

## Reflections on José Rizal, Arnis, and the Nature of ‘Historical Knowledge’

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### ABSTRACT

Although Philippine national hero José Rizal practiced several sports, in popular imagination, he is generally remembered as a fencer. This is probably due to the famous pictures of the hero taken in Paris, France, where he can be seen posing in fencing gear. From an academic point of view, most sources describe Rizal as a swordsman who used to practice fencing, both in Europe and in the Philippines. Few works mention that Rizal practiced *arnis* or Filipino folk fencing, which nowadays is a well-known martial art and the national sport of the Philippines. However, the details given by biographers and scholars about the martial disciplines practiced by Rizal lack depth or are often inaccurate. By examining Rizal’s memoirs, novels, and epistolary correspondences with his family members, friends, and fellow reformists, as well as biographies and oral accounts about the hero, this article sheds light on the kind of fencing practiced by the hero in different stages of his life and reflects on the partial/impartial and biased/unbiased nature of historical knowledge explaining why many Filipino martial arts researchers and scholars have so far rejected the possibility that Rizal was an *arnisador*.

*Keywords:* Sining José Rizal, arnis, fencing, Filipino martial arts

The fact that José Rizal practiced Western fencing is well known. It is well documented both by photographic evidence—many are familiar with the 1889 photos of the hero throwing a lunge at famous painter and activist Juan Luna (Austin Craig Album, plate no. 54) or the photo in which the two pose in fencing gear together with their friend and fellow reformist Valentin Ventura (*Juan Luna*, NLP Digital collection)—as well as the many references such as the hero’s correspondences with his family members, friends, and fellow reformists during his stay in Europe. There is, by contrast, uncertainty as to whether he also practiced *arnis de mano*, the Filipino folk fencing that in 2009 was declared the national martial art and sport of the Philippines (Philippines, Republic Act No. 9850)<sup>1</sup>. But the aim of this article is not only to answer the seemingly trivial question of whether Rizal played arnis de mano. In historicizing his practice of arnis (short form of arnis de mano), the study

addresses a more significant issue: how historical knowledge, such as that of arnis, can be altered by the collective opinion experts share about sources coming from a given timeframe.

Although Rizal's knowledge of arnis or *eskrima*, as it is also called, is mentioned in various sources, specific research on the subject is lacking. The only work that addresses the subject with an appropriate academic methodology, including a systematic checking of sources and their reliability, is that by Ryan Alvin M. Pawilen titled "Guro Pepe?: Examining the Idea of 'Rizal as Martial Artist' in Popular Biographical Sources." Unfortunately, Pawilen concludes that: "No, Rizal probably did not practice Arnis, after all" (140). According to him, the depiction of Rizal as an *arnisador* is the result of a promotional attempt by practitioners to associate their martial art with well-known historical figures, as it was also done with Lapu-Lapu.

In fact, books, magazines, and websites on Filipino martial arts (FMA)<sup>2</sup> contain so much unfounded information on their history and origins—many of them excellently disguised by FMA masters Celestino C. Macachor and Ned R. Nepangue in their book *Cebuano Eskrima - Beyond the Myth* (43-65)—that even among enthusiasts themselves, there is a tendency to label as myth or legend anything that could be a source of pride for FMA practitioners.

In this article, subdivided into sections corresponding to the various stages of Rizal's life, I will examine in detail the references to the martial discipline practiced by Rizal in the Philippines. Additional information will show that the hero used to practice and teach arnis before and after his stay in Europe.

My philological approach to research, concerned with the identification of sources crucial to the critical evaluation of information, sheds light on a detail—Rizal's knowledge of arnis—that, although may seem insignificant to many, has been a source of doubt among Filipino martial arts practitioners for decades. In 2008 FMA master and researcher Nepangue condensed this doubt with a mere question mark soon after the word 'arnis': "Of course he [Rizal] was well-coordinated and fast because of his Western fencing and arnis (?) background" (Nepangue 32). Today, it is still a cause for debate on social media (Marquez). I will likewise look into the predisposition of the community of scholars and researchers to consider writings on arnis during the postcolonial period as false, as can be clearly inferred from the satirical *Kali Historical Nugget* series of posts in the Filipino Martial Arts Forum on Facebook (Dojillo). For them, the claim that Rizal practised arnis is a nationalist invention.

## Rizal's Youth in the Philippines: Practicing Arnis

Buenaventura Mirafuente was the first FMA author to describe Rizal as an expert in arnis. He wrote about the hero in his historical review titled “*Maikling Kasaysayan ng Arnis*” (“A Brief History of Arnis”), included in Placido Yambao’s book *Mga Karunungan Sa Larong Arnis (Knowledge of the Game of Arnis)*. Published in 1957, this was the first book on arnis, and the historical information provided by Mirafuente, including Rizal’s practice of arnis, has since been reused by several authors. But Mirafuente cannot be considered a reliable source. The doubt about the veracity of his claims about Rizal arises from his other statements such as Lapulapu and his warriors also having practiced arnis. Since there is no evidence to support this claim, many FMA researchers have also been led to consider information regarding Rizal and arnis as inaccurate. Additionally, the list of heroes given by Mirafuente does not end with these two great figures but includes others:

*Sina* Dr. Jose Rizal, Hen. Antonio Luna, Hen. Gregorio del Pilar, Gat Andres Bonifacio, Rev. Fr. Gregorio Aglipay, *at iba pang mga bayani ng lahing kayumanggi ay pawang dalubhasa sa sining ng arnis* (Dr. Jose Rizal, Gen. Antonio Luna, Gen. Gregorio del Pilar, Gat Andres Bonifacio, Rev. Father Gregorio Aglipay and other heroes of our race were all experts in the art of arnis). (Mirafuente 9; R. Galang 29)



**Fig. 1.** Rizal practicing arnis.

Artwork by Daniele Calvarese based on an idea of Andrea Rollo.

