup>52</sup> See Kilindi Iyi, "Empty Hands: World of African Martial Arts intro" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSCpiyAyQ\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSCpiyAyQ_0), see "Kung Fu Extravaganza at Howard University African Martial Arts" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqYKuIXDTy4>, accessed January 1, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Jared Ball, "Ahati Kilindi Iyi and the African Fighting Sciences," June 16, 2013. <https://imixwhatilike.org/2013/06/16/kilindi/> accessed January 25, 2020.

dance. Ishangi founded the Sankofa Society in 1973 in New York. The Ishangi African Dancers performed at the New York World's Fair in 1965 and twice for the World Body of the United Nations in 1965 and 1980. The Ishangi African Dancers are pioneers and cultural ambassadors in spreading African culture, history, philosophy, and African dance.

Iyi's pursuit of African fighting sciences caused him to seek out African martial arts practitioners from various African communities he met in America. He met a South African friend named Zukele, who taught him Zulu stick fighting, and he studied the Egyptian martial arts naboot after meeting Mohammad, a teacher of the Egyptian martial arts. Moreover, it was Iyi's travels to Senegal, Ghana, and Gambia and his association with Baba Adeboye from Nigeria who provided insight into Nigerian martial arts. Iyi learned that African martial arts systems were taught and learned differently in African societies than in other martial arts cultures. African martial arts training was not separate from the culture it was embedded within the daily life activities of the student.

It is customary in African American culture for young boys to engage in play fighting called slap-boxing. Slap-boxing is a playful free-form fight with two pugilists who attempt to touch their opponent's face with an open hand instead of a closed fist. The skills of the boys in the group determine an informal ranking order within the group. Slap-boxing is an informal method to learn or improve boxing skills and prepares the boys for self-defense using boxing skills. The same type of informal fighting or self-defense training can be found among the Kunene pastoral societies in Namibia. African pastoral societies are one example of how African martial arts training is embedded within African society's daily life.

The herding societies of the Kunene start training boys as early as four or five years old to manage calves and cattle greater in size and weight than themselves. The interaction with the herd at an early age trains the boys to “recognize individual pastoralists as dominant; yet, the natural tendency of cattle to continuously test those above them as they grew stronger necessitated the maintenance of dominance through aggressive behaviors with sticks.”<sup>54</sup> Herding sticks are the first tool used in herding, but they are also used as a weapon. Herding training provided the foundation for Kunene stick-fighting culture. Herding boys spend a long time idle when watching the herd during the day. During that idle time the boys used the long hours to establish their own hierarchy among themselves through stick fighting matches: “These matches were part of a lifelong maintenance of mastery of stick fighting through both the throwing of sticks and dueling with them,” and the practice allowed younger boys who were more skilled “to rise in the pecking order of the herd.”<sup>55</sup>

T.J. Desch Obi’s research of the pastoral communities supports Kilindi Iyi’s experiences of witnessing the relationship between African culture and combative training. In African societies the conventional term “martial arts” does not describe the combative training learned through the daily rituals, rites of passages, or work. Among pastoral young men the demonstration of combative skills played a role in courting behaviors to gain favor from young women. A game called *onhandeka* “consisted of fights between pairs of boys who wished to show off before the girls. Each pair fought another

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<sup>54</sup> Obi, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 31.

pair with knobkerrie sticks an even number of rounds, odd numbers being unlucky, until the vanquished pairs admitted defeat. Then each victor performed a jumping dance, called by the name of a favorite warrior, and challenged all other boys of his age group to fight him."<sup>56</sup> Stick fighting training also prepared the males to fight as a coordinated unit when they became adult soldiers.

Iyi's experiences studying different African combative sciences allowed him to develop a unique martial arts perspective blending Africa's systems to include the different martial dance moves learned through different African dance systems. The African dance to Ogun and its relationship connecting stick fighting and using the machete is an example. Within Iyi's training were African combative elements learned from Akan, the Yoruba, or Hausa, and Mende cultures. He described this syncretism: "I blend them all together. I see them as one and that's my own personal viewpoint as far as the martial arts of Africa."<sup>57</sup> The blending of African martial arts, philosophy, and cultures lead Iyi to develop the Ta-Merrian Institute.

