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Sacred Imagery and the Sacralisation of Violence in the Martial Arts

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Abstract

Engaging in martial combat, whether for military, self-defence or cultivation purposes, is taken to sensitise practitioners towards existential issues which in turn enliven potential religio-spiritual experiences and awakenings. In this paper, we





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draw on Girard's (1977) *Violence and the Sacred*, and in particular his proposition that, "religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion" (Girard, [1977] 2005: 25) to examine sacralisation processes in the traditional martial arts with a particular focus on highlighting how violence, sacralised through sacred imagery, is used as a structuring force to instill dispositions that counter ubiquitous human tendencies towards unfettered violence and violent vengeance. We highlight the phenomenon and function of sacred imagery used in martial arts with very different cultural, ethnic, and spiritual influences, specifically: Japanese Karate, Korean Taekwondo, Brazilian Capoeira and Mexican Xilam. For authenticity, each section is written by an experienced scholar-practitioner of the art and combines literary, empirical, and biographical reflection. Despite these variations, we identify two modalities of sacred imagery use. The first is representational imagery used as sacred signifiers which embed the art in a tradition of sacred attachment. The second form of sacred imagery is metaphorical discourse which is designed to invoke creative visualisations aligning practitioners with idealised experiential states taken to have sacred (as well as practical) value in relation to combat. We conclude that the use of sacred imagery in these ways becomes part of an affective body pedagogy used by the traditionalist martial arts to transfer valued knowledge through the corporeal medium to offset and sacralise violent tendencies. It is qualified that in practice, this sacralisation process involves complex entanglements of the cultural origins, practitioner interpretation and the contemporary context of the martial art in question. The outcome is an evolving sacralisation process which rests in constant tension with the underlying problems initiated by the ubiquitous body-in-conflict problem and the propensity for violence and violent vengeance that the learning of combative skills might otherwise unleash in the body and onto society.

Keywords

Martial Arts | Spirituality | Religion | Imagery | Sacred

1. Introduction: The sacralisation of violence

The sacred has been the subject of significant ongoing academic investigation in the social sciences and humanities focusing on various aspects of religion and spirituality (Eliade, 1959; Morgan, 2005; Marshal 2010; Yelle, 2012; Kim, 2013; Moser and Feldman, 2014; Yi and Silver, 2015; Lim Tae-seung, 2015; Nancy, 2013; Morgan, 2017). However, it is Girard, (1979) who focused most acutely on the relationships between the sacred and the violent and this paper will implicate Girard's thesis for the understanding of cultures of combat and martial arts specifically. According to Engler and Gardiner (2017: 617), "published discussions of the 'sacred' already arrive at the table with semantic presuppositions." They clarify that these assumptions are broadly reducible to four positions; the "ineffable sacred, the experienced sacred, the polarized sacred and the contextualized sacred," (Ibid: 617). The *ineffable* sacred holds that the "the sacred cannot be spoken of..." (ibid: 617), it is "an ontological phenomenon that transcends signification" (Lynch, 2012: 15)" (Cited in Engler and Gardiner, 2017: 617). The *experienced* sacred, "is apprehended directly, by a phenomenological feel, rather than indirectly by a discursive description" (Ibid: 620). The *polarised* sacred "means what it means in opposition to 'profane,' through this mutual relation" (Ibid: 625). Finally, the *contextualised* sacred, posits the "meaning of 'sacred' as tied in different ways to specific contexts" (Ibid: 629). We concur with Engler and Gardiner that while each viewpoint has its merits, the polarised and contextualised views of the sacred offer most analytical promise so long as they are approached, non-referentially, holistically and externalistically.¹

The assumptions highlighted above help clarify positions taken by previous research on the relations between the sacred and the profane in 'everyday' activities such as the traditional martial arts (see for example, Cox 2003, Henning, 1999; Brown, Molle and Jennings, 2009; Jennings, Brown and Sparkes, 2010; Molle, 2010; Benesch, 2014; Finlayson, 2015; Tuckett, 2017; Oosterling, 2019; Cibotaru, 2021). In what follows, we are guided by these assumptions, and in particular an orientation towards a more fully contextualised, non-referential and holistic analysis of sacred imagery in a range of traditional martial arts. We consider this set of assumptions important, because as Nancy's (2013: 153) declares, "the ordinary supplies a point of access to the sacred because the sacred is itself one of the nomadic folds of the ordinary." Nancy's polarised and contextualised view critically opens up the ineffable and helps us talk about relations helping us to identify meaning, process and function of sacralisation in the traditional martial arts. Although, we do not agree with the notion of the ineffable sacred, as scholar-practitioners of various martial arts, we do acknowledge the experienced sacred as an embodied phenomenon with

¹ Externally referenced concepts build their meanings from empirical, publicly referenced sources rather than taken to be a quality internal to the phenomenon. Referential understandings point specifically to the phenomena itself, whereas non-referential understandings point more generally to the phenomena such as what it is not, what it opposes and so on. Holistic understandings try to encompass a broad reading of the context of usage of a term such as sacred and takes on board a complex range of possible meanings.



important affective implications for the constitution of culture, although we recognise the difficulties of attempting to represent embodied experience through language.

These considerations link to Paden's (2000, 221: cited in Engler and Gardiner 2017: 632) work. Paden considers, the sacred is systemic cultural *order* that needs understanding as a *structuring force*:

Sacred order is a broader concept than religion. It is not a uniquely religious category...It is a structuring force, in a primordial sense, in every system on which some community's or individual's life depends. ... In only focusing on ... the revelatory nature of objects, phenomenologists of religion have typically ignored ... the sacrality of the system itself.

While we may, phenomenologically speaking, experience the sacred, sacred experiences, like all experiences, are only possible to be re-presented by language, and are thus always different from experiences themselves and thus we must be cautious about *reducing* sacred experience to linguistic explanation. Nevertheless, the language of representation becomes extremely important analytically as it shows cultural attempts to impose meaning and structure on experience. The idea of the sacred (experience) as a structuring force is empirically in evidence in relation to the traditionalist martial arts. Over the course of their ongoing development, traditional martial arts have become deeply interlaced with culture, religion and spirituality, becoming highly contextualised expressions of and justifications for what might otherwise might simply be understood as profane and vulgar forms of interpersonal violence (actual and symbolic). *Part* of the reason for this is as Brown, Jennings and Pedrini (2019: 300) argue that the traditional martial arts emerge from *cultures of combat*, which are:

A cultural phenomenon containing particular culturally relevant responses to the ongoing, lived body problems created by interpersonal human conflict and incorporate a myriad of styles of bodily usage involving mixes of dominating, disciplined, mirroring and communicative bodies.²

In this article, we would like to develop the analysis of the "universal relational body-in-conflict problem" (Ibid, 300), with particular reference to the meanings, processes and function of the sacred and sacralisation through the use of sacred imagery in the traditional martial arts (although elements of our argument may pertain to other cultures of combat (such as sport combat and self-defence systems) as well as the sacralisation of aspects beyond imagery. In extending this analysis we draw together the above notion of interpersonal human conflict as a body problem with Girard's (1977) *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard's thesis is built on the assumption that, "religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion"

² Ideal types of bodily usage were originally theorised by the sociologist Arthur Frank in his 1991 chapter "For a sociology of the body: An analytical review". As a heuristic it has proven useful to dissect the relationships between body-self and others.