Mirafuente's list of names conveys a clear patriotic message: the heroes of the revolution against Spain were skilled *arnisadores*. Among the FMA community, practitioners and scholars do not share the same opinion. Majority of FMA practitioners are convinced and proud of this. On the contrary, most FMA scholars and researchers argue against such claims, attributing them simply to the strong nationalistic impulse that characterized the historical and social milieu when Yambao published his book.

Mirafuente mentions two venues where young Filipinos in Manila could practice fencing in the late 19th century: the *Tanghalan ng Sandata* located on Sales Road and the Ateneo Municipal de Manila, which at the time was on Arzobispo Street in Intramuros. In particular, according to Mirafuente, some of the heroes used to practice both disciplines, Western and Filipino fencing, in the latter. Mirafuente states:

*Ilang taon bago magsipaghimagsik ang mga Pilipino nuong 1896, sa daang Sales, Maynila, ay binuksan ni Don Jose de Azas ang Tanghalan ng Sandata, hayagang aralan sa sining ng pananandata; at maging sa Ateneo de Manila, ay itinuro rin ang arnis at "florete or foil" bilang hiwalay na karunungan sa paaralan. Doon nag-aral ang iba sa ating nga bayani sa sining ng "florete or foil" bukod pa sa arnis.*

(A few years before Filipinos revolted in 1896, at Sales Road, Manila, Don Jose de Azas opened the Theater of Arms, an open school for the study of the art of arms; and also at the Ateneo de Manila, arnis and "florete or foil" were taught as separate subjects. There some of our other heroes studied the art of the "florete or foil" aside from arnis.) (Mirafuente 11; Macapagal)

In his article "A History of Arnis in Manila and Surrounding Areas" (2001), Mark Wiley includes the information from Mirafuente but erroneously locates Jose de Azes' *Tanghalan ng Sandata* within the Ateneo de Manila campus. Furthermore, among the heroes who trained at the Ateneo, Wiley explicitly mentions Rizal: "In addition, it is believed that some of the Philippines' national heroes, including Jose Rizal, trained there" (57). This belief probably has its origins in two facts: first, that Rizal attended the Ateneo, and second, that he was a keen fencer.

In contrast, as already mentioned in the introduction, Pawilen rejects the idea of Rizal as an arnis practitioner. However, in order to confirm or deny the claim that Rizal used to practice arnis during his lifetime, it is necessary to examine the numerous biographies, memoirs, works, letters, and other first- or second-hand sources on the hero. Among them, the most evident record indicating that the

hero practiced fencing was a letter that the 17-year-old Rizal wrote in 1878 from Santa Cruz, Manila to his Ateneo classmate Enrique Lete. In that letter, where Rizal expresses his desire to be a “swordsmen,” he also claims to have “played *moro-moro*,” a traditional Filipino game. The correspondence reported in the *Epistolario Rizalino* (1930) states:

Mi mano tiembla pues acabo de jugar al moro moro, pues sabrás que quiero ser espadachín. (1:10)

The literal translation is:

My hand trembles because I have just played the *moro moro*, because you know I want to be a swordsman. (my trans.)

In his statement, Rizal uses the phrase “*Jugar al moro moro*” which places his practice of fencing in the context of a game.<sup>3</sup> A detailed description of the moro-moro game is provided by Albert Sonnichsen, an American soldier arrested during the Philippine-American War. In his *Ten Months a Captive Among Filipinos* (1901), Sonnichsen writes:

But the accomplishment of which they were proudest was the moro-moro play, a kind of fencing in which each of the combatants has a bolo in the right hand and a dagger in the left. This is a relic of the times when the Malay Filipinos all were Mohammedans, ruled by rajahs, before the advent of the Spaniards. As boxing is to the British and Americans, so is moro-moro to the Tagalog. Although he may be lazy and disinclined to exert himself, the Tagalog youth is willing to stand for hours giving and taking blows with sticks in this exercise, until he is bathed in perspiration.

Here in Malolos, we saw a good deal of this and even had it taught us, but we did not prove apt pupils. Two men would stand facing each other, each a long stick in the right hand, to represent the bolo, a short one in the left to serve as dagger or “campit,” as the Tagalog calls it. Then commences a giving and warding off of blows bewildering to a stranger, but in which there is undoubtedly a crude science. Sometimes they would stop all of a sudden as if petrified in some position, while the bystanders would loudly argue which of the two had the advantage, and, when at length decided, the fight was resumed. (82-83)

The technique with a long stick and a short one described by Sonnichsen is undoubtedly the style of Filipino arnis called *espada y daga* (sword and dagger). Although the *espada y daga* was once a typical combination of weapons in Western fencing, it was hardly ever adopted by European fencers at the end of

the 19th century. On the contrary, the simultaneous use of rattan sticks, a longer one representing the sword and a shorter one replacing the dagger, was a typical feature of Filipino fencing. Important to consider is the first documented definition of the word “*arnés*,” old pronunciation of *arnis*, given by Epifanio de Los Santos in 1916:

Arnés, úsase en lugar de esgrima, principalmente de espada y daga, y no como armadura defensiva, guarnición o utensilio de caza.

(Arnés is used instead of fencing, mainly sword and dagger, and not for defense armor, handguard or hunting tool.) (*Florante* 64, *Vida de Florante y Laura* 55; my trans.)

The above reference to the oldest definition of *arnés* is taken from the critical essay that accompanied a republication by de Los Santos of the poem *Florante et Laura* by the famous writer Francisco Balagtas y de la Cruz, also known as Francisco Baltazar. Written in 1835 or 1836, this poem is the first written source on the practice of Filipino fencing in the archipelago (Cruz 39).

Indeed, in the early decades of the 1900s, there was a faction of Filipino fencing practitioners who considered the *espada y daga* style of fencing to be typically Filipino, unaware of the existence of this style in Western fencing. In a 1925 article titled “*La Esgrima en Filipinas*” (“Fencing in the Philippines”), Manuel Reyes compares modern European fencing and traditional Filipino fencing. On the latter, he writes:

Los partidarios de la llamada escuela nacional aducen razones sobre razones para probar: 1° Que la esgrima de espada y daga es genuinamente filipina, y por tanto, no ha podido ser importada por los españoles; 2° Que la esgrima de espada y daga es muy superior a la de espada sola y del sable europeos de la escuela moderna.