Iyi chose the name of the Ta-Merrian Institute to honor an ancient African empire called Ta-Merri. Ta-Merri means "the loving earth" and it also represents the Kemetian

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas A. Green, "African Roots in the Martial Arts: An Interview with Kilindi Iyi." *InYo: Journal of Alternative Perspectives on the Martial Arts and Sciences*, Nov. 2004. [https://ejmas.com/jalt/2004jalt/jcsart\\_green\\_1104.html](https://ejmas.com/jalt/2004jalt/jcsart_green_1104.html), accessed December 1, 2019.

methodology of Ansar which is “the house of resurrection.”<sup>58</sup> Kemetian culture is an African-centered approach to tracing traditional African cultures origins to the Nile Valley civilizations and Kemet (Ancient Egypt) as its foundation. The concept of an African martial arts culture in the United States or in Africa serves to resurrect African martial arts elements, which are as universally compatible with the martial arts of Japan, China, or Korea. Iyi’s vision was to make African martial arts a part of African American martial arts culture as a relentless and viable part of the Black martial arts lexicon. Essentially, Iyi wanted to connect Africa to the African diaspora by encouraging Black martial artists to study African martial arts as a rich source for martial arts growth and enhancement.

Black martial arts culture has taken on many different dimensions within Black life. Martial arts culture also intersects Black activist circles and community activism. Balogun Ojetade, the founder of the Afrikan Martial Arts Institute and a Yoruba Ifa priest, combines West African martial systems and spirituality under the name *Egbe Ogun*, while seeking to promote African histories and culture. The goal of Ojetade’s institute was to “promote and preserve the traditional indigenous martial arts of Afrika, as conveyed through the system of Egbe Ogun; to focus on adults as well as children, in our educational activities; and to share the history and cultures of Afrika with our community, through demonstrations, lectures, workshops, classes, films, plays, and music.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Afrikan Martial Arts Institute, Siafu Movement <https://www.thepeoplesarmy.org/afrikanmartialarts>, accessed January 22, 2020.

The Afrikan Martial Arts Institute intended to build a strong community of martial artists who were knowledgeable, skilled practitioners of indigenous African martial arts or martial arts of the African diaspora. Inclusive within the martial arts system is the ability to sing, play the [African] instruments, execute the movements and techniques, and have knowledge of the roots, rituals, and traditions of Afrikan and Diasporan martial arts." The Egbe Ogun system utilizes four basic applications in its system: 1) Polyrhythmic application, 2) the Unbroken Circle, 3) The Wind Has One Name, and 4) Waste No Part of the Animal.

The *polyrhythmic application* is similar to the drum patterns used by African drummers. Polyrhythmic patterns are also indigenous to African American music, seeking to apply multiple strike patterns simultaneously in an offensive or defensive attack. In African American musical and religious communities, the "call and response" technique is often used to create interaction between the caller and responder. The *unbroken circle* seeks to use the opponent's force against him while adapting to the actions and rhythms of the opponent to create a never-ending circle of offense and defense. The *wind has no name* prepares the martial artists to recognize finite angles and to "further simplify combat by teaching that every block is a strike, and every strike is a block. Thus, when an Afrikan martial artist learns an offensive technique, he has, in effect learned a defensive technique."<sup>60</sup> The application of *waste no part of the animal* uses the philosophy

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

of economy of motion. In other words, a strike to the chin can be followed by a strike with an elbow to the chin.

Inclusive to the Egbe Ogun martial arts system is the relationship between martial arts and African spirituality. Balogun Ojetade teaches a double sword technique that also includes gripping and unarmed techniques against bladed weapons. In the Ifa spiritual system, Ogun is closely related to warfare. The craft of African blacksmiths who were Yoruba often gave Ogun rituals to protect their weapons during battle. Ogun statues are often seen with Ogun holding the sword. The Afrikan Martial Arts Institute is not a standalone organization; rather, it is a part of several organizations that provide the foundation for the Siafu Movement. This brings activism and martial arts under the umbrella of Black community activism. The Siafu or FTP Movement is “built on love, respect, loyalty, discipline, and principled unity. The mission is to raise political awareness and engage and inspire people to take an active role in building the community.”<sup>61</sup> The African-centered philosophy teaches Black citizens how to survive beyond basic self-defense systems or martial arts. The Siafu Movement is a holistic, African-centered survival movement that includes the Feed the People program, Mama’s Army, Siafu Youth Corps, and the Urban Survival Preparedness Institute are the programs that provide self-reliance and preparedness training as the foundation for Black martial culture.