(Girard, [1977] 2005: 25), additionally, that, “the sacred embraces all those forces that threaten to harm man [sic] or trouble his peace” (Ibid: 61). In brief, we see strong parallels with Paden’s point of the sacred as a structuring force, the universal relational body-in-conflict problem and Girard’s unnerving thesis that human culture is universally and ubiquitously built out of human tendencies towards violence and vengeance, and the existential issues this raises:

Vengeance, then, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process. Every time it turns up in some part of the community, it threatens to involve the whole social body. There is the risk that the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size. The multiplication of reprisals instantaneously puts the very existence of a society in jeopardy, and that is why it is universally proscribed. (Girard, [1977] 2005: 15)

This ubiquitous, visceral tendency towards escalating violence through vengeance is, for the first time in human history, much clearer to see according to Girard (and we would suggest that 45 years later it is even more apparent) due to the relative decline of Western religious persuasiveness and the rise of science and technology through the 20th century involving the use of the disciplines to industrialise warfare - with potentially catastrophic, even apocalyptic consequences:

Today the reign of violence is made manifest. It assumes the awesome and horrific form of technological weaponry. These weapons, as the “experts” blandly inform us, are what is keeping the whole world more or less in line. The idea of “limitless” violence, long scorned by sophisticated Westerners, suddenly looms up before us. Absolute vengeance, formerly the prerogative of the gods, now returns, precisely weighed and calibrated, on the wings of science. And it is this force, we are told, that prevents the first planetary society, the society that already encompasses or will soon encompass the whole of humanity, from destroying itself. (Ibid: 253)

Girard surmises that, “if vengeance is an unending process, it can hardly be invoked to restrain the violent impulses of society. In fact, it is vengeance itself that must be restrained” (Girard, [1977] 2005: 17). Subsequently, Girard’s thesis explores, the *hypothesis of substitution*, where a surrogate victim is sacrificed (actually or symbolically), or other substituted processes are introduced to break the otherwise unending process of violence and retribution. Importantly, this substitution process is often ‘sacralised’ and symbolic as well as material and operates in cultures as “an instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence” (Girard, [1977] 2005: 18, 21) identifies three broad forms of substitution, “(1) preventive measures in which sacrificial rites divert the spirit of revenge into other channels; (2) the harnessing or hobbling of vengeance by means of compensatory measures, trials by combat, etc., whose curative effects remain precarious; (3) the establishment of a judicial system—the most efficient of all curative procedures.” In our view, the paradox of vengeance (i.e., using forms of restricted violence to quell escalating vengeance violence risks producing more violence) parallels the paradox of the martial arts (training people to



perform restricted, sanctioned violence to defend themselves risks producing more violence) (see, for example, Reid, Croucher, 1983; Domaneschi, 2021).

Consequently, we can see that the sacralising function often observed within the traditional martial arts is an exemplar of the substitution of rituals and practices at the symbolic and sacred level that are more likely to be effective forms of violence and vengeance prevention. This, we contend, is one of the primary underlying functions of the widespread use of symbolic sacred imagery – to tame, sacralise (or civilise) and ultimately reduce the potential for the savage brutality of unfettered violent vengeance in cultures of combat (a cultivation process which we contend is responsible, in part, for turning combative cultures into martial *arts* cultures). Examples include, substitutions in the form of strict etiquettes and rules surrounding violent engagement, the delimitation of techniques that may be learned and used in specific contexts (e.g. sport and combat variants of techniques) and the use of metaphor, simile and iconography for observational movement analysis that aestheticises or spiritualises violence at the same time as providing a affective pedagogy to convey embodied experience (the imagery of fighting snakes, cranes, monkeys, pumas and tigers are illustrative of this). Importantly, the connection of violent acts with spiritual and religious principles, redefines these acts as something more meaningfully legitimised. Fighting for fun, egotistical, or financial reward becomes vulgar, whereas fighting for a cause beyond one's own immediate gain is morally valorised evoking dispositions of the 'warrior spirit' and chivalry (see, for example, Nosanchuk, 1981; Reid, Croucher, 1983; Fields, 1991; Bolelli, 2008).

Following Barthes (1972), this process can also be identified as one of 'myth making' in which the image as object (the signifier) and the meaning of that object (the signified) combine to form a sign which is then re-appropriated through a second order mythical signification which becomes the myth. A good example of this is provided by the Wado-Ryu Karate style whose symbol is a fist and a dove. The signifiers (fist and dove) combine with the signified (violence and peace) to appropriate the mythologised (sacralised) idea of the 'way of harmony'. However, this harmony is achieved through a controlled and legitimated (potential) use of violence. In this way, violence becomes *sacralised* as a mythological category of violence legitimised by specific cultural beliefs and practices. Cultural re-appropriations of this sort are put the myth to use as a moral compass guiding practitioners on aspects such as how violence can legitimately occur within specific contextual parameters 'appropriate' to that social, cultural, historical and political context (such as to defend oneself with sufficient, but not unrestrained violence, when one might use violence to protect the weak or elderly from harm and, importantly, how (and if) these actions fit with a code of the martial artist (such as 'do' or bushido codes). There are also broader spiritual allegiances such as Buddhism, Taoism (Allen, 2014) and so on



Image 1: Wado Ryu
Karate symbol



stabilising these myths. Importantly though, these symbolic processes of substitution through sacralisation and mythologisation have to be translated at the embodied level, because it is at this level that violence remains very real and difficult to control. This threat, is intrinsically understood by many martial arts teachers:

Once aroused, the urge to violence triggers certain physical changes that prepare men's [sic] bodies for battle. This set toward violence lingers on; it should not be regarded as a simple reflex that ceases with the removal of the initial stimulus. Storr remarks that it is more difficult to quell an impulse toward violence than to rouse it, especially within the normal framework of social behavior. (Girard, ([1977] 2005: 2)

As previously mentioned, one of the most powerful 'mythologies' concerning engaging in real combat is that it is often considered to enliven religio-spiritual experiences and awakenings due to the existential issues raised by the universal relational body-in-conflict problem involved. These culturally constructed relations between mortal combat and the sacred are often given 'form' through the use of sacred imagery which act as non-referential conduits to develop practitioners' sacralised sensibilities above and beyond those carnal, visceral impulses towards violence and vengeance. Borrowing from Elias (1969), symbolic imagery used in this way thus becomes an instance of what Shilling (2017) refers to as 'body pedagogics' to transfer the mythologised dispositions appropriated by imagery into the body of the practitioner. These 'civilising' dispositions forge part of what Brown and Jennings (2013) refer to as the *martial habitus* at the same time as embedding that culture's specific set of values and orientations towards violence and the sacred (amongst other things) into the individual. Pedrini, Brown and Navarini (2021) came to similar conclusions in terms of how the pedagogies of political somatics operated in Italian box popolare. Returning to Padden (2000), theoretically, we can begin to see how the sacred and its use in traditional martial arts cultures is very much a structuring force operating to install a sacred order, functioning to substitute or at least temper, violent, vengeant dispositions.

In what follows, we highlight the phenomenon and function of sacred imagery used in martial arts from very different cultural, ethnic and spiritual traditions: Japanese Karate (presented by Simon), Korean Taekwondo (presented by Jungjoo), Brazilian Capoeira (presented by David C), and Mexican Xilam (presented by George). As noted, for authenticity, each section is written by an experienced scholar-practitioner of the art in question. Reflecting on the varied nature of our ongoing research into these arts as scholar-practitioners, the example sections and subsections that follow make use of textual, literary, ethnographic, interview and biographically reflective data (as the sacred can also be experienced in a subjective sense, these sections do reflect the subjectivities of each of the authors) alongside images of vivid symbols (the representational imagery) in each of the martial arts covered. Through these illustrations, we explore the two modalities of sacred imagery use identified above in greater detail and how they sacralise violence.



The first form of representational imagery is that used as a sacred signifier which embed the art in a tradition of sacred attachment and the second are metaphorical discourses designed to invoke creative visualisations aligning practitioners with experiential states taken to have sacred (as well as practical) value.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the use of sacred imagery becomes part of an affective body pedagogy used by the traditionalist martial arts to transfer valued knowledge (dispositions) through the corporeal medium to offset vengeant violent tendencies that otherwise might be unleashed by introducing the body to fighting practices. It is qualified that in practice, this sacralisation processes - as a structuring force - will involve complex entanglements of the cultural origins, practitioner interpretation and the contemporary context of the martial art in question. Therefore, the outcome is an ongoing iterative, ideographical process that reconstructs and evolves individuals and the traditional martial arts themselves and rests in constant tension with the underlying problems inaugurated by the ubiquitous body-in-conflict problem and the propensity for violence and violent vengeance that the learning of combative skills might otherwise unleash.



2. Creating Sacred Practices and Imagery in (UK-based) Shotokan Karate-Do (Simon)

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Ever since an explosion of growth and interest in the 1960s, the collective Japanese martial arts (budo/bujutsu) remain an incredibly popular physical activity across the United Kingdom for many thousands of practitioners. Of these martial arts, the various styles of karate-do remain some of the most widely practised martial arts, with Scotland recently reporting karate as the fastest growing sport for women and girls (Scottish Government, 2017). Out of these numerous styles, Shotokan karate-do, of which I am a practitioner, enjoyed an influx of professional instructors sent by the Japanese Karate Association (JKA) in the mid-1960s. It included such notable individuals as Kanazawa Hirokazu, Enoeda Keinosuke, Kase Taiji and Shirai Hiroshi. With the establishment of a distinct link to the Japanese homeland, these teachers brought with them the customs, training practices and social conducts of another nation into the heart of the UK dojo, which would go on to permeate across the country as future generations of instructors spread further and wider. The result of such an origin, and a desire to maintain a sense of 'authentic lineage' (Brown, Jennings, 2011; Bowman, 2016), has led to numerous components associated with karate-do and/or Japanese culture which could be said to have been granted 'sacred' status among many current practitioners and teachers. For this discussion, the focus will be on two such elements; practical and symbolic/philosophical. Specifically, these will be a brief examination of the use of the training method 'step-sparring' (kohon-kumite), and the sacred image of a 'black belt' practitioner.

Step sparring

Step-sparring are prearranged compliant exercises involving 5-step sparring (gohon-kumite), 3-step sparring (sanbon-kumite) and 1-step sparring (ippon-kumite), with 5-step sparring being one of the first forms of partner-based training newcomers to karate will experience and one of the primary requirements for typically the first two or three grading tests undertaken.

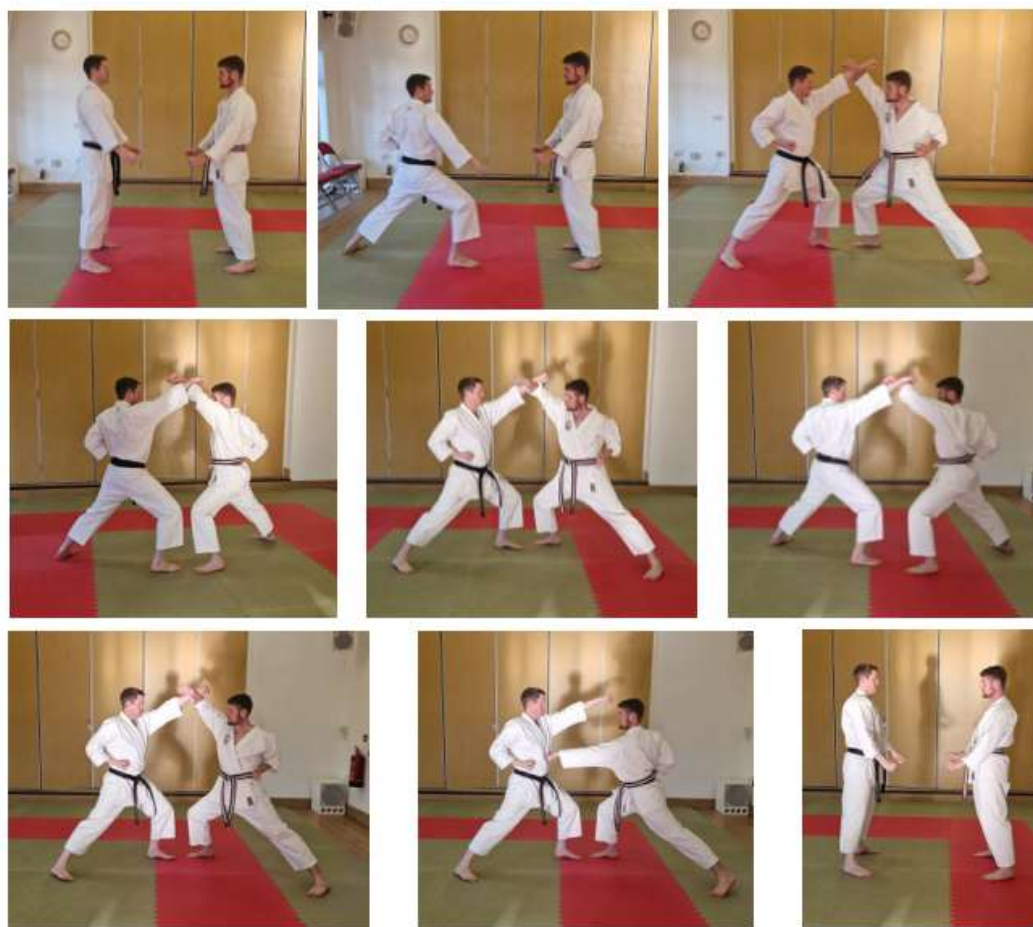


Image 2: 5-Step Sparring (Gohon Kumite)

5-step sparring practice consists of a pair of practitioners facing off against one another, alternately taking on the roles of attacker (tori) and receiver (uke), using five consecutively stepping punches to either the head or body being defended with the corresponding blocking technique. On the final defence, the receiver counter punches with a reverse punch to the body, both then return to the 'ready' position and the role reverses. 3-step sparring differs in using a different attack for each step



(punch to head, punch to body, front kick to body) with three corresponding block techniques, and 1-step offering only a prescribed attack with the defence being entirely up to the receiver. These are undertaken in what is called kihon format; basic or fundamental form, with large stances and held final positions. Importantly, for this thesis, the step sparring pedagogy reveals the process of sacralisation of violence. Each punch, kick and block become formalised and ritualised in a manner which allows teachers to install appropriate reactions and onto what are profane acts of violent attacks and justified counter attacks. The sacralisation process thus mythologises not only the specific techniques but also the pedagogy of their attainment.

This method of training has existed from the earliest days of Shotokan karate's introduction to mainland Japan and is likely heavily influenced by the judo methods of partner training owing to the relationship between Funakoshi Gichin and Kano Jigoro³, and is subsequently a method brought to the UK by the Japanese instructors, becoming widely considered a fundamental part of karate pedagogy. For decades this has remained the case; however, more recently, popular karate instructors such as Iain Abernethy have come to question the practicality of this as a training method and have begun to remove it as a practice in their clubs/organisations in favour of other, perhaps more progressive, exercises (practicalkatabunkai, 2021; Allen, n.d.). In short, those seeking to expose the lack of practical effectiveness of these techniques are in effect seeking to demythologise the violence in step sparring and unleash Karate's destructive potential. This increasing criticism has seen two diametrically opposed camps emerge, with one firmly removing the use of step-sparring and denouncing any meaningful practical benefits to its continuation, and the other fervently its defender as a part of 'traditional' karate practice. As an observer not firmly in either camp, in the case of the latter group the overriding impression is that they have elevated the practices that go back to the earliest traceable UK lineage (the instructors of the 1960s) to that of 'sacred' practices of a 'traditional' martial art. Many of the Japanese martial arts in the UK typically split into two parallel groups; one heavily focused on the sport component, and another seeking to maintain a more 'martial' approach (commonly considered the traditionalists). However, karate is notorious for its divisions, within divisions, within divisions, often caused by tiny differences of view/practice of things considered as 'sacred' practices to the art.

Removing practices such as step-sparring can be seen by some as damaging the sacred, traditional ways of karate and making it into something other than that which it was and should be. There is also the consideration that in doing so it undermines the competency of those revered teachers of the past, the origin of the art itself, and the culture of the people that created it, where many Western practitioners desire to (positively) imitate, understand and appreciate aspects of the culture and history of their chosen martial art's origin (Malmo and Moiseichik, 2017). The dilemma that seems to exist, and perhaps the reason something as simple as step-sparring can



³ Founders of Shotokan Karate-do and Judo respectively

become a contentious issue, is at what point does changing practices and methods within a style of karate make it no longer considered 'pure'? Perhaps the elevation of pedagogy to 'sacred' status is indicative of a desire to maintain a sense of authenticity (at the expense of developmental evolution?).

The black belt

On a slightly more ethereal and philosophical plane is the notion of the highly coveted black belt. Symbolism is very strong within the Japanese martial arts, particularly uniformed and belted martial arts like karate, where status and standing are a very visible commodity. For those within the martial arts much is often discussed about what a black belt 'means'. Amongst karate instructors, it is common to hear such phrases as "a black belt is just a white belt that never gave up," "having a black belt and being a black belt are two different things," "a black belt must be earned, not given," amongst other such similar comments. The signified and the signifier here combine to create a mythology, a special discourse, as illustrated by Master Nishiyama Hidetaka (n.d.):

The black belt is an award or honor given to the modern knight or samurai who has sacrificed many hours in disciplining and honing his [sic] body and mind to achieve the epitome of physical and mental attainment. The black belt is the symbol of an expert.

The prominent symbolism of a martial art black belt is evident in how readily even those unfamiliar with martial arts can associate this with a top-level practitioner (such as when seen in TV or film). However, there are counter narratives to this mythologised discourse. In their book on successful, visionary companies, Collins and Porras (2005) tell a fable related to the black belt:

"Before granting the belt, you must pass one more test," says the sensei. "I am ready," responds the student, expecting perhaps one final round of sparring.

"You must answer the essential question: What is the true meaning of the black belt?"

"The end of my journey," replies the student. "A well-deserved reward for all my hard work."

The sensei waits for more. Clearly, he is not satisfied. Finally, the sensei speaks. "You are not yet ready for the black belt. Return in one year."

A year later, the student kneels again in front of the sensei. "What is the true meaning of the black belt?" asks the sensei.

"A symbol of distinction and the highest achievement in our art," says the student. The sensei says nothing for many minutes, waiting. Clearly, he is not



satisfied. Finally, he speaks. "You are still not ready for the black belt. Return in one year."

A year later, the student kneels once again in front of the sensei. And again the sensei asks: "What is the true meaning of the black belt?"

"The black belt represents the beginning - the start of a never-ending journey of discipline, work, and the pursuit of an ever-higher standard," says the student.

"Yes. You are now ready to receive the black belt and begin your work."

The message of this story even has a similar tale told amongst martial artists that the reason a black belt (commonly made of silk) fades and frays back to white (the starting belt) is as a symbol that 'we never stop learning'. There is no evidence this was ever intentional and is likely simply a consequence of the material of construction, but it expresses the eminent place a black belt holds in the hearts and minds of martial artists. Despite the dan/kyu ranking system being little more than 100 years old, the black belt (dan) has achieved an almost mythological quality as a sacred symbol of something that is beyond purely physical skill. These coveted black belts are also awarded in Taekwondo, a martial art influenced by Shotokan Karate, amongst many others. The symbolism of the black belt is also a substitutive, preventative mechanism against the very violent techniques learned to acquire the black belt. Incumbents are required to conduct themselves within a code on chivalry where excessive or unrestrained violence and vengeance is generally forbidden. Black belts thus serve an important function for the sacralisation of violence and the second order mythologisation of martial arts discipline as a mechanism to control violence.

The lack of a clear and conclusive definition of precisely what a black belt level *is*, whilst also being intrinsically recognised as the epitome of what a martial artist strives for, does lead to some problems; who determines and judges the standards of a black belt? As a practitioner, I am as guilty as any other karate-ka of silently (and sometimes less so) judging the perceived standards of other black belts, whether seen in person at courses and events, or through video and imagery online. Despite my best efforts, I admit that I hold an image of what *I* think a black belt should be and, with no real justification, compare them to what I intrinsically *know* a black belt performer should exemplify. After all, the black belt is sacred.

3. Yin-Yang, and Taeguek (Taiji) in Taekwondo: The abundance of sacred imagery (Jungjoo)

It is undeniable that religions and philosophies such as Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism had an intense effect on the physical cultures represented by martial arts in the forms of sacred imaginary in Korea (Kim, 2008). In this section, I show how the sacred imagery of these religions and philosophies influence Taekwondo,



introducing first, the monistic body culture of the Taekwondo body and second, Yin and Yang, and the Taegeuk philosophy of Taekwondo. Each of these play roles in sacralising violence and violent retribution that the practice of the art's techniques could otherwise unleash.

Both WT (World Taekwondo) Taekwondo, known as Olympic Taekwondo, and ITF (International Taekwondo Federation) Taekwondo, known for emphasising practicality and the martial dimension, have pattern training systems along with sparring training systems. WT and ITF call patterns as 'Poomsae' and 'Tul', respectively. In Taekwondo, patterns are built on a philosophical basis as a technical system that combines attack and defence against imaginary opponents (BT Kim and DG Kim, 2011). Patterns can be classified largely according to the names and meanings of 18 kinds of Poomsae and 24 kinds of Tul as follows:

- Patterns reflecting Asian religious thoughts (Taoism, Confucianism, and Korean indigenous thought) - Cheonkwon Pumsae, Sibjin Pumsae, Taegeuk Pumsae, Cheonji Tul, Hansu Pumsae, Hwarang (Korean warrior spirit) Tul, and Juche Tul.
- Patterns reflecting Taoism's naturalism - Geumgang Poomsae, Pyeongwon Poomsae, Taebaek Poomsae, and Jitae Poomsae.
- Patterns commemorating the historical significance of characters (monks, Confucians, Generals, Admirals, etc.) - 9 kinds of Tul including Dangun, Dosan, Wonhyo, etc.



As such, modern Taekwondo, established in the 1960s, attempted to cultivate not only physical skills but also mental training at the same time through Taekwondo pattern training (Yang and No, 2004). This follows not only the Korean martial arts tradition but also the martial arts tradition of Far East Asia (Kim, 2008).

Monistic body culture of Taekwondo as 'somatic' body

Chinese Confucianism has had a profound effect on Korean body culture. Confucians reckoned that they could not possess true awareness unless they practised knowledge. In other words, it is true knowledge that the integrated knowledge acquired through study and mastered through experience. Toegye and Yulgok, the representative Confucian scholars of Korea had influenced Korean Confucian body culture (Kim, 2008: 175-177). They placed great importance on reflecting through meditation while seated on the floor with folded legs (a practice known as Jeong-jwa), and Taekwondo took this way for self-meditation training.

J. H. Lee (1997) pointed out that the somatic theory claimed by the West is interpreted as the concept of the 'living body' (as opposed to the passive body) based on Eastern body thought. Also, the conceptual change of the body or the physical activity of the West coincided with the traditional Korean idea which does not allow the separation of the body the mind (body holism/monism). Furthermore, Lee and Kim (2007) understand the tradition of Korean martial arts as a somatic body culture



and deeply relate the emphasis on the importance of the somatic body culture and the revival of Korea's traditional martial arts. It can be said that this tradition of monistic body culture in Korea also influenced Taekwondo. Dziwenka and Johnson (2015) emphasise the organic relationship between the body and mind by insisting that not only 'mind and body' work together but also both influence each other closely during Taekwondo training.

Taeguek and Yin-Yang

The principles of Taiji (Taeguek in Korean) and Yin-Yang are dissolved in Taekwondo which shows the Korean body culture presenting a typical Korean somatic body. Interestingly, a Western website introducing 'Clinical Somatics' using a version of the Taiji symbol as a logo, is an example showing the growing influence of somatic body culture throughout the world, both the East and the West as a monistic body culture (<https://somatics.org/>), something which Cambell's (2007) Easternisation of the West thesis. While explaining the meaning of Taekwondo uniforms, Kukkiwon (the World Taekwondo headquarters) emphasises the harmony between the mind as Yang (the left side of the uniform) and the physical power as Yin (the right side of the uniform). Moreover, the logo of Kukkiwon also has a Taeguek pattern that combines Yin and Yang, so it can be visually seen that Taekwondo stands on the basis of Yin-Yang philosophy (<https://www.kukkiwon.or.kr/>).



Image 3: Ying-Yang Imaginary Taekwondo. Source: Taekwondo Technical Terminology (Kukkiwon, 2010)



Image 4: somatics.org logo adopting and adapting the Taiji symbol

The most representative example of this Yin-Yang and Taeguek philosophy can be seen in the fact that the names of the eight kinds of Poomsae for coloured belt practitioners (below black belt practitioners) in Taekwondo are Taeguek patterns (from Taeguek 1 to Taeguek 8). In the instruction video clips of Poomsae 'Taeguek', Kukkiwon explains the meaning of Taeguek as follows:

Taegeuk refers to the source of everything in the universe and the universal law in which everything continuously goes through cycles of creation and destruction. Poomsae Taegeuk symbolizes the root principle of universal philosophy and is constructed by applying the truth inherent in Taeguek's Yin and Yang principles. (source: youtube.com)

Taegeuk (태극 in Korean) or Taegeuk pattern is a Korean pattern that implies the concept and value of Taegeuk, and the pattern located in the centre of the Taegeukgi, the national flag of South Korea. The concept of Taegeuk pattern had been affected by Taoism. The word Taegeuk is a Korean pronunciation of Chinese Taiji (太極) and is interpreted as a grand ultimate or ultimate reality if translated directly into this Chinese character. It is designed so that Taekwondo practitioners can naturally inspire the spirit of Taegeuk by practising Taegeuk Poomsae.

Taegeuk is the separation of non-geuk into Yin and Yang. In Korean tradition, Yin and Yang are represented by blue and red colours, respectively. This is also the colour of hogu (protective gear) in Taekwondo Gyorugi (sparring). Completing the match by exchanging attack (Yang) and defence (Yin) by Gyorugi players shows that the blue and red of Taegeuk are in perfect harmony with Yin-Yang.

Image two shows that some core techniques and stances of Taekwondo in the Taegeuk Poomsae are being made dynamically in the harmony of yin and yang expressed in blue and red. On the other hand, Chun-Ji (천지; 天地; heaven and earth), which is the first 'Tul' (pattern) for the practitioner who enters ITF Taekwondo for the first time, reflects this Yin-Yang philosophy. Cheon-Ji, a combination of heaven as Yang and earth as Yin, symbolises the creation of the world as the conversion of non-geuk into Taegeuk.

Taekwondo practitioners will engrave a spirit of mutual respect and peace in their monistic somatic bodies that learn that there is no "me" (or "us") without "you", just as Yin and Yang are harmonised in Taegeuk separately and in one at the same time. Taekwondo practitioners learn co-prosperity ironically and grow spiritually and physically through the practice of Taekwondo, which was designed for martial force. The above highlights a process of sacralisation of violence through the development of second order myths through the signifiers (techniques and patterns) and signified (the given meanings) both of which come together to provide powerful sacred interpretations of what are otherwise violent actions. The additional focus on the Yin and Yang philosophy crystallised through the repeated use of the Taiji in Taekwondo emphasises that even in violence there is balance and harmony between individuals a step cosmologises the sacralisation process.

It is important to point out the fact that all religions may have sacred imagery, but not all the things that have sacred imagery are religions. Taekwondo does not ostensibly pursue practice in religious ways, but it contains abundant sacred imagery and the sacred imagery makes Taekwondo more abundant and a force for the restraint on unfettered vengeant violence. This subtle relationship to religion through sacred imagery is also seen in Capoeira.



4. Ambiguous sacred imagery in capoeira: The interplay between the sacred and the profane (David C)

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial activity that combines dance, fighting and play elements. It is 'played' (*jogada*) in pairs within a circle of people (*roda*) who sing, clap and play musical instruments. Typically, all participants in the *roda* are Capoeira practitioners (*capoeiristas*) themselves. The couple moves to the music 'as if' dancing, while exchanging and dodging kicks and blows 'as if' fighting. The 'game' generally oscillates between the two extremes (dancing and fighting) while avoiding collapsing into either. However, different styles and schools may encourage their adepts to develop more aggressive or expressive forms of play. In this way, the imagery used in Capoeira sacralises the potentially violent techniques within the system and binds them to notions of dance and play in ambiguous ways which invoke an ongoing interplay between the sacred and the profane.

The origins of Capoeira are closely linked to the history, experiences and traditions of Brazil's Afro-descendant population (Assunção, 2005; Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008). For this reason, it is often seen as a cultural expression nourished by 'other' — non-European, non-hegemonic and potentially decolonial— knowledge, practices and worldviews (Abib, 2002; 2017; 2019; Cajigas-Rotundo, 2008). For example, Sergio González Varela (2017: 88) observes that in Capoeira, "there is a cosmological principle that rejects a separation between the material and the immaterial, or between practice and symbolism". Thus, he points out that "the division between the visible and the invisible, which echoes the familiar Western distinction between mind and body, does not appear to be effective for understanding Capoeira". The latter also applies to the division between the sacred and the profane (Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008: 36). In the case of Capoeira, then, it is not the polarisation between the sacred and the profane (Engler and Gardiner) that is central; but rather their interweaving into a kind of worldly sacredness (see Browning, 1995: 108-109). An exploration of the spiritual imagery of Capoeira needs to consider this situation.

In this section, I present three images that can further illustrate the ambiguous nature between the sacred and the profane, the intangible and the practical in Capoeira: the *circle*, the *cross* and the *corpo fechado*.

The circle

The circle is a recurring motif in Capoeira, which it shares with other cultural expressions of Bantu origin (Browning, 1995; Thull, 2013). We find it in the *roda* and its technique, which favours circular kicks and arched movements (Rosa, 2015), and even in the repetitive circularity of its music (Diaz, 2017). Even time follows a circular pattern that allows the past to be constantly actualised in the present (Abib, 2002).

The Capoeira *roda* functions similarly as a sacred space (Eliade, 1957) by separating the players from "external" gazes while exposing them to the eyes of the 'initiates'. What appears to be only a game to the outsider reveals itself to the eyes of the initiated as "a 'magic theatre' where situations that arise in life itself and between



people are staged" (2002: 4). *Life itself* often refers specifically to the situations of people living in the slums of Brazil's big cities. Conditions marked by inequality, discrimination and violence, where cunning (*malícia*, see Downey, 2005) becomes an essential survival skill.

The Capoeira circle becomes a pedagogical space for practitioners to develop the cunning necessary to cope with everyday life. Hence, it becomes a place where real-life danger and violence are staged (mostly) in symbolical ways: a subtle shake of the hips may indicate a deadly blow; an elegant hand movement implies the cutting of a razor. There is no need to hurt or even touch each other: the more obscure and indirect the violent gesture, the more elegantly it is disguised, the better. The community reacts to such cunning or ambiguous violence with surprise, laughter even enthusiasm; however, they will generally disapprove overt, direct violence.

In this way, the roda operates as a sacred space that orders certain types of violence as 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' based on their (perceived) 'ambiguity' or 'indirectness'. Such a criterion is ambiguous, meaning that different Capoeira communities will accept different expressions of violence as 'legitimate'. Unlike in other martial arts, these limits are not set by written rules or explicit ethical principles but are negotiated in the 'sacred space' of the roda through implicit and situated community feedback in the form of affective and embodied reactions to different manifestations of violence.



The cross

We can further illustrate the prominent role of ambiguity in the Capoeira praxis with the symbol of the cross. The cross is another recurring sacralised image that capoeiristas embody when crossing themselves before entering the circle, but also in movements such as the *aú* (cartwheel, image 5), knockdown techniques (image 6), and the *chamadas* of Capoeira Angola (image 7).

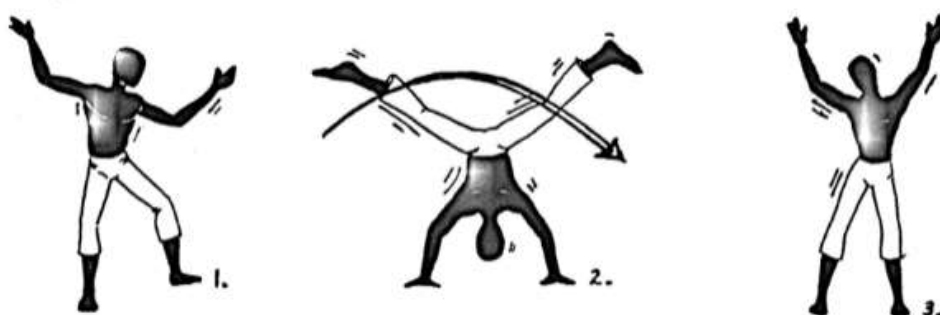


Image 5: *Aí* (cartwheel). Source: Capoeira (2003: 69).

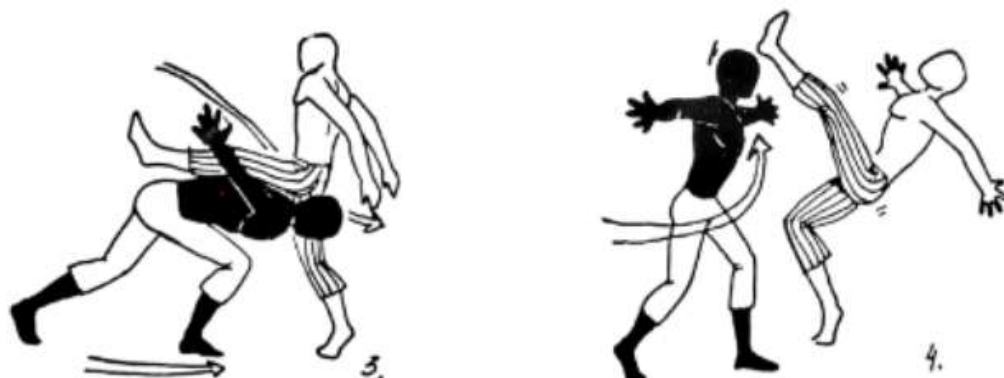


Image 6: Cruz (cross), a knockdown technique. Source: Capoeira (2003: 126).



The cross is, of course, a fundamental spiritual symbol of the Christian faith brought to Brazil by the Portuguese. However, it is also a primary image in the cultures of the Congo-Angola region (see: Browning, 1998: 110). Through the syncretism of European and African religions, the cross became a central image for candomblé. Here, the cross is the symbol of Exú: guardian of the crossroads, of the relative, who rules and opens the paths that connect the earthly and the divine. If this variety of possible meanings is not enough, the symbol of the cross acquires new ones when conjugated with the circle.

It is a common practice among capoeiristas to make the cross sign before entering to play while they wait their turn squatting in front of the music ensemble (see: Browning, 1995: 110; Downey, 2005: 146). At first glance, this practice can be interpreted as genuine asking for protection from the game's dangers. However, sometimes it is done "for comedic effect" either "to mock another player's ineffectual attack" (2005: 150) or to highlight the skill difference between the players ironically. Thus, the image of the cross is not immune to Capoeira's intrinsic ambiguity.

More relevant than the crossing is the custom—current in all styles of Capoeira—that players enter the circle with an *au*, which "literally inverts the sign of the cross, demonstrating the ambivalence of 'the above' and 'the below'" (Browning, 1995: 111). One day, explaining to a group of children from a poor neighbourhood in Mexico City why we make an *au* when we enter the *roda*, my *Mestre* (master) said: "...we have to look at the world upside down because in the world there are many things that are wrong, that are not good". According to this narrative, the Capoeira circle becomes a playground to ironically invert the (colonial) hierarchies and values of the 'real world'. It is the world upside down. In Browning's words: "If God is in heaven, then all is right with the world. But if nothing is right in the world and hierarchies, human or divine, are set off balance, then men [sic] will invert themselves until they can make sense of it all" (1998: 111).

This function of the *roda* and the cross resonates with Girard's thesis of the sacralised as a medium to prevent vengeance and reduce violence. In this case, it would operate as an outlet for the frustration and anger provoked by social

injustices. Instead of inciting confrontation in a spirit of vengeance, Capoeira resorts to playful ambiguity, deception and double entendre as forms of resistance. A confrontation against the oppressor is replaced by playful cunning—a more subtle and ‘civilised’ form of vengeance that twists the system against itself.

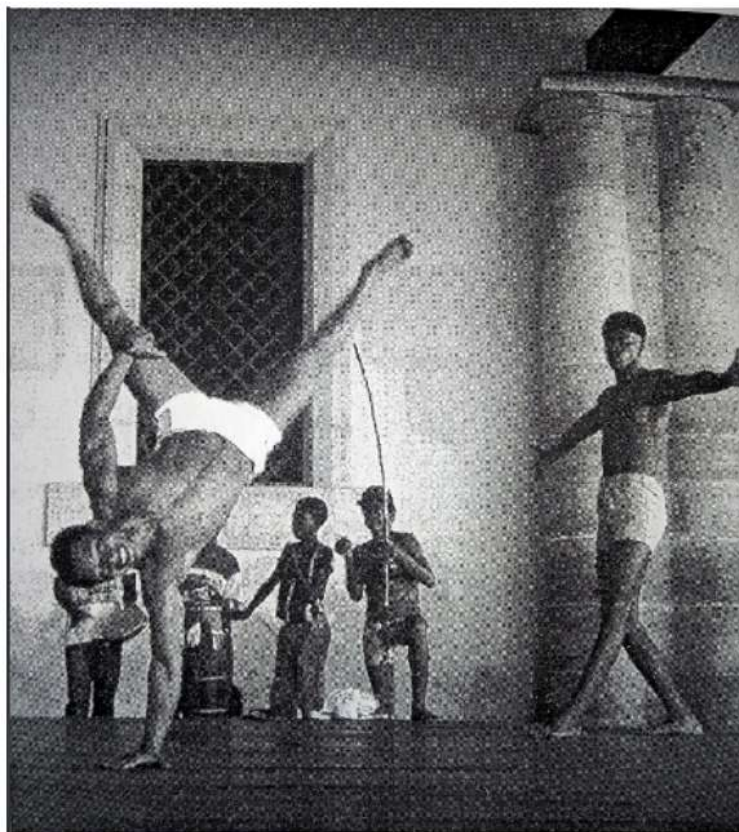


Image 7: “Chamada” in the Capoeira Angola. Source: Onori (2002: 44).

The closed body (corpo fechado)

However, practising this form of resistance requires capoeiristas to reduce their vulnerability as much as possible. Capoeiristas use the images of ‘open’ (*aberto*) and ‘closed’ (*fechado*) to refer to one’s own and other players’ vulnerability. An ‘open body’ is a vulnerable body, susceptible to attack. A ‘closed body’, on the contrary, is invulnerable. The goal of the capoeirista is to attain and maintain a ‘closed body’ (*corpo fechado*). This term refers to specific embodied practices, which include keeping one’s face and abdomen out of reach of an adversary (for example, by covering them with one’s legs and arms), and a raised attention toward own’s vulnerability (Downey, 2005: 136-146).

The image of the *corpo fechado* is also a reference to the legendary Besouro Preto (black beetle). Besouro was indeed a capoeirista named Manoel Henrique Pereira, who lived in the early 1900s. His legend, however, has inspired numerous Capoeira songs and even movies (e.g., Tikhomiroff, 2009). The story goes that Besouro would have acquired the *corpo fechado* through a candomblé ritual, making his body impenetrable to bullets and blades—in addition to other magical powers such as the ability to fly by transforming himself into a black beetle. As a result, only a knife made of *ticum* (a particularly hard type of wood) could cut through the *corpo fechado*. Additionally, the protection lost effectiveness when consuming alcohol or having sexual intercourse.

For González Varela (2016: 136), Besouro's story "starts from the assumption within Afro-Brazilian cosmologies that people are capable of physically and spiritually shutting down their bodies in the face of situations of danger, violent attacks and adversity." This spiritual assumption operates as a regulative idea that guides Capoeira practitioners. "What we see in a roda is the product of an endless work of practitioners behind the scenes, of physical moves trained daily in the classroom, and of individuals prepared spiritually to achieve closure" (González Varela, 2017: 83). How individuals prepare 'spiritually' to close their body is very diverse. González Varela's (2017: 85-87) ethnographic study gives numerous examples ranging from sexual abstinence to washing hair using special oils. However, most capoeiristas recur to much simpler rituals—like crossing themselves. Following Shilling (2017), these practices could be addressed as parts of specific body pedagogics used by Capoeira practitioners to incorporate its sacred imagery. Another Latin American martial arts, Xilam, provides another culturally-specific body pedagogy tied to sacred imagery.



5. The fantastic beasts of Mexican Xilam: Moving like animals for human betterment (George)

The size of Western Europe, Mexico can boast of a complex set of ecosystems with great biodiversity that have influenced its numerous cultures. Before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores and the Roman Catholic faith instilled in the colony of New Spain, the philosophy and religion of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican civilisation was deeply influenced by an ecological perspective on the world, with the elements, four seasons, plants and animals all being represented by non-dualistic, process-based sacred symbols and deities (Maffie, 2014) on the remaining calendars, murals and pottery. Xilam is a recently invented Mexican martial art inspired by those ancient pre-Hispanic cultures – most notably the warrior peoples of the Mexica (Aztec), Maya and Zapotec (Jennings, 2016). As with some Asian martial arts as in certain styles of Kung Fu (see Farrer, 2013) allegedly created by founders inspired by animals locked in combat (Green & Svinth, 2003), Xilam invites the practitioner to become like animals through specific techniques and forms. Directly influenced by

those surviving artefacts as well as more contemporary indigenous cultures and their physical cultures such as dance, wrestling and ball games, the Xilam system is structured according to seven levels that are based on seven animals important to Mesoamerican civilisation: The snake, eagle, ocelotl, monkey, deer, iguana and armadillo, with the first four animals being the fundamental stages and the final three for more advanced students (see www.xilam.org). Each level is themed around techniques (eagle claws or snake-like strikes) and tactics (e.g., rolling like a monkey or covering like an armadillo) used by the animals, although some stances from the other animals are still drawn on in each level.

ESTRUCTURA XILAM

PARA FINES DE APRENDIZAJE Y EVALUACIÓN, XILAM ARTE MARCIAL MEXICANO, ESTA ESTRUCTURADO EN UN SISTEMA QUE ESTÁ DIVIDIDO EN 7 NIVELES Y UNA INTRODUCCION, CADA NIVEL SE DIVIDE EN 4 BLOQUES.

NOMBRE				
NIVEL	ESPAÑOL	MEXICA O ZAPOTECA	BLOQUES	COLOR DE LA CINTA
INTRODUCCION	MERECEDOR	MACEHUAL	LAQUITE	BLANCO
NIVEL I	SERPIENTE	VENDA	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA	AMARILLO
NIVEL II	AGUILA	BIFIA	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA	MORADO
NIVEL III	OCELOTE	PEYE	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA	NARANJA
NIVEL IV	MONO	MIGÚ	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA	AZUL
NIVEL V	VENADO	BIGÜIÑA	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA LAGUIDE	VERDE
NIVEL VI	IGUANA	BUSHASHI	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA LAGUIDE	CAFÉ
NIVEL VII	ARMADILLO	NGUPI	LAQUITE CHUYITE CHUYA LAGUIDE	NEGRO

LAQUITE:	MOVIMIENTOS BÁSICOS.
CHUYITE:	DANZA CORTA MOVIMIENTOS DE PREPARACIÓN.
CHUYA:	DANZA LARGA FORMA DEL NIVEL RESPECTIVO.
LAGUIDE:	APLICACIÓN DE LOS MOVIMIENTOS EN PELEA.

Image 8: The structure of Xilam

The meaning behind the structure and movements in Xilam is heavily influenced by the Mexica and Nahua philosophy taught to the founder Marisela Ugalde by her late mentor Andrés Segura Granados, a renowned Conchero dance teacher and teacher to Native American communities who was known for his oral style of transmission to explain the deeper philosophical meaning behind icons, maps and specific symbols in clothing and movement. The Conchero dancers are noted for their connection to the Mexicanidad movement popular among urban youth that hails a return to indigenous beliefs and a sense of Mexicanness (Rostras, 2009). An example of this is his lecture on “The path of Quetzalcoatl”, on the connections between ancient Mesoamerican beliefs and the dress and presentation of dance



groups in postcolonial Mexico (archived in YouTube). This Quetzalcoatl, or plumed / feathered serpent, is often regarded as a pre-Hispanic god, but for Segura, it is a symbol of human's connections to the earth (the snake or serpent) and the cosmos (represented in the quetzal bird). With such a strong influence of philosophy and spirituality, Xilam might be categorised as a kind of martial activity that Martinková and Parry (2016) regard as a martial path rather than a martial art for self-defence or a martial sport for competition. Words such as 'energy', 'spiritual' and 'spirit' are evident in an excerpt from a public display in Mexico City in which Marisela Ugalde narrated during the demonstration of animal techniques:

The snake, in the pre-Hispanic world, represents energy. Then we have the eagle – the spirit of each person. Everyone has different ranges and motives, the internal force or spirit that they can apply. After that, we have the jaguar, which is the force, the confidence. And not just the physical force. Mental force. Emotional force. Spiritual force. The fourth level is the monkey. As a student, you have the facility and ease to move around. After that, the deer, one has to define perfectly one's centre, one's heart. And this heart determined who you are, what you want, and how you are going to achieve it. The iguana takes the force from your ancestors. You find your lineage. The last level is the armadillo. The concheros used Catholic symbolism. It is to create and recreate yourself.

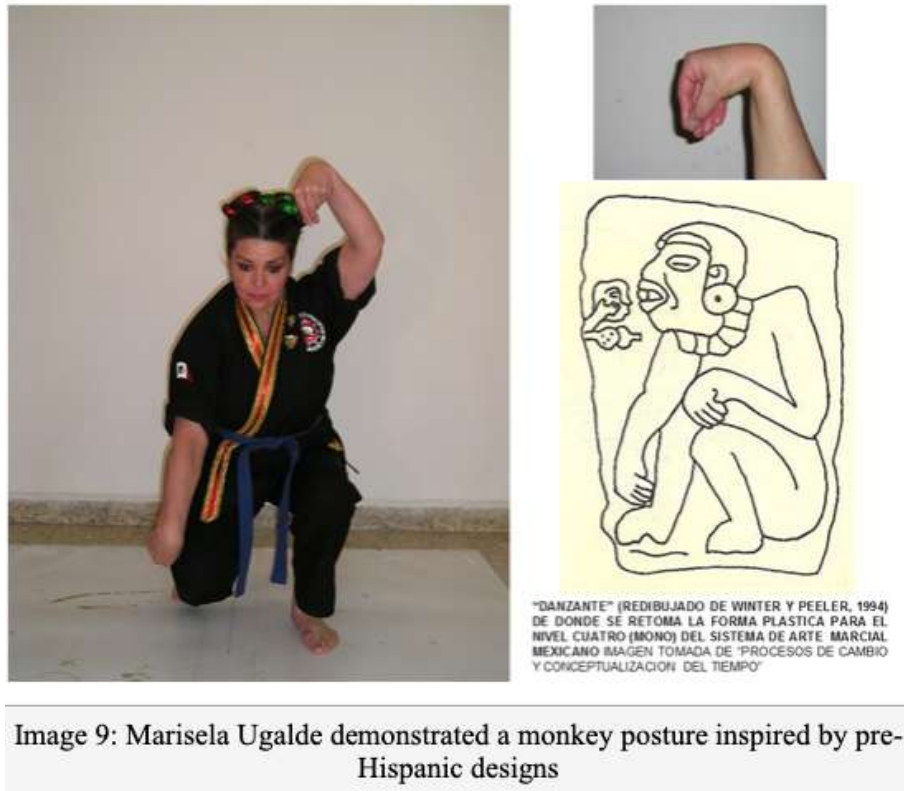


Image 9: Marisela Ugalde demonstrated a monkey posture inspired by pre-Hispanic designs

The official Xilam website beckons newcomers to “take advantage of your emotional and cognitive faculties for an integral development always in harmony with the environment” (www.xilam.org). However, there is little written about the animals on the official Xilam website or its Facebook group, and there is still no official textbook on the art, despite it being registered in the early 1990s. Instead, the philosophy of Xilam is passed down in an oral tradition, with intense and eloquent speeches prepared for students and the wider public. According to numerous television interviews, public demonstrations and my ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico, the seven levels of Xilam connect with specific aspects of the human being, such as the cognition, emotions, willpower and awareness that practitioners believe sets humans apart from other species.

As part of a nationalistic indigenismo (indigenism) movement concerned with a proud display of *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness), the Xilam practitioners therefore use the animals as a means to cultivate themselves as wiser, more alert, healthier and better prepared human beings able to help their neighbours and country. This begins with the focus on one’s self, as explained in an interview with Marisela’s daughter Mayra, a black belt instructor:



It’s a very natural philosophy, and we would go through the steps, of willpower – you need to have that to get somewhere; emotional control, again, something very important is control over yourself; reactions, how you react, if you are sad...to balance your emotions...and to know your own force through the jaguar...obviously, alongside your willpower, with the control over your emotions. What happens is, you become stronger and you become more “you.” After that, comes the monkey, that connects to the ego, and you have to seek that balance again. Then, there is the deer, which is the heart, the monkey and the deer accompany each other. For you to work with your ego and your vanity, it is balance, you connect to your centre; later, is the iguana, this is the recognition of your ancestors, and there is a genetic aspect, too. What limitations do you have? What abilities do you have? And later, the armadillo, you have already studied what you are, and now you are going to work on developing yourself: to create the self. I am going to construct and forge myself. This is very individual work – this exact formula, so to speak, this very path, each person is going to take it differently...you can’t say “this is accessible or this is in such a way.” Xilam has much to do with nature and organic things. You can see it in a plant, in a system, a person. You can apply all of this. (Mayra interview, 2016)

In fact, in the Mayan language, Xilam means ‘to remove the skin’; its name is therefore a metaphor for unravelling the outer ego and external labels to discover one’s true potential. This striving for human betterment using the vehicle of the seven animals is a lifelong pursuit, as dancer turned Xilam black belt Andrea reflected in a separate interview:

We work a lot from below. First, the legs, and then later, the arms. To strengthen them. Then we work on the coordination and memory. Once you have this, you start to work on the arms, and your intention and what you impregnate. At

jaguar level, you want to be strong and have certain levels of tension in your legs and arms. The monkey is the playful one. It is about trickery against the opponent – a playful character who appears as if they won't break a plate, but then it does. It can be dangerous. The deer moves using large movements, to jump from the earth. So, you start from the centre and move from there. Then, at iguana level, you start to look at where you come from – your family, why you are the way you are. You accept and don't pretend to be something you're not. There is introspection and investigation about your family. And then with the armadillo, is to wait for the final test. You have to be strong, and prepare yourself physically, and get ready for the final exam, because to pass it is nothing simple. More than attack and defend oneself, but about fluidity in movement; it is about life. It is something that you can maintain and something that you continue to learn when you are elderly – you can always learn to flow more. (Andrea interview, 2016)



Despite its rarity of being founded by a woman (Jennings, 2015) and largely led by a balance of women and men, Xilam adopts more of a nationalist and environmental stance than a feminist position. Andrea is the main designer of the *Siete Guerros* (Seven Warriors) show planned to share the Xilam philosophy through a story of seven pairs of warriors who have an animal theme. Together, these leaders of the Xilam community aim to develop a heightened environmental awareness – as do certain Taijiquan organisations (Brown, Jennings and Sparkes, 2014) – during times of climate change and great uncertainty not only for Mexico and a recovered version of Mesoamerican civilisation (inspired by Bonfil Batalla, 1994), but for the world. As both Andrea and Marisela explained in interviews with George:

There is a link to nature. Each level of Xilam has to do with an animal. On another level, what it teaches you is about one's ancestors. Xilam is Maya, Aztec and Zapotecan. Your grandparents' and ancestors' way before them. This care and respect for the environment. Respect and care and learn starting from there. Everything. To be kinder with the atmosphere. (Andrea interview 2016).



Image 10: The icons for the seven animal levels of Xilam are inspired by pre-Hispanic art

We have the mantra 'to respect the earth, respect those around us, no matter their nationality, respect the rules of the environment, and be ready to work'. If you follow that, you won't have a problem anywhere. The new human being needs to be concerned with respect and harmony. (Marisela interview 2016).

Despite the attractive designs in the seven animal logos, the deep philosophy behind each stage and the aesthetically pleasing movements of the animal forms, the techniques themselves have aggressive applications for self-defence scenarios which like our previous examples of martial arts, reveal the sacralisation of violence. After learning an initial snake-level form (Laquite Venda in the Zapotecan language) focusing on the low, wide stance and basic closed-fisted blocks in four directions, the second foundational snake form (Chuyite Venda) opens up the hands to form a hard block of extended fingers to resemble a snake's head. This, and the third form (Chuya), includes techniques such as a circling, double-handed eye gouge after feigning an attack to the groin (that the opponent drops to defend), which is shortly followed by a strike to the imaginary downed opponent. These are all illegal techniques in modern martial arts competitions, and are meant for survival purposes in a country that is becoming increasingly violent – especially in relation to girls and women. Students learn to defend themselves against common attacks such as grabs to the hair and wrists while learning attacks with all parts of the body. These are honed in the fourth level designed to drill these applications against a compliant and later slightly resistant opponent. Later animal levels include clawing and tearing techniques in the jaguar / ocelot I level, as well as strikes to the lower limb joints and ligaments that could maim a person at armadillo level. However, through their deep philosophical system and ritualistic approach to all aspects of the class, the Xilam community maintain their ethos of the art as a human development system rather than just a martial art. This includes oral mantra speaking of peace and harmony with one's surroundings, saluting to one's fellow student from the heart, counting in indigenous Mesoamerican languages and playing animal-themes games, such as wriggling on the floor like a snake and jumping like a monkey, or bumping one another onto the floor, leading to an environment full of smiles and laughter. The games predominate in the classes for or including children, while more intense bodily conditioning and serious self-defence training occurs for the adults alone. This polarisation of play and serious fighting means that for participants the potential for violence is realised within a deliberately mythologised system which justifies the use of violence for survival. On this point we conclude by returning to the theoretical considerations inspired by Girard (1977).



6. Concluding comments

Each of the article sections drew on polarised, contextualised and experiential assumptions of the sacred in order to unpack and reveal processes of sacralisation of violence occurring through the use of imagery. The Japanese Karate section

illustrated this process in relation to step sparring and black belts symbolisation. The Korean Taekwondo section contextualised how sacralisation of violence occurs through monistic body culture, Taeguek imagery and Yin-Yang philosophy. The Brazilian Capoeira section polarised and contextualised sacralisation, showing the ambiguous interplay between the sacred and the profane through analysis of the circle (roda), the cross symbolism and the closed body (corpo fechado). Finally, Xilam provided a contextualised, experiential view of sacralisation offering practitioner insights of their experiences and how the mythologisation of sacred Mesoamerican animals' within the martial art were used as a vehicle to transcend normal human experience and relationships to the earth and also sacralise violent self defence techniques.

This paper has taken some exploratory steps to provide a line of analysis bringing together the martial arts, symbolic sacralised imagery and in particular, the sacralisation of violence. By sacralising martial arts practices those who developed and maintained these arts intuitively understood the restraining role played by religious and spiritual practices on those learning techniques of combat. That in many cases, these arts have evolved as vehicles of self-cultivation within which the central discourses include, 'defence' and non-violent, non-vengeful dispositions is testimony to such a function. In conclusion, the sacralisation of the martial arts and other cultures of combat, the use of 'sacred' imagery, enlivens a form of what might be termed "collective affective contagion" (Thrift, Venn, 2010) in which, following Massumi (2001), the body's infra and inter corporeal martial movements and associated sensations are given sacralised interpretations. These might be seen as sacralising *affective* practices (Wetherell, 2015) binding combat/martial practice with sacralising physical, interactional, discursive and narrative practices. We are inclined to take the view that this process operates as a positive cultural force to constrain and counteract the worst human elements of vengeful violence that lurk in almost every culture of combat.

While sacralisation does not *remove* the propensity for violence, the use of sacred imagery, especially as a body pedagogic is a particularly powerful means through which the body's propensity for violent confrontation is mythologised and mystified and to an extent thereby channeled and pacified. However, it would be remiss not to conclude by also stating that this sacralising process always and everywhere appears to exist in tension with the carnal realities of violence inherent in any culture of combat. In Girard's terms, demystification (the undoing of the substituting function of religion and the sacred vis-à-vis violent vengeance) "leads to constantly increasing violence, a violence perhaps less 'hypocritical' than the violence it seeks to expose, but more energetic, more virulent, and the harbinger of something far worse—a violence that knows no bounds" (Girard, 1977: 25). It is no coincidence that, where the traditional martial arts and wider cultures of combat have been 'dy-mystified' and 'sportified' such as mixed martial arts and bare knuckle fighting, the level of violence is often far higher, the type of violence has changed (usually from self-defensive to offensive) and the rationalisation for violence is altered (from practical necessity to ego fulfilment commercialisation and entertainment). That is not to say that some



exponents of these arts do not attempt to sacralise their violent actions in any way or that there is no restraint of violence at all. In fact, these violent combat sports are replete with imagery and narratives of the sacralisation of violence intertwined with the spectacularisation of violence (Debord 1967; Sánchez-García, 2018a, 2020). We conclude that there is a need to further investigate the relationship between sacralised violence and the more secular (de-)civilising processes (Dunning 1999; Sánchez-García, 2018b). Indeed, as illustrated by Rage Against The Machine's 1992 iconic protest track, *Killing in the name of*, there are good reasons to deepen our critical understanding of the relationships between power, violence and the sacred occurring within culture and cultures of combat. Such investigations might benefit from drawing from additional theoretical ideas than those used here, such as those of Marshall's (2010) sacralisation theory in which temptation and taboo are examined more closely. Similarly, Anderson's (1983) imagined community and long-distance nationalism and Randall Collins' (2005) interaction ritual chains and more recently, Molle's (2022) work who on the role of violence in nation building and nationalism within Israel and the wider Jewish diaspora, using the example of Krav Maga, which has transitioned from a military combat system to a civilian self-defence system to a martial art. Future research might need to consider the concepts of sacred imagery, violence, nationalism and ritual in the martial arts and cultures of combat.

We conclude with one empirical insight that is borne out by the theory. Regardless of the theoretical lens adopted by scholars, incumbents of these arts intuitively know that at "the procedures that keep men's [sic] violence in bounds have one thing in common: they are no strangers to the ways of violence" (Girard 1977: 24). Thus, the paradoxical relationships between violence, vengeance, the sacred and the cultures of combat are not an esoteric academic topical indulgence, but a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon in need of sustained sociological attention. We hope this analysis stimulates further questions, debate, and analysis.



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