Estas son, en síntesis, las afirmaciones de los partidarios de la esgrima de espada y daga.

(The supporters of the so-called national school adduce reasons upon reasons to prove: 1° That *esgrima de espada y daga* [sword and dagger fencing] is genuinely Filipino, and therefore could not have been imported by the Spaniards; 2° That sword and dagger fencing is far superior to the European single sword and sabre fencing of the modern school.)

(These are, in brief, the claims of the supporters of *espada y daga* fencing.) (19-20; my trans.)

In essence, at the time of Rizal, moro-moro was an arnis game. Nevertheless, in various texts in Spanish or English, the phrase “jugar al moro moro” has been explained by using the words “esgrima” or “fencing.” An example is the José Rizal National Centennial Commission’s collection *Cartas Entre Rizal y Otras Personas 1877-1896* of 1961. Although Rizal’s letter to Lete states “Jugar al moro moro” (13, letter no. 8), the footnote reads:

*Rizal ya estudiaba entonces el primer año de Medicina en la U.S.T., y a la vez que esta, estudiaba también pintura y esgrima.*

(At that time, Rizal was attending the first year of Medicine at the U.S.T., and at the same time he was also studying painting and fencing. (8n4; my trans.)

To give another example, in his book *José Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas* (1984), Spanish historian Fidel Villaruel includes both the Spanish version of the letter and his translation:

My hand is shaking because I have just had a fencing bout (acabo de jugar al moro-moro). You know I want to be a swordsman (espadachín). (101)

Unfortunately, foreign terms such as “fencing bouts” have completely replaced the original words “jugar al moro-moro,” fully altering the meaning of the sentence. Several authors have translated the letter as follows:

My hands are shaking because I have just had a fencing bout; you know I want to be a swordsman. (Guerrero 67; Navarro, “Rizal: Zen” 41; Navarro, “Jose Rizal”)

By completely omitting that Rizal had just finished playing moro-moro, the phrase “had a fencing bout” seems to refer to European fencing. This, however, is not what is meant by Rizal’s letter. He was undoubtedly referring to arnis de mano.

Pawilen himself mentions Rizal’s letter to Lete but, not being familiar with the dynamics of the moro-moro duel-game, he gives it the same meaning as the other authors:

My hands are trembling as I have just played *Moro-Moro* (or better translated to “I have just finished sparring/a duel), because you know that I want to be a swordsman/fencer. (134)

The inaccuracy of some sources and translations, probably due to the lack of interest in details among scholars who have described the hero’s life and deeds, has resulted in confusion on the martial disciplines practiced by the hero.

Another document on Rizal's practice of arnis during his adolescence in the Philippines dates back to December 1877. It is Rizal himself who mentions the episode in his autobiography *Memorias de un Estudiante de Manila*:

*Mi familia se extrañó cuando supo que yo manejaba las armas, pués aquella misma noche probóme, el mejor espadachín de mi pueblo.*

(My family was surprised when they heard that I handled weapons, because that same night I proved myself to be the best swordsman in my town). (35; my trans.)

This episode, which happened in Rizal's hometown in Calamba, Laguna has been recounted in different versions by several authors. In his book *The Pride of the Malay Race* (1949), Filipino politician, writer, and educator Rafael Palma describes the episode as an "exhibition bout" and replaces the original term "*armas*" with "sword":

After his baccalaureate, he surprised his family with his skill in handling the sword when he gave an exhibition bout with the best swordsman of the town. (25; *Biografía de Rizal* 21)

Palma's decision to use the term "sword" can likely be attributed to Rizal's use of the word "*espadachín*" ("swordsman") in his letter. Like Palma, in his book *Stories on Rizal's Character, Teachings, Examples* (1980), Filipino historian and author Diosdado G. Capino also erroneously uses the term "sword" to describe the weapon handled by Rizal against the opponent in Calamba:

"My family," wrote Rizal in one of the stories about his student days, "was surprised when they learned that I knew how to handle the sword. On the night when I arrived at our home from Manila, I defeated the best swordsman in our town." (102)

However, in the book *José Rizal: Man and Hero* (1963), Filipino physician and writer Sixto Orosa includes the oral account given by Dr. Conrado Ustariz's father, one of Rizal's neighbors, who tells of two matches against the aforementioned opponent in Calamba. Both fought with sticks:

#### RIZAL LEARNS A LESSON.

Another interesting story about Rizal, told by Dr. Conrado Ustariz's father, who was a neighbor of the Filipino hero, was the following:

"On one occasion, Rizal and the town's master fencer engaged in esgrima (native fencing).

The two contenders used canes, like those used by a Macabebe or a Batangueño cloth peddler. Rizal got the worse of the encounter. He was hit on the forehead. But he did not insist on continuing. Two weeks later, he again faced the champion and defeated him. Cold and calculating in any kind of encounter, he believed that he needed further training to defeat his opponent. Hence the two-week interval between their first and second fencing bouts.” (65)

Orosa uses the Spanish *esgrima* but, by describing it as “native way of fencing,” it is clear that he is referring to Filipino fencing, which was also called *eskrima* pronounced with the “K” or *escrima* with the “C” (alternative terms to *arnis de Mano* or *arnis*).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the use of sticks, distinctive of *arnis de mano*, confirms the fact that the two contenders faced each other in Filipino fencing matches. However, one detail still requires clarification. In the same book, Orosa writes:

In Calamba he [Rizal] studied wrestling and **esgrima**, the native way of fencing; in Japan he studied **Jiu-Jitsu**; in Europe, fencing and marksmanship. (64)<sup>5</sup>

The astonishment of the family that Rizal knew how to use weapons, described by Rizal himself in his autobiography *Memorias de un Estudiante de Manila*, contrasts with Orosa’s words that Rizal learned Filipino fencing in Calamba. Had Rizal begun practicing *arnis* during his childhood in Calamba, his family would have undoubtedly been aware of his skill in weapon usage. This is precisely what *arnis* aims to teach: the ability to use weapons effectively.

In *Jose Rizal: A Collection of What People Have Said and Written about the Filipino National Hero* (1956), recounting the activities practiced by the hero in his youth, Orosa uses the English term “fencing” in a generic way: he does not specifically mention native fencing. This suggests that Orosa became aware of the account of Dr. Conrado Ustariz’s father in the period between the publication of his two books—after 1956 and before 1963.

Orosa, as well as many other authors such as Osias and Panlasigui, links Rizal’s practice of “fencing” to his uncle Manuel, his mother’s brother, who had instilled in him a love for the sport since childhood. In his 1956 book, Orosa narrates:

His uncle Manuel taught him athletics. Rizal soon formed habits of daily exercise and from an undersized, frail boy, became muscular and strong. He learned fencing, wrestling, swimming, and when he became a full-grown man, he would put an iron bar on the nape of his neck, fold his arms around it, and six husky men could not wrest it from him. (2)

Orosa does not specify the source of this information but it likely comes from Charles Edward Russell and Eulogio Balan Rodriguez, authors mentioned by Orosa elsewhere in the text (60, 100). In their book *The Hero of the Filipinos* (1923), they write:

He had been born at Calamba, June 19, 1861. In his earliest childhood he seemed undersized and undervitalized; but when he was six years old there came to his father's house his uncle Manuel, a figure of health and a resolute practitioner of open-air sports, who took Jose in hand and with daily exercise and rigorous living built his body to normal strength and agility. Filipinos have a natural aptitude for athletics; he verified now the ancestral blood in his veins. He ran and jumped; he took long walks; he learned to fence, to ride, and to like the sun and the wind. (28)

And again:

Rizal had never forgotten the training in physical exercise he had received from his uncle; he still loved to fence, to ride, to run, to take long, swift walks. (159)

However, there are also different stories about Rizal's first fencing instructor. For example, his sisters Narcisa and María do not mention fencing among the disciplines taught by their uncle to the young Rizal. Their recollections may be found in the book *Lolo José, An Intimate Illustrated Portrait of José Rizal* (2007) by Asunción López Bantug, Narcisa's granddaughter, where we read:

Recalled my grandmothers Narcisa and María:

...

Happily, our Uncle Manuel, seeing the boy's avidity for advice on bodybuilding and pitying his eager envy of tougher boys, took him under his care. A strong man full of vitality, our Uncle Manuel sought to part the boy from his books and to satisfy his craving to develop his body. He made the boy skip, jump, run; and though this was at first hard work for the frail boy, he had so strong a will and such anxiety to improve himself that, at last, the will won over the flesh. He became lighter and quicker on movement; and his physique, more lively, more robust, more vigorous, though he didn't seem to grow much taller. (18)

In the same book, Rizal's great-niece attributes his first fencing lessons to his elder brother Paciano:

Paciano was ten years older and would always feel a special responsibility for his younger brother. It was Paciano who first taught the little José to ride, to swim, to fly a kite, and to fence. (20)

In any case, the controversial point is that if Rizal really did study native fencing as a child (either with his uncle or his brother), the family's astonishment at seeing him wielding arms at the age of 16 against his opponent in Calamba is unexplainable.

The discordance among the different accounts should be examined by assessing their sources. There is no doubt that his relatives were surprised to see him fight, as Rizal himself states in his autobiography. On the contrary, it is not certain that it was his uncle or his brother who taught him how to fence, as we do not know the source of these statements. It is likely that Rizal started studying arnis only once in Manila during his time at the Ateneo.

The scholastic records of the Ateneo Municipal do not include arnis or fencing, nor any subject on physical activity in general, in the list of subjects studied by the young Rizal:

1872-1873	
Arithmetic.....	Excellent
Latin 1.....	"
Spanish 1.....	"
Greek 1.....	"
1873-1874	
Latin 2.....	Excellent
Spanish 2.....	"
Greek 2.....	"
Universal Geography.....	"
1874-1875	
Latin 3.....	Excellent
Spanish 3.....	"
Greek 3.....	"
Universal History.....	"
History of Spain and the Philippines.....	"
Arithmetic & Algebra .....	"

1875-1876

Rhetoric & Poetry..... Excellent

French I..... ”

Geometry & Trigonometry.....”

1876-1877

Philosophy 1..... Excellent

Minerology & Chemistry ..... ”

Philosophy 2..... ”

Physics..... ”

Bothany & Zoology..... ” (Zaide, *José Rizal: Life* 32)

However, in a letter to his sisters and brothers from Manila dated July 2, 1876, Rizal mentions gymnastics at the Ateneo Municipal de Manila:

I am now studying philosophy, physics and chemistry, natural history, drawing and gymnastics. (*One Hundred Letters* 4)

This simply indicates that gymnastics was a subject which was not given a grade in the end-of-year report card.

As regards the practice of fencing in the Ateneo, more useful information may be found in Rafael Palma’s biography of the hero, *The Pride of the Malay Race* (1949):

José was considered small of stature and he tried to correct this defect by applying himself regularly to gymnastics in the college. He also engaged in other physical exercise, such as fencing. (25; Palma, *Biografía de Rizal* 21)

In the above quotation, Palma does not explicitly say that the hero practiced fencing in Ateneo. Rather, his statement could be read to mean that Rizal used to practice fencing during his time as a college student. We do not know whether the fencing lessons were organized by Ateneo or were a pastime that had nothing to do with the educational institution.

Pawilen suggests the possibility that the young hero “attended gymnastics and fencing training as extra-curricular activities or joined groups outside his schools” (131). The second option seems to be confirmed by Capino, where the author, unfortunately without specifying his source, gives further details about Rizal’s study of fencing in Manila and mentions his usual training partner:

Rizal took fencing lessons for exercise in the house of Antonio Luna in Binondo, Manila. Jose Luna, a brother of Antonio, was a classmate of Rizal when he was studying at the Ateneo Municipal de Manila, Jose Luna and Rizal often fenced with each other. (102)

The Luna brothers mentioned by Capino would become famous *ilustrados* and officers of the Philippine-American War. In particular, Antonio Luna would be remembered as one of the most valiant generals of the War. The lesser-known elder brother Jose Luna would serve as a medical officer. Interestingly, in the above quotation, Capino does not specifically mention fencing lessons in the Ateneo but only those at the Luna family home, where Rizal trained with his Ateneo classmate José Luna (both born in 1861). Capino does not state whether the fencing studied at the Luna house was Western or native fencing. Certainly, the use of the English word rather than the name of the Filipino martial art suggests Western fencing. However, the home practice and the absence of any indication of who the fencing master was suggest that the two friends were training in arnis. Usually, Western fencing, which was a sport for aristocrats, was studied in academies or clubs run by recognised fencing masters. Arnis, on the other hand, was popular fencing often practised within the family.

After graduating, Rizal enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Santo Tomas in Intramuros, Manila, where he very likely went on practicing arnis with groups outside the University. This possibility seems to be suggested by Rizal himself when in his second novel, titled *El Filibusterismo* (1891), he mentions fencing among the various activities carried out by boarders in a students' lodging house:

*Conciertos de piano y violin, de guitarra y acordeon, alternan con el chocar repetido de bastones de las lecciones de esgrima* (Concerts of piano and violin, of guitar and accordion, alternated with the repeated impact of canes from the fencing lessons). (Rizal 100-101, Lacson-Locsin 110)

Although Rizal uses the Spanish term *esgrima*, the weapons used were not swords but canes, a typical weapon of arnis de mano.

The students' lodging house described by Rizal in his novel was very likely inspired by *Casa Tomasina*, a dormitory at Calle 6, Santo Tomas, Intramuros, where Rizal lived with some friends. Villarreal writes:

There is little doubt that Rizal refers to the *Casa Tomasina* and to his fellow-boarders when he describes a "student hostel" in Chapter 14 of *El Filibusterismo* under the title of *Una casa de estudiantes*. Since the *Casa Tomasina* was run by his uncle and aunt, it is presumed that Rizal did not take the caricature too far and that he intended to portray an approximate picture of the place and of his experience there. (127)

Apart from what Rizal wrote in his novel, the practice of *arnis* in the students' lodging house is suggested also in the picture of *Casa Tomasina* dated 1879 (Epistolario Rizalino 1:210; Villarroel 125), where Rizal is standing near a painting with a paintbrush and palette. Among the many boarders portrayed in the picture dressed according to their hobbies, there are two students, specifically Crisanto Aguilar and Sixto Lopez, crossing two sticks in "fencing mode."

In short, Rizal's novel and the *Casa Tomasina* picture are clues that, together with Rizal's letter to Lete recounting how he just finished playing the moro-moro *arnis* game, lead one to assume that he practiced "stick fencing" (also known as *arnis* in the Philippines) with other boarders.

Another training partner of Rizal was Gregorio Aglipay, the well-known presbyter and activist who founded the Iglesia Filipina Independiente. Although a source of much debate, it seems that it was during one of their training sessions that the hero prompted Aglipay to take the vows. The source of this information is Aglipay himself. Filipino writer Zoilo M. Galang recounts the conversation between the two in his work *Leaders of the Philippines* (1932):

What led him to such a mighty task happened a long time ago in Intramuros when Dr. Jose Rizal was living with him. Dr. Rizal and he were in the house of the former's sweetheart, Leonor Rivera. They were fencing, when Pepe said to him, "Be a priest." But Gorio replied, "No!" (27)

Galang speaks of "fencing" training but as earlier explained, sources mentioning fencing during Rizal's time did not really distinguish Western fencing from Filipino fencing or *arnis*. Thus, it is important to ascertain whether the two were training partners and, then, determine what style of fencing they practiced.

Among the writers of Rizal's biographies who subsequently reported this episode are Frank Charles Laubach, Simon Mandac, and Tomás S. Fonacier. Laubach, in *Rizal: Man and Martyr* (1936), writes what Rizal allegedly said to Aglipay but without mentioning fencing. He specifies in a footnote that the conversation is an "[e]xtract from historical studies of Dr. Pardo de Tavera, corroborated in person by Bishop Aglipay" (57-58). On the contrary, in his unpublished manuscript written after Aglipay's death, Mandac, a long-time personal secretary of the Filipino priest, confirms Aglipay and Rizal's practice of fencing and adds another martial sport: wrestling. He states:

In Santo Tomas University he became acquainted with Jose Rizal and cultivated close friendship with him. Together they studied, walked and played wrestling and fencing.

Aglipay planned to study law, but Rizal dis[s]uaded him. “Take Theology” Rizal said, “and we shall help each other in emancipating our country from Spanish rule; you will stay inside, and myself, outside.” (4)

Mandac does not specify that the conversation took place during a fencing session, but the decision to quote Rizal’s words immediately after writing that the two used to practice fencing together is most likely not accidental.

Fonacier, in *Gregorio Aglipay y Labayan (A short Biography)* (1954), specifies that the conversation took place while they were training:

Aglipay had plans of preparing for the law. But while he was at Letran, he became acquainted with Rizal, who made a profound influence in Aglipay’s later life. The two became very good friends, for both were good fencers. One day, while they were resting from a fencing game, Rizal asked him what he expected to be. “I want to be a lawyer, Pepe,” answered Aglipay. Then they continued fencing. When they got tired, they stopped and sat together. In the course of the conversation, Rizal urged Aglipay to prepare for the priesthood instead. (10-11)

Fonacier does not specify the source of this information but the words allegedly spoken by Rizal during the conversation are roughly identical to those in Laubach’s account. Therefore, it is likely that Fonacier’s source is the “historical studies of Dr. Pardo de Tavera, corroborated in person by Bishop Aglipay” (Laubach 57-58).

As can be seen from the above quotation, Fonacier places the birth of Rizal’s friendship with Aglipay at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran in Intramuros, Manila, while his secretary Mandac states that the two met at Santo Tomas University. Since Rizal attended the Ateneo and given the close relationship between Mandac and Aglipay, I consider the hypothesis that Rizal and Aglipay met at Santo Tomas University more plausible. The friars Pedro S. de Achútegui and Miguel Anselmo Bernad deepen this aspect, focusing on where they first met in their book *Religious Revolution in the Philippines: The Life and Church of Gregorio Aglipay, 1860-1960* (1961), where they write:

AGLIPAY AND RIZAL. - The biographers like to link Aglipay’s name with that of Rizal. Tomas Fonacier says that Aglipay and Rizal became good friends while at Letrán - a difficult thing to accept since Rizal did not go to Letrán but to the Ateneo. Others say that the two became friends at Santo Tomas. This is much less unlikely since both went to Santo Tomás, and it is not improbable that they were at Santo Tomás at the same time. Rizal graduated Bachelor of Arts from the Ateneo in 1877, enrolled at

Santo Tomás the following year and left for Europe in 1882. Aglipay went to Manila in 1876, studied for two years under Carpio, and enrolled at Letrán in 1878. He *could* have been at Santo Tomás beginning in 1881, leaving for the Vigan Seminary in 1883. Thus, Rizal and Aglipay *may* have been both at Santo Tomás during the school-year 1881-1882. But it is one thing to say that they were in Santo Tomás together. It is another thing to say that they were personal friends. (11)

The comment made by the two friars about the uncertainty of the bond of friendship between Aglipay and Rizal also casts doubt on whether their dialogue during fencing training actually took place.

As it can be expected from the above quotation, the two friars question the veracity of the whole story:

The story falls of its own weight. In the first place, it is unlikely that Rizal would talk of an independent Philippines at a time when the idea of independence had not yet occurred to Filipino patriots... . In the second place, Rizal could not very well persuade, nay force, another to become a priest when he himself had given up the idea of becoming a Jesuit ...

On the face of it, the story is an evident attempt to link the name of Aglipay to that of the national hero and may be safely dismissed as a myth. The learned Filipino scholar, Dr. Jose P. Bantug, finds no foundation for the story beyond the statement of Aglipay's biographers. (12)

If the two friars were right, and the dialogue between Rizal and Aglipay never took place, this would undermine the assumption that the two practiced fencing together.

Three years later, their opinion was part of a debate with historian Willian Henry Scott. The debate was published in the journal *Philippine Studies*. Scott, unlike Achútegui and Bernad, does not exclude the possibility that the conversation between Rizal and Aglipay while fencing really happened. In communication with the journal editors, Scott states:

Another effect of document-worship is a disinclination to believe anything happened which left no written record behind it. Previous Aglipayan biographers recounted a story in which José Rizal influenced Aglipay to become a priest while the two of them were chatting and fencing together during their school days, and while Fathers Achútegui and Bernad do not invoke the absence of documents to disprove the

story – for what kind of documents would two men have left of a fencing conversation?- much the same effect is achieved by quoting somebody else: “The learned Filipino scholar, Dr. Jose P. Bantug, finds no foundation for the story beyond the statement of Aglipay’s biographers.” On the grounds of what is presumably logic they conclude that since some of the ideas Aglipay is quoted as saying Rizal expressed were not typical of Rizal’s published opinions of that date, the whole story “may safely be dismissed as a myth.” By “myth” they must mean “lie” for there are men still living to whom Aglipay told this story as a first-person account while passing the very house in which he claimed the incident took place. The possibility of an old man’s having exaggerated an actual historic event of his youth through the years of retelling seems to have been ruled out. Yet in the absence of documents the only basis for concluding that the story was made up out of whole cloth would be if such an act were typical of the man’s character. The research of Fathers Achútegui and Bernad have convinced them that this is just the sort of man Gregorio Aglipay was, and they present various documents to illustrate his character with an honest announcement of their purpose. (331-32)

In other words, Scott believes Aglipay’s account for the simple fact that it was he himself who told it. In particular, Scott mentions the episode in which Aglipay showed Marcelino Foronda Jr. the house of Leonor Rivera, where he practiced fencing with Rizal. It was Foronda himself who recounted this episode in a 1962 article titled “Rizal and Aglipay”:

Aglipay and I drove to nearby Intramuros where Aglipay pointed at a house in a corner, near the old University of Santo Tomas campus. Aglipay said that that house used to be the home of Leonor Rivera and that Rizal and he used to fence on the ground floor. While they were resting during one of those fencing sessions, Aglipay said, Rizal asked him what profession he, Aglipay intended to take up. (7)

Achútegui and Bernad’s response was published in the same issue of *Philippine Studies* immediately after Scott’s communication. Below is the excerpt from the response, which concerns the episode in question:

Mr. Scott finds fault with our dismissal as a myth the story that Aglipay’s decision to become a priest had been suggested to him by Rizal. Such a story, if it were supported by reliable documentary evidence, would of course have to be accepted as fact. In the absence of documentary proof, the story must be tested by internal evidence as well as by other ordinary

criteria of likelihood. Mr. Scott, apparently, accepts the story as true. That is his privilege. We reject it as unlikely: that is what we mean when we call it a myth. We invite the reader to form his own judgment. The story is contained in Zoilo Galang's *Encyclopedia of the Philippines*. (338)

The bone of contention between Scott and the two friars was the fact that Aglipay decided to become a priest at Rizal's suggestion. What is of interest here is the fact that the two of them used to fence together as boys. Regardless of whether Rizal played a role in Aglipay's choice, there is a possibility that the two were training partners. Moreover, as already suggested regarding Rizal's training sessions with Jose Luna, it is also plausible that Rizal and Aglipay practiced Filipino fencing. Apart from the homely location which points to informal lessons or training, there are sources describing Gregorio Aglipay as an *eskrimador* or *arnisador*. Ramiro Umipig Estalilla Jr., an old master of *kabaroan* (the term for the Filipino martial art in Ilocos), states that Aglipay taught eskrima to his father, Ramiro A. Estalilla Sr. (125; Wiley 164). Buenaventura Mirafuente, in his historical review of arnis, mentions Aglipay both as a source of some information and as an "expert in the art of arnis" (9; R. Galang 29).

Furthermore, fencing involves particular requisites: proper attire, mask, and sword (i.e., epee, foil, saber). In the copious narrative about Rizal's youth, there is no reference to the possession of these requisites. Also, these are not needed in arnis.

In conclusion, an examination of the above sources reveals that Rizal certainly used to practice arnis de mano in his youth. The most reliable source on the discipline practiced is Rizal himself who said that he fought in a moro-moro, a Filipino game in which the players compete in *arnis*. The claims of the two closest sources to him, his neighbor and Aglipay, confirm that the young Rizal practiced *arnis*. The neighbour, who describes the two fights against the opponent from Calamba in December 1877, speaks of matches that took place with sticks, a typical arnis weapon, and Aglipay, who was training with him at the time, is described by later sources as an *arnisador*.

Rizal probably began studying *arnis* once in Manila and not with his uncle Manuel or his elder brother Paciano when he still lived in Calamba with his family. Learning began during the years he attended the Ateneo but not as a subject in the curriculum.

The absence of records from the Ateneo confirming the practice of fencing (both Western and native) during the years of Rizal's attendance suggests that the young man cultivated his passion after school hours or outside the institution. Rizal continued to practice *arnis* as a hobby even when he enrolled at the university as he clearly wrote to Enrique Lete. Moreover, the 1979 photo of *Casa Tomasina*

testifies to the practice of “stick fencing” among boarders, which Rizal mentions in his novel *El Filibusterismo* where boys use *bastones* (canes) for their fencing lessons in a student-boarding house.

But what about some authors’ use of the term “fencing”? It is plausible to assume that the English word “fencing” used by both Capino and the biographers of Aglipay, at a time when no distinction was made between the two styles, is to be understood as Filipino fencing (*arnis*) and not Western fencing. In other words, although the English word “fencing” used by Capino and Aglipay’s biographer did not distinguish between Western fencing and Filipino *arnis*, one can assume it was the latter.

### **Rizal’s First Trip to Europe: Still No Western Fencing**

Several authors write that Rizal used to practice fencing in Madrid during the early 1880s. However, this statement is not reflected in the diaries and correspondence of the hero. The same authors also specify which *Sala de Armas* (hall of arms) Rizal frequented at that time. In his biography on the Filipino hero dated 1949, Rafael Palma writes:

He practiced assiduously at the Hall of Arms of Sanz y Carbonell not only to keep his body vigorous but also to be ready to respond to any provocation in a country where duels were frequent and where to engage in a fight on questions of honor or self-esteem was considered elegant. (50; *Biografía de Rizal* 44)

Subsequent scholars also point this out. In his book *Man of the Century* (1964), for instance, Filipino historian and college professor Pedro A. Gagelonia writes an additional detail concerning the monthly cost of the lessons:

To keep himself physically fit he kept a tight schedule at the Hall of Arms of Sanz y Carbonell where he paid a monthly fee of three duros [equivalent to 15 *pesetas*]. (66)

The source of this detail is one of the letters collected by the Philippine National Historical Society in *One Hundred Letters of José Rizal to His Parents, Brothers, Sisters, Relatives* (1959). In this letter of Rizal to his relatives from Madrid on October 28, 1883, he recounts that the cost of the gymnasium he attended in Spain’s capital city amounted to \$3; he does not, however, mention the famous Hall of Arms at all (176). Besides, Rizal could not have attended their fencing school in 1883 as the two fencing masters would work together in the same academy for two years at the turn of the 1890s.

These Spanish masters were the famous Pedro Carbonell (or Carbonel, the Castilian version of the name), author of *Teoria y Practica de la Esgrima* (Theory and Practice of Fencing) (1900), where he defends the concept of a mixed French and Italian school, and Adelardo Sanz, who proclaimed himself the inventor of the *Nueva Escuela Española Moderna de Esgrima de Florete y Espada* (New Spanish Modern School of Fencing of Foil and Sword). Both were pupils of Juan Nicolas Del Peu, also known as “El Zuavo,” a former French soldier teaching fencing in Spain. Having become masters themselves, the two collaborated by teaching at the same academy, the *Sala de Armas* at Puerta del Sol, 9 in Madrid (Carretero García 202, 259, 272):

At some point between 1887 and 1889, Sanz goes to Paris to fence with French masters. Upon his return, he spends two years teaching along with Carbonell. On 11 November 1891, he announces that he has separated from Carbonell. He seems to continue owning the same space as before. (Bacarreza 4)

In essence, there is definitely a time discrepancy. Palma, Gagelonia, and the other authors place the training at the Hall of Arms of Sanz y Carbonell during Rizal’s first trip to Europe, when he resided in Madrid from 1882 to 1886. However, at the time, that Hall of Arms was not yet established.

As for the practice of fencing by Filipinos living in Madrid at that time, the only references I found concern Pedro A. Paterno and Fernando Canon Faustino. In particular, Sta Maria Felice Prudente in her *Fountain of Gold: The Club Filipino Story* of 1983 states:

Pedro Paterno and Fernando Canon Faustino, an electrical engineer as well as Malolos Congress delegate, both enrolled in the 1870s for fencing with the Slav master, Nikosal. (85)

Later, in his article “The Engineer as Hero and Artist” (1987), Manuel Arsenio writes:

Canon sailed for Spain with Maximino Paterno and Santiago Carrilo sometime in 1877. He began a course in medicine (in which institution it is not known), only to discontinue it due to illness. He took fencing lessons under the Slav teacher named Nikosal; so also Pedro A. Paterno studied under this master. (37)

Although numerous authors describe Rizal in Madrid during the period 1882-1886 as a fencing practitioner, there is no evidence to prove their claims.

The only time Rizal mentions fencing during his first trip to Europe is in February 1886, when he was in Germany. In particular, in a letter to his parents and siblings,

Rizal recounts having watched fencing duels between members of the various fraternities at the University of Heidelberg:

I have gone three times to see their duels in Hirschgasse, and I have witnessed some 20 to 25; each time there were 7, 8 or 9 fights and several times the duels have been very bloody...: according to them it is to prove their bravery. (*One Hundred Letters* 285; Alip 144; Gagelonia 91-92)

The impersonal tone of his description (e.g., “according to them it is to prove their bravery”) and the absence of any reference to himself may be due to the fact that Rizal had not yet taken up the study of Western fencing. However, the frequency with which he went to the duels suggests that the dream of becoming an *espadachín* was still alive in him.

A letter he received from Ceferino de León, another *ilustrado*, reinforces the point that Rizal had not started training Western fencing. de León commented on the fencing duels’ customs among German students as follows:

As you portray the German students as bellicose on one hand and on the other good and amiable and as their favorite sport is the duel with offensive weapons from which they come out with scars on their faces, frankly I would not want to see you one day with the traces of those semi-barbaric sports as you describe to me in your letter. (48)

De León, who had been Rizal’s housemate in Madrid, wrote the letter above from the Spanish capital on March 2, 1886. The adjective “semi-barbaric” demonstrates that the Filipino *ilustrados* who formed Rizal’s circle of friends in Madrid, had not yet developed an appreciation for fencing as a sport that could instill in players virtues of willpower, perseverance, discipline, and the spirit of self-sacrifice that they later, from 1890 onwards, considered necessary to shape a new Filipino identity based on the values of strength, bravery, and honor.<sup>6</sup>

## **Rizal Back in the Philippines: Teaching *Arnis* in Calamba**

Back in his hometown after this first period in Europe, Rizal opened a gymnasium for his fellow citizens. It was Rizal himself who, filled with pride, tells of the good results brought by his gymnasium in a letter to his Austrian friend, ethnographer and writer Ferdinand Blumentritt:

For that reason, I give vacation to my patients and my gymnasium pupils and I write to engage in mental conversation for a few hours with my friend. May I tell you that I have popularized here physical exercises so that the gamblers, instead of going to the cockpit or sitting down at the

*panguingue* table, would come to the gymnasium to watch the exercise or join them. Through this means also some ailments are cured. (*The Rizal-Blumentritt Correspondence* 143)

Rizal despised the sport of cockfighting and the card game *panguingue* because he considered them harmful behaviors. He was quite content that his gymnasium provided a new alternative that could keep the men of Calamba away from gambling.

In his letter, Rizal did not specify what sporting activities were held in his gymnasium. However, in the collection *Cartas entre Rizal y el Profesor Fernando Blumentritt* published by the José Rizal National Centennial Commission in 1961, we read:

Rizal organizó entre sus amigos y jóvenes de Calamba un salón de gimnasia. De entre los juegos atléticos en que se ejercitaban se recuerdan las anillas, las barras, las paralelas, el sipa, el boxeo, la esgrima y otros.

(Rizal organized a gym hall among his friends and the young people of Calamba. The athletic games they practiced included rings, bars, parallel bars, sipa, boxing, fencing and others.) (1005n56.3; my trans.)

Most members of the José Rizal National Centennial Commission who participated in the publication of this work were the same ones who worked on *Cartas Entre Rizal y Otras Per-sonas 1877-1896*, where, as seen above, *jugar al moro moro* was explained by the Spanish term *esgrima* instead of the Filipino *arnis*. It is therefore possible to assume that also in *Cartas entre Rizal y el Profesor Fernando Blumentritt*, *esgrima* was chosen instead of *arnis*. Some might argue that *sipa*, the traditional Filipino game with a rattan soft ball, was referred to by its local name, so there was no reason to substitute *arnis* for *esgrima*. *Sipa*, however, does not have a corresponding English word. It has its own set of rules that differentiate it from footvolley, which is a similar Western sport. Referring to it by the name of another sport would change its fundamental nature. Therefore, the decision to keep the Filipino sport's specific name was a choice forced by the lack of alternatives.

In the same year, Eufonio Melo Alip, also a member of the National Centennial Commission, lists both Filipino and Western types of fencing in his *I Traced Rizal's Footsteps in Foreign Lands* (1961):

To wean the people from pernicious habits and vices like playing cards, cock-fighting and *panggingge*, he [Rizal] established a sort of gymnasium and introduced ball games, *sipa*, *arnis* and fencing. (283)

Later, various other biographical authors listed fencing and/or *arnis* among the sports practiced in Rizal's gym hall. For instance, in his 1964 book, Gagelonia states:

While he was with his family Rizal occupied himself with various activities. He set up a gymnastic class and taught physical exercises in the hope that people instead of going to the cockpits to gamble will take up gymnastics to learn the art of fencing, body culture, etc. (170)

Capino also gives an interesting detail about the weapons used during training sessions:

Rizal who was glad to help the young boys in the neighborhood, taught them fencing. To make fencing exercise less dangerous, Rizal made use of wooden canes in teaching his friends. (102)

Unfortunately, the source from which Capino derived this detail is unknown. However, if this were true, the “wooden canes” used for training again suggests the idea that the only kind of fencing at the time known to Rizal and taught by him in his hometown was Filipino fencing.

In *The Asian American Encyclopedia* (1995), Franklin Ng, professor of the Anthropology Department at California State University, writes that upon returning to the Philippines in August 1887, Rizal “opened a gymnasium, where he introduced European sports, such as fencing, shooting, gymnastics, and Roman-style wrestling. He also promoted native sports, such as sipa (Filipino football using a small rattan ball) and arnis (native fencing)” (1280).

Essayist, poet and martial artist Rene J. Navarro also mentions this information in his article “Rizal: Zen Life, Zen Death”:

Rizal organized martial arts groups for Filipinos. Rizal’s public gym in Calamba (circa 1887) combined classes in wrestling, weightlifting, fencing, marksmanship and arnis de mano. It was probