

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF AFRICAN MARTIAL ARTS' BODY TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT: The French anthropologist Marcel MAUS had defined the concept of “Body Techniques” as the ways in which from society-to-society people know how to use their bodies. It involves cultures and traditions developed by Man in relation with its social environment. Martial arts as an indispensable part of human culture, embody the way people understand and use their bodies. They are a set of cultural practices developed by humans for adaptations’ needs. African people throughout history, have developed their own patterns of “Body Techniques” slanted towards the “physical”, the “spiritual” and the “artistic”. Then, through cultural refinement, this has lay down the core philosophy of African Martial Arts with “Combat”, “Spirituality” and “Dance” as intrinsic values. Borrowing MAUSS’ definition of “Body Techniques”, the concept “African Martial Arts” will refer to “a cultural complex of body techniques associated with fighting (Attack/Defense) created by African people in response to their adaptation and development needs over the course of history.” This article uses Marcel MAUSS’ anthropological conception of “Body Techniques” as theoretical foundation, and explores the African conception of “Body Techniques” in the context of African Martial Arts.

KEY WORDS: Cultural Anthropology, African Martial Arts, Body Techniques, Combat, Dance, Spirituality

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1. INTRODUCTION

The famous philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) suggested that Man was once a solitary animal (James Delaney, 2006) ^[1], without thoughts, languages or community, he later developed these things for prehistoric reasons. Nowadays, not only Man has developed the culture, language and thinking, he has developed politics, economy, science and so on (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1968).^[2] In other words, human nature is not static but dynamic, and so it is with the programs and systems he generates. Few decades later (Richard Dawkins, 1989) ^[3] the biologist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), The psychanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) accepted that idea after an in-depth examination from different disciplines' perspectives (Laura Baker; Ezdijian S.; Raine A., 2006) ^[4]. Of all the processes made by humans, culture is considered as the most virtual and the most complex. The British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor successfully set a more comprehensive definition of the word 'Culture' for the first time in his master piece <Primitive Culture (1871)>. For him, culture is *a complex of knowledge, belief, art, law, morality, custom, and any other human made process as member of society.* ^[5] Emile Durkheim, George Murdoch, Claude Levi-Strauss, Donald Brown and other great thinkers saw culture *as an element, a pattern, a characteristic shared by all human beings* (Schacter, Daniel L, Daniel Wegner, Daniel Gilbert, 2007) ^[6]. In short, culture can be viewed as a set of systems produced by Man in the process of human adaptation to his milieu. From primitive societies to the modern ones, human survival and development have been inseparable from all kinds of struggles for adaptation. In fact, humans' struggle for foods or lands, the fighting for protection against beasts and other dangerous animals (including his fellow human), have generated a set of fighting skills, and those skills through time and evolution have gradually become the cultural tool indispensable for humans in their development processes. From this perspective, martial arts can be viewed as a simple product of human adaptation, a 'cultural behavior' for survival purpose. However, the inherent aggressive human nature may well have inspired violent cultural practices. The close combat is a process that brings into play human aggressiveness, and may have gradually been perfected overtime into an art of fighting. It is believed that many common elements of martial arts are determined by the 'anatomical', 'physiological' and 'psychological' details of the human body and are not dependent on a specific culture or region. From this standpoint, martial arts just as mathematics and physics, becomes an applied science, a knowledge system that expressed nature's laws and principles. In fact, scholars such as James L. Hawkins believes that, *"Martial arts are nothing more than a human physical expression of the laws of physics and biology. The scientific concepts that power the martial arts are common*

knowledge on their most basic levels. There is nothing mystical to the martial arts and nothing that cannot be explained; there is only science, the body that applies the science and the body that has the science applied to it.” (James L.Hawkuns III, 2006)^[7]

We can conclude anyhow that every civilized region of the world has (or must have) its own system of martial arts, such a coding system is the body language that makes visible their relationship with their hostile environment. In addition, Africa, as the origin of human beings (Cheikh Anta Diop, 1970; Leo Frobenius, 1952)^{[8][9]} and one of the cradles of early civilization, had naturally molded a series of combat practices during its evolution process going from barbarism to civilization. It suffices to consider “*Engolo, Dambe, Laamb, Donga, Sile Tia, Messing, Zulu Stick Fighting*” (Taling T. Rodrigue, 2016)^[10] as well as many existing African martial systems and traditional war dances, these African martial systems and combat traditions have engineered their technical orientations on the common basis of human nature (anatomy, physiology) but have developed their core philosophy and artistic orientations on the unique features of African cultural behaviors and social practices. In a word, “*African martial arts’ Body Techniques* reflect a unique coding system rooted in “*Combat*”, “*Dance*” and “*Spirituality*”.

2. AFRICAN MARTIAL ARTS’ BODY TECHNIQUES: THE INTEGRATION OF “COMBAT”, “DANCE” AND “SPIRITUALITY”

2.1. Concept Delimitation of “Body Techniques”

From the ancient Greek thoughts system, where the body is the soul’s bondage to the pursuit of the immortal and perfect world, to the philosophy of pure consciousness initiated by Rene Descartes where “*the body and mind are independent*”, the former is connected with the material and sensitive world, while the latter is connected with the immaterial and spiritual world. By separating the human subject from his body, Rene Descartes elevated the status of the body in the world compared to the period of ancient Greek philosophy, but the dualism of the subject and object of the mind was still presented, and the body was seen as conflicting to knowledge (Wang Yuanyuan, 2007).^[11] In modern times, since Nietzsche’s theory of “*Death of god*”, the phenomenology of the spirit of Emanuel Kant to the contemporary French structuralism, reflections on traditional western thought of rational centralism was aroused, and debates were opened over the status of mind and body, and priority still was given to the transcendental subject or pure consciousness. As conclusion, Man was seen as an actor embodied in his physical body, with acknowledgment that the body influences how we perceive the world and ourselves.

Since the 1980s, there has been great progress in the social sciences about the study of the physical body (Brian Turner, 2003).^[12] Most of these studies have described cultural representations of the body but have not yet developed a coherent and comprehensive theory of the body that can deal with a complex set of issues related to society and the various modes of human body representation. The French anthropologist Marcel MAUSS (1872-1950) made a noteworthy contribution over this limitation and provided a new thinking space on the premise of this series of problems. In many of his works, such as *<The General Theory of Witchcraft>*, *<Introduction to the Analysis of Religious Phenomena>*, *<A Spiritual Category of Man: The Concept of Man>*, *<Sociology and Anthropology>*, etc. he recontextualized “Man”, “body” and “society”. MAUSS sees the *Body* as *Man’s* first and most natural instrument to explore the society and experiment his milieu...For him, the “*Body*” is no longer an obstacle to thinking or something that must be overcome in order to be able to think. On the contrary, different societies, cultures and times encode different categories (realities) on the body through thinking. In short, the “*Body*” is a show-ground for the thinking. People do not carry out daily life under the guidance of thinking categories, but thinking is incorporated into various categories of daily life and shaped the posture and behavior of the body. From this new position on *Body* and *Consciousness*, Mauss comes to a new view of the *Society* as well: “*it is because of society that there is an intervention of consciousness. It’s not because of the unconsciousness, that there’s a social intervention. It is because of society that various preparatory movements are ensured and there is conscious control over the emotions and the unconscious.*” (Marcel Mauss, 2003)^[13]. Mauss suggests that the concept of “*Body Technology*” should be explored with an anthropological perspective. In his article *<Body Technology>*, the author defines “*Body Technology*” as the various ways in which people in different societies use their bodies according to their traditional understanding, while for the concept “*Technology*”, he further points out: “*I call technology an effective traditional behavior. It must be traditional and effective. If there is no tradition, then there is no technology and no inheritance.*” (Marcel Mauss, 2003)^[14] More specifically, how to distinguish “modern technology” (apparatus) from Mauss’ “technology” (body)?