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<sup>61</sup> FTP Movement, *Siafu Movement*, <https://www.thepeoplesarmy.org/ftpmovement>, accessed January 26, 2020.

## CONCLUSION

"African Warriors Marooned in the Swamp" – Latif Tarik<sup>62</sup>

African diasporic scholarship has explored and researched many cultural traits of Africana culture. However, Black martial arts systems in the United States and their connection to African cultures whether they were adopted or rediscovered, is a recent phenomenon. Captured Africans brought to the United States their fighting systems, forms, tactics, and African martial arts culture. Obi explained, "African combat traditions in the Americas, where martial arts continued to play a key role in the society of enslaved Africans, albeit in radically new ways."<sup>63</sup>

Due to the volatile nature of slavery, African fighting sciences were taught in secret within maroon communities, performance circles, ritualistic initiations, and secret societies. The most skilled practitioners were known by rank within the enslaved

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<sup>62</sup> This quotation by Latif Tarik is based on studying marooned societies on the Atlantic Coast, particularly the Maroons of the Dismal Swamp. Maroons were often runaways who learned combative skills in Africa or improvised skills adoptable in the New World.

<sup>63</sup> Obi, 13.



community. The movie *Daughters of the Dust* featured the legendary Igbo Landing, a community of captured Africans with roots in the Biafran fighting traditions. The film contains several scenes where two Igbo descendants are wrestling. African wrestling styles varied by regions: Wolof *laamb*, Igbo *mgba*, or Yoruba *gidigbo*, "each with distinctive techniques and formats" passed down from the ancestors to younger generations within the enslaved community.<sup>64</sup> As African wrestling techniques transformed throughout the generations, new styles were created. The most popular form was the "kicking a wrap" style, where practitioners were known to be practicing well into the twentieth century.

Most modern-day Black martial artists did not know about their African military utility or martial arts culture when most began to practice Asian martial arts. However, the Black Power Movement, African Independence Movement, and a return to traditional African culture enticed some Black martial artists also to return to the source of African fighting sciences. One of the tenets of traditional African diaspora studies is the "Return to Africa."<sup>65</sup> It was traditional African practitioners that most sought out to teach them African martial arts. Black martial artists did not abandon Asian martial arts but used African and Asian martial arts to create new and authentic Black fighting systems. Since the days of Black martial artists such as Jim Kelly, Grandmaster Moses Powell,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>65</sup> See Harris, *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*.

Grandmaster Duncan, and Billy Blanks along with movie stars such as Wesley Snipes and Michael Jai White, martial arts have been a part of Black popular culture.

Black martial arts scholarship is forcing Black martial art culture to be recognized within the broader spectrum of American popular culture. Black martial arts culture is legendary and has lived in the margins of society before scholars and researchers recognized its origins, authenticity, and staying power. Professor Mo, also known as Mahaliel Bethea, attests that Black American cultural innovation laid the foundation for 52 hand blocks, a Black martial arts system, commonly seen in Wu-tang Clan's rap videos and utilized by some mixed martial artists. Professor Mo believes the system is derived from the genetic memory of Black people.

Professor Mo understands historically that "a lot of fighting systems were used in fights that took place on plantations. Plantation owners would take their slaves from place to place and let people gamble on the fights. So slaves did have a form of fighting."<sup>66</sup> Black martial arts culture has embraced its African roots, while experiencing various levels of modernity. Many African cultural roots found their way back into Black martial arts culture. African dance and drum culture has become essential to elevating Black consciousness and in inciting African sensibilities. African dance and drummer cultures have also experienced changes in modernity, while staying grounded in traditional African drum and dance cultures.

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<sup>66</sup> Robert W. Young, "52 Blocks: Art of Africa, Not 'Art of Incarceration,'" <https://blackbeltmag.com/arts/western-european-arts/professor-mo-everything-to-know-about-52-blocks>.

The challenge of studying Black martial arts systems and creating scholarship and historiography is similar to studying African dance history. Ofoosuwa Abiola writes that the challenge of writing an African dance history is often difficult because the wealth of African history is housed within traditional African culture and, “consequently, the dances can be used as an African-derived primary source for writing African history.”<sup>67</sup> The same can be said about Black martial art systems in North America. Recent scholarship and Black martial arts research must use interdisciplinary historiography in African diaspora studies, African history, cultural anthropology, performance studies, and field research. The practitioners of Black martial arts, its experts, and master teachers cannot be limited to the interpretations of academicians.

In the media, most people see only Asian martial arts as being legitimate forms of martial arts systems. However, traditional African martial arts are being sought out by other martial artists outside of Africa. The 52-hand block system, which has its origins in New York City, also has practitioners in Europe. Many scholars are slowly accepting the research of Black fighting systems with origins in Africa. Scholars such as Michael Gomez, John Thornton, and T.J. Desch Obi have laid the foundation for historical inquiry.

This essay attempts to show how Black martial arts systems in the modern era have African roots, utilize Africanity, and display authentic martial arts principles rooted in a Black consciousness with Africana sensibilities. Several cultural streams in the media, music, performance arts, and the fighting arts have contributed to the growth of Black

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<sup>67</sup> Abiola, 2.

martial artists. Despite the popularity of Mike Tyson in Chinese martial arts movies, the martial arts roles of Wesley Snipes and Michael Jai White, Black martial artists have not reached the popularity of Chinese martial artists in the film industry.

However, the subculture of Black martial artists is creating a resurrection of the African warrior spirit. Black martial arts culture provides the Black community with a mechanism to defend themselves, and more importantly, the higher principles associated with martial arts instill valuable principles embedded within the warrior code. A Japanese proverb says, "For a Samurai to be brave he must have a bit of Black blood."<sup>68</sup> If this proverb is true, it means that throughout the ages the African warrior and the Black martial artists have always engaged and sustained a martial culture.<sup>69</sup> The African martial artist has received a reemergence in international popular culture. The book *African Samurai The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary Black Warrior in Feudal Japan* and the Netflix anime series, *Yasuke* has created a great interest in Yasuke's life. Little is known

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<sup>68</sup> Runoko Rashidi, *The Global African Community: Travel Notes* (San Antonio: Runoko Rashidi, 2005), 32; Geoffrey Girard and Thomas Lockley's *African Samurai: The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary Black Warrior in Feudal Japan*, 2019; "Yasuke: The Legendary the African Samurai," and N Series, Anime Series, *Yasuke* .

<sup>69</sup> This quote has been a myth for years. However in the recent book *African Samurai: The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary Black Warrior in Feudal Japan* (2021) and the Netflix anime series *Yasuke* dispels the myth and places the Black samurai experience in historical context. Race and identity has a long history, and the Black/African interaction is one that has had some influence from the time of Yasuke to today's modern Japan. The article "Japan's Diverse Olympic Stars Reflect a Country That's Changing (Slowly), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/world/asia/japan-olympics-diversity.html>.

about the life of Yasuke before arriving in Japan in the 1500s, as one biography notes, “Most Japanese people had never seen an African man before. Some believed he was a god. Others saw him as the black-skinned Buddha.”<sup>70</sup> The mythology of the Black martial artist is brought to life and provide additional perspectives to the African origins of martial arts and the Black experience.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is Patrick Manning’s understanding between the relationship of African American culture and African Diasporic culture? Why should readers examine Black martial artists in North America within the foundation of traditional African culture?
2. Explain the relationship between martial arts and ritualistic drumming. How did modernity affect African Diaspora culture, particularly African martial arts and drumming?
3. The Nation of Islam was the first Black organization to implement unarmed self-defense training in their organization, and Malcolm X advocated for Black people to learn Judo and Karate. Why do you think Black communities embraced martial arts during the Black Power Movement? Name some examples from the essay of Black martial artists who inspired Black consciousness and social activism.

### Writing Prompt

In a 500-word essay that asserts your main point, evaluates evidence, and sets forth an argument in a clear, concise, and compelling manner, explain how has this chapter changed your understanding or perception of African American participation in American martial arts culture.

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<sup>70</sup> Thomas and Lockely and Geoffrey Girard, *African Samurai The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary Black Warrior in Feudal Japan* (Hanover Square Press: Ontario, 2021). Quote is on the back cover of the book.