In his last published article (*< Technique and Technology >*, 1948), the author further explored the problem of technology to distinguish the two concepts of “technique” and “technology”. The main difference between the two concepts lies in “tradition (the former)” and “appliance theory (the latter)”. Technology occupies a decisive position. (Marcel Mauss, 1948)^[15] In other words, our age is not a technological age because it is a machine age, but rather, “*it is a machine age because it is a technological age.*” Technology is essentially an art of work, a field of pure production, created

from nothing; It deals with problems, tries out practical experiences, and even makes discoveries. The body, as the object of technology, is no longer an unnatural product, but an objective existence, and its actor is a social tradition that exists as an unconscious existence for individuals, where the primo of the subject is removed (Marcel Mauss, 1948).^[16] He believes that religion, witchcraft, and various traditional practices, and even how people use food and sleep, all depend on the body technology of every social group (Marcel Mauss, 1936)^[17]. It is worth mentioning that MAUSS' thinking has also aroused the interest of scholars in various fields. For example, the French philosopher Michel Foucault said in his unfinished book *<History of Sexuality>*, that he was greatly inspired by the concept of Mauss' *Body Technology* (Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality*. Translated by She Biping, 2000)^[18]. Mello Ponty even admits that "social anthropology is Mauss' work that continues to be active before our eyes." (Maurice Mello Ponty. *Praises of Philosophy*. Translated by Yang Dachun, 2000)^[19]. In the study of Chinese body technology, Mr. Dai Guobin, in his book *<Wushu: The Culture of The Body>*, regards Chinese martial arts as "a cultural practice of the body" and a "manifestation of humanization", and regards the "body of wushu practitioner" as the carrier of the "Wushu cultural expression". He believes that Chinese martial arts techniques cover the Chinese understanding and use of the "Body" (Dai Guobin, 2011).^[20] In short, the martial arts culture of each region contains the local people's understanding of the body, which has both similarities and differences. Likewise, African martial arts body techniques are a reflection of how African people use their bodies to deal with their opponents. Their understanding of the body is deeply rooted in their customs and traditions and reflects their understanding of the environment in which they grew and developed.

2.2 "Combat", "Dance" and "Spirituality" in African Martial Arts

The concept "African martial arts" can be defined as "a cultural complex of body techniques, systems, beliefs, and practices associated with fighting created by African people in response to their adaptation and development needs over the course of history." (Taling T. Rodrigue, 2016)^[21]. In many African cultural traditions, the word used to describe martial arts can often be translated as *wrestling*, as it is the case for the words *Laamb* in the Wolof culture of Senegal, *Umladlo Wezinduku* in Zulu culture of South Africa, *Mgba* in Igbo culture of Nigeria, and *Messing* in the Fang culture of Gabon, etc. On the basis of 'attack/defense', the traditional African martial arts orbits around the African understanding of the body in various African societies, which over the course of history has oriented its development around the "Physical", the "Spiritual" and the "Artistic". That understanding finally molded the African concept of "body

techniques” in a core philosophy rooted in “Combat”, “Dance” and “Spirituality”. Just as noticed Mr. Meng Ga after watching a traditional wrestling match in Africa, he declares, “It’s not like many other sports that only requires the average physical ability of the contestants. Before the fight began, the venue was very formal and solemn. Wrestlers participate in many religious rituals, dances, etc. Many people praise the wrestlers and sing them traditional hymns to keep their spirits up. Then there are ceremonies of prayers to avoid bad luck before the game. In addition to the physical, technical and strategic preparation of the wrestlers, there is also psychological and spiritual preparation, which is closely linked to African traditions”. The author further explains that as a cultural phenomenon on the African continent, the traditional African sport of wrestling combines sport with mythology and is very popular during festivals. In August 1992, the African Wrestling was recognized by the International Wrestling Federation as the third type of wrestling. (Meng Ga, 2006).^[22] In short, the “Physical combat” backed up with the “Spirituality” through rituals and expressed by the “Artistic dance” of the martial artist constitutes the core components of *African Body Techniques*. In other words, “Combat”, “Dance” and “Spirituality” are integrated in one in traditional African body culture, and there is no boundary between the three. Therefore, understanding the three notions is fundamental to an in-depth understanding of the overall concept of African Martial Arts.

2.2.1 “Combat”: The Physical Expression of Human Aggressiveness

Violence, Confrontation and fighting are immediate inheritance of our physical nature and therefore part of our human nature independently of the culture or society in which we belong. Alexander Moseley (2002) thinks that *Aggressionism* (a philosophical theory that the only real cause of war is human aggression, which refers to the "general tendency to attack members of one’s species) is the real motives behind humans fighting behaviors. That inherent human aggression theory explains that “aggression is a natural response to defend vital interests such as territory, family, or identity if threatened” (Alexander Moseley, 2002)^[23]. Sigmund Freud, in his theory of structural models, suggested that the stability of the human body depends on the self-adjustment of *Eros* (the instinct for survival and self-preservation) and *Thanatos* (the instinct for attack and self-destruction), (S. Freud, 1966)^[24], similar to the concepts of “Internal-energy” (conservative/protective) and “External-energy” (dissipative/destructive) in Chinese martial arts. *Aggressiveness* and *defensiveness* are the basic ingredients of aggression, resistance, and violence. In other words, attack and defense are directly generated by the human aggressiveness and is fundamentally

shared by all martial systems in the world. In fact, the Martial arts primarily as the art of dealing with violence, fighting and confrontation for the purpose of survival and adaptation, are sets of various skills (kicking, punching, stabbing, grappling, wrestling, etc.) gradually accumulated over time, and mastered through routines and repetitions. The cultural treatment will gradually produce the conscious use of these skills, and the martial arts will gradually achieve its purposes from “savage fighting” to “civilized combat”. This process is mainly revealed in the desire of the martial artist to deeply explore philosophically the questions of *why/how/when* to fight and with *who* fighting? This will lead to a redefinition of the martial purpose and will naturally bring to play a more artistic way to deal with the opponent. Therefore, the ideal pursuit of the martial artist through the physical combat won't be any more limited to the destruction of others, but re-oriented to the protection of others including himself. That perhaps explain why African referred to the word “wrestling” to describe their martial practices, as a mean to defend against a close aggressor.

The Nigerian scholar Balogun O. Abeegunde discusses in detail the basic principles and technical orientation of African Martial Arts in his book *<Afrikan Martial Arts: The Warrior Within (2008)>*. He uses the four elements theory of the ancient African culture to explore the body techniques of African martial arts (Svinth A. Balogun, 2008)^[25]. He explains that almost every nation or tribe in Africa has its own complete martial arts system, and in their languages, Africans traditionally called their martial arts system “*wrestling*”. But he further explains that the idea of wrestling in Africa is very different from that in the West, Asia and elsewhere. According to the author, to “*wrestle an opponent*” in African martial arts means to lay the opponent down on his back or his stomach, making him vulnerable to a deadly attack. Moreover, the wrestling purpose can be achieved by any means: all kinds of unarmed punching (strike, sweep, kick, lock, push, etc.) and all kinds of weapons (stick, arrow, knife, stone, etc.). Therefore, if you stun your opponent over the head with a stick, by the standard of traditional African martial arts, you have successfully “*wrestled your opponent*”. Mr. Meng Ga concedes that “*African wrestling, like other forms of wrestling, has evolved over a long period of time into a unique style*” (Meng Ga, 2006).^[26] Balogun O. Abeegunde clarified the technical orientation of African martial arts on the basis of The Four Elements in ancient African civilizations. According to this ancient theory, the four elements are the simplest form of being, a simple state of things. They are the most important elements of any living thing. These four elements are “*earth*”, “*air*”, “*fire*” and “*water*”. Different philosophies of classical elements have emerged in many of the world's civilizations. The Ancient Greek scriptures *<Kore Kosmou>* (“*Virgin of the World*” attributed to Thoth, the goddess of the moon in ancient Egyptian

mythology and called Hermes Trismegistus by the ancient Greeks) divided the four elements into “fire”, “water”, “air” and “earth” (Subhash Ranade, 1992).^[27] According to Galen, these elements were used by Hippocrates, the father of ancient Greek medicine, to describe the four bodily fluids of the human body: yellow bile (“fire”), black bile (“earth”), blood (“air”), and mucus (“water”).^[28] In Chinese civilization appeared the doctrine of five elements (“五行学说”), namely “Metal”, “wood”, “water”, “fire” and “earth” (“金”、“木”、“水”、“火”、“土”).^[29] These influences somehow the Chinese interpretation of body techniques. For example, the concept of “Five Steps” (“五步”) or “Five Stances” in Chinese martial arts. Stances (steps or 步法) are structural postures employed in Chinese martial arts training. They represent the foundation and the form of a fighter's base. Each style has different names and variations for each stance. Stances may be differentiated by foot position, weight distribution, body alignment, etc. Stance training can be practiced statically, the goal of which is to maintain the structure of the stance through a set time period, or dynamically, in which case a series of movements is performed repeatedly. In contemporary wushu there are five basic stances: “Gong Bu 弓步” (bow stance), “Ma Bu 马步” (horse stance), “Xie Bu 歇步” (rest stance), “Pu Bu 仆步” (flat stance), and “Xu Bu 虚步” (false stance or void stance). it reflects the unique understanding of the Chinese people’s body techniques. In African martial arts culture, the “four-element principle” is applied to the body techniques and can be summarized as follows (O. Abeegunde 2008):

- a) “Earth” stands for “steps” and can respectively be separated in “Wood”, “Stone” and “Metal”. The “Wood” symbolizes the high and narrow steps. The *wooden step* is fluid and used for erect, swift fighting, or self-defense. The “Stone” symbolizes low and wide step. The *stone step* is very stable and is used in wrestling and weapon fighting situations. The “Metal” symbolizes the low and narrow pace. The *golden step* is used for wrestling and ground fighting.
- b) “Air” stands for “footwork and action”. A basic movement in African martial arts such as a breeze, gale, or cyclone.
- c) “Fire” stands for “male energy and techniques”. “Fire” techniques are explosive, with external force, rigid and so on
- d) “Water” stands for “female energy and techniques”. “Water” techniques have shrinkage, softness, with internal forces, etc.

On the basis of these four elements, the Nigerian scholars divided the African martial

arts techniques into four types:

- i. *“Polyrhythmic Application”* : Like the African drum, the African body must use multiple rhythms in combat, which means that the fighter has to “hit” the opponent multiple times (or more than two times) in a single attack.
- ii. *“The Unbroken Circle”* also known as “Call and Response”: Being adaptable, mixing your opponent’s rhythm and movements. Thus, creating a continuous cycle.
- iii. *“The Wind Has One Name”* : This type of techniques is characterized by simplified self-defense, focusing less on specific methods of attack and more on angles of attack. In African martial arts culture, there are limits to the different angles an opponent can attack from. Up to 15 different angles to attack your opponent. So, in order to simplify the fight, the warrior has to learn to handle the problem of attacking from multiple angles and combining “attack” with “defense”.
- iv. *“Waste No Part of The Animal”* : This technique type emphasizes on saving actions. The goal is to avoid redundant action, thereby saving energy and increasing the likelihood of victory. In short, through a long-term development, African martial arts formed its own sets of “offensive and defensive body techniques”.

2.2.2 Spirituality: The African Martial Artist’s Advanced Coded System of knowledge

The understanding and handling of the supernatural in Africa is very different from that of the West and the East. In African traditional religious belief systems, any living thing in the world (humans, animals, plants, etc.) has a soul. This is very different from western thought “*Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)” (René Descartes. Translated by Donald A. Cress, 1986)^[30], with representative figures such as the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1644 <*Principia Philosophiae*>), traditional western mainstream thoughts state that animals don’t think because of the lack of the soul, therefore can’t feel the existence of God (You Xin, Zhou Yichang, 1999).^[31] “*The basic contents of the black African traditional religious practices include: nature worshipping, ancestors worshipping, totems worshipping, tribal gods worshipping and the supreme God worshipping.*”(Schneider, Harold K., 1981)^[32] God is in every corner of the nature and speaks to humans through codes, entities, symbols, and therefore there is a needs of a knowledge system for decoding and interpreting God’s will through nature; that

knowledge system is known as spirituality, a domain of expertise in understanding and converting the dialogue between God and humans through nature's codes, symbols and entities. African spirituality focuses on the use of natural and supernatural hidden powers to achieve the desired purpose. In the context of African martial arts, the aim is often to achieve the intentions of the martial artist with more efficiency than simply relying on physical means. For example, in self-defense, the African martial artist through spiritual shortcuts should effortlessly anticipate the opponent's attack (it is possible to read in the opponent's mind and anticipate any of his physical moves in advance) and easily counterattack to defeat him; In most practices of African spirituality in martial context, it is common for practitioners to partner with non-human entities or supernatural beings such as deities, spirits of ancestors, various forms of unconscious consciousness, or through a simply use of herbs, words such as poetry, prayers and incantations to easily defeat one or several opponents. This is especially true of martial activities practiced in various regions of Africa in time of wars or military conflicts. In fact, Military practices associated with gods worshipping, animals' kingdom, traditional medicine and cultural rituals can be found historically in many cultures across Africa. Spiritual practices and supernatural concepts in African martial arts are based on African belief systems and can be easily found in various myths, initiation rituals, fairy tales, poems, prayers, festivals, and so on. "It's a cultural phenomenon on the continent," as said Mr. Meng Ga of traditional African wrestling. "It's a combination of sport and mythology. It's very popular during festivals" (Meng Ga, 2006) ^[33]. These traditions are inherited from generations to generations throughout Africa and have evolved into ritualistic forms in formal occasions, often through oral communication and observation. In fact, through formal or informal oral transmission, observed formal initiation, etc. spiritual practices in Africa are passed down to the next generation. Their practices in the martial context can be traced back from the very first records of military conflicts in the continent. From ancient Egypt to today's postcolonial Africa, we can mention the various examples that show case of African spirituality in martial context:

In North Africa. The earliest example is the *Narmer's Tablets* found in ancient Egypt in 3100 BC. It depicts the site of an ancient African military ritual, in which the Egyptian pharaoh is seen preparing rituals of the sacrifice to the gods, along with four Nubian (today's Sudan) warriors standing in front of the pharaoh. The Greeks began wrestling in 776 BC in honor of the African god Amon, whom the Greeks called Zeus. All ancient Greek and Roman scholars attribute their knowledge of Greco-Roman wrestling to illustrations discovered on the walls of ancient Egyptian tombs of Beni Hassan (Cheikh Anta Diop, 1992). ^[34]

In west Africa. There are many gods of war in West African cultures such as “Ogun”, “Shango”, “Eshu” and “Ochosi”. The Yoruba people of Nigeria call *Ogun* “the King who fights with the sword.” (Babalola, Adeboye, 1997)^[35]. West African cultures have many stories and poems about fighting, hunting, and other activities associated with Ogun, such as “*Injiala*”, which is translated as “Saluting birds and animals. (Dennet, Richard Edward, 1910)”^[36]. *Ogun* is said to have a magic potion that protects its user’s body from the damaging effects of any weapon. One can invoke *Ogun* through *Okigbe* and the procedures for *Okigbe* are recorded in the *Ifa* scriptures *Odus* and *Orikis*. *Eshu* is the god of sticks, and *Shango* is known as the god of lightning and witchcraft, but his witchcraft was mainly used in warfare. *Shango*’s priests are said to have a hidden small stone in some part of their bodies that protect them against any attack. *Ochosi* is the god of hunting, the king of the forest, whose main weapon is the bow and arrow (Thomas A. Green, 2010)^[37]. The Yoruba would pray to these gods through ritualistic dances before going to war, or would use the fighting methods of these gods.

In East Africa. *Kibuka* is regarded by the Baganda people as a god of war. *Kibuka* is a mythical ancestor. It is said that in ancient times when the Baganda were fighting their opponents the Banyoro, *Kibuka* rose to the clouds and caused a “shower of arrows” to fall on the heads of the Banyoro. When *Kibuka* was seriously wounded, he threw his shield upon the enemy, and when the Banyoro took back the shield, they later met with a serious disaster. In fact, the shield itself possessed supernatural powers, enough to cause an epidemic to the Banyoro. To get rid of the curse, the Banyoro eventually traded the shield to the Baganda, who kept the shield and other sacred objects of *Kibuka* in *Kibuka*’s temple (John Roscoe, 2005).^[38]

In middle Africa. The Central African region is dominated by the Bantu belief systems. The earliest known settlers of central Africa are the Bantu people, who settled on the Niger/Cameroon border in central and western Africa about 4,000 years ago (2000 B.C.) and later moved down over time. The ancient Bantu civilization is one of the oldest in sub-Saharan Africa. *Engolo* in today’s Angola is an example of central African martial arts. *Engolo* is a total combat system of the *Kunene* clan. This system of fighting is based on the belief system of the Bantu people of central Africa. *Engolo* is based on *Kalunga* (an inverted spiritual world of ancestors), one of the central concepts of Bantu cosmogony. According to the African Bantu cosmogony, *Kalunga* refers to an inverted spiritual world where ancestors walked upside down and could pass on the spirit of *Engolo* to the next generation (Taling T. Rodrigue, 2016).^[39] Armed with the *Engolo* spirit from *Kalunga*, the *Kunene* warriors

can use supernatural powers to protect their tribe. Once possessed by an ancestor spirit, the Kunene warrior fighting style and techniques will be imposed and controlled by the spirit till the targeted opponent is defeated. There is a set of ritual practices to call on the Engolo spirit. This will happen after a long and hard physical training of the warrior and under the strict control of a spiritual master called *NGanga*. It is worth mentioning that, the “spiritual possession” in Engolo practice requires patience, hard work and deep faith.

In southern Africa. The war history of the Zulu warriors is filled with records of magic practices. One of the most common is “*the curse of the enemy with words*”, which sometimes are expressed through battle hymns, prayers or poems such as *Izibongo* or *Izigiyo*. Magic tactics can sometimes be used in the form of magical objects or herbs that the warrior will carry on his body. These are usually prepared by a healer or diviner (Marie-Heleen, Coetzee, 2000).¹⁰¹ The most famous of this warfare spiritual tactician was the well-known Zulu Chief warrior *Shaka Zulu*. Historically, it is said that Zulu fighters have used spiritual or supernatural ingredients before or during the combat in order to control the course of the battle. For example, fetishes such as “Impi Kayibon” can blind the opponent’s eyes. The figure of *Shaka* still sparks interest among not only the contemporary Zulu but many worldwide who have encountered the tribe and its history. Certain aspects of traditional Zulu culture still revere *Shaka Zulu*, as the typical praise song below attests. The praise song is one of the most widely used poetic forms in Africa, applying not only to spirits but to men, animals, plants and even towns.

*He is Shaka the unshakeable,
Thunderer-while-sitting, son of Menzi
He is the bird that preys on other birds,
The battle-axe that excels over other battle-axes in sharpness,
He is the long-strided pursuer, son of Ndaba,
Who pursued the sun and the moon.
He is the great hubbub like the rocks of Nkandla
Where elephants take shelter
When the heavens frown...*

Traditional Zulu praise song, English translation by Ezekiel Mphahlele.¹

In short, from south to north, from east to west, African martial arts culture appears

¹ **Es’kia Mphahlele** (17 December 1919 – 27 October 2008) was a South African writer, educationist, artist and activist celebrated as the Father of African Humanism and one of the founding figures of modern African literature.

to be inseparable from African belief systems. The African understanding of the supernatural and the spiritual world has largely influenced African body techniques and has consequently shaped the spiritual component of African martial arts. The multiple African belief systems that put in relationship the spiritual world and the natural one, the ancestors' world and the living one are the building blocks of African spirituality in general, and the cornerstones of spirituality in African martial arts in particular. The Belief in the existence of spirits and delocalized entities in nature and the knowledge of control techniques over these entities can help the African martial artist to achieve his intentions and purposes related to "Defense" and/or "Attack". Under the influence of African nature worshiping, the understanding of divine objects, herbs and others existing beings or under-human consciousness in nature became an important encoded system of knowledge for fighting or healing. It is noteworthy emphasizing that the spiritual realm of *mortal techniques* and *secret skills* remain highly restrained to high-level practitioners, professional masters or destined warriors. This is as powerful and mythical as "hidden techniques" or "secret books" in ancient Chinese martial arts kept top-secret by super-trained masters and temple's guardians.

2.2.3 "Dance": The Artistic Expression of the Martial Artist's Body Techniques

Dancing is nonetheless, and important component of African martial arts; It is the carrier of the artistic expression of the African martial artist. From traditional ritual dances to art performances, dancing has a long-standing development history in Africa. And compared to African spirituality, the African dance is more a manifestation of an ideology, an expression of sentiments and state of mind. Cadenced with rhythm, it attaches importance to refined, organized and beautified body movements to express the thoughts and feelings of the martial artist. Many of the war dances in ancient Africa included not only the techniques used by soldiers in battle, but also the synchronized sacred dances of before and after wars. Mr. Stanley once described one of the main characteristics of African dance: "*Dancers often perform in semicircles, circles or lines, mainly imitating farming, hunting, war and other activities.... Thousand heads seem to be moving like one head. At first, they all lift up at the same time, showing a high spirit, and then hang down at the same time, emitting a cadenced voice...*". (Stanley, 1996)^[41] In reality, many African dances are the packaging of percussion techniques, which in reality are encoded artistic forms of martial arts. In time of peace, they can be classified as folk-arts, but in war times, they can be transformed into killing techniques. Malonga Casquelord (1947-2003), a Congolese expert dancer, explained clearly that African dance involves in many fighting

techniques, but everything depends on the intention of the dancer. When dancers want to express “beauty”, they express “beauty”, and when they want to express “fighting”, they express “fighting”, he said (Thomas A. Green, Joseph R. Svinth, 2010).^[42] Most African combat performances are accompanied by dance rituals and strong musical rhythms. Dancer Malonga Casquelord further explained the relationship between dance and Spirituality in an interview with scholar Earl White: If the dancer wants to have the agility of a monkey, he must first take the “monkey’s medicine”, and if the dancer wants to have the speed of a snake, he must first take the “snake’s medicine”. Snakes represent speed and precision. Malonga Casquelord also talked of other animals being used in African martial arts, such as gorillas and the electric fish (*Malapterus electricus*). He stressed that wrestlers take electric fish pills before matches to keep their bodies slippery and full of strength (Angela Merder, 1999).^[43] This can largely improve the body techniques of the martial artist. Therefore, *dancing* is not only closely connected to *spirituality*, but also a form of disguised *combat* performance. Another example that shows this close connection between dancing, spirituality and combat is the Cameroonian traditional dance called “*Bikutsi*”, a dancing style of the Fang-Beti people of Cameroon. *Bikutsi* literally means “*steps on the ground*” of “*Hit the ground with your steps*”. The great significance of this dance lies in the steps it contains. The dancers use the rhythm of the sound (clapping hands or drum beating), in programmed steps, to stomp hard on the ground, in order to let the underground ancestors, praise their descendant’s vigor and energy, as to pass down the message to the ancestors that “not only we have remained healthy and strong, but we are combating to achieve the hopes of the future generations. So be proud of us when resting in peace”. It is worth mentioning that the “stepping method” is not very usual, and special training is needed to master the stepping techniques and how to accord with the rhythm and power of the feet, otherwise the ancestors may never get the call. Hard pression on the ground must be maintained through proper posture and strong force, and to follow the change, rhythm must be diversified. This dance basically contains the basic steps of African martial arts style such as the Cameroonian traditional martial arts *Sile Tia* (literally meaning “asked to the ancestors”). To be brief, the combination of combat, dance and spirituality is fully accomplished in *Bikutsi*. In Africa martial arts in general, “Combat”, “Dance” and “Spirituality” are inseparable parts of the same reality, and that reality have become the unique form of expression of the African’s body techniques.

3. CONCLUSION

Anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss, Edward B. Taylor, George Murdoch, etc. shared the view that, people through culture can adapt differently to their environment in non-genetic ways, therefore creating different cultural patterns in relation to their beliefs and social practices. This implies the idea of “Cultural relativism” initially articulated by the American anthropologist Franz Boas who asserted that, culture (civilization) is not something absolute, but relative, and our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our culture (civilization) goes (Levitsky, Steven; Murillo, Maria, 2009).^[44] The ways people use their body from society-to-society is particularly meaningful so far as they set their cultural goals. Among these cultural goals are the needs for adaptation and development in well-defined context. Man’s aggressive nature and hostile environment have imposed him to engineered violent cultural tools and social practices for the purposes of survival and self-contentment. Through genius cultural refinement, these tools and practices have become comprehensive systems of knowledge. *African martial arts* understood as African people’s body techniques related to attack and defense molded under particular social contexts have shaped their own philosophy and artistic orientation through a long process of development history. They use “*Combat*”, “*Dance*” and “*Spirituality*” as cores constituents. *African martial arts* are grounded on the ideal pursuit of physical combat, while remaining deeply rooted in spirituality, namely the set of beliefs and rituals practices that connects the material and spiritual world, and finally express its beauty through the artistic “*Dance*” powered by the African rhythm; The three elements (*Combat+ Spirituality+ Dance*) are integrated into one unique and larger concept of *African martial arts body’s techniques*.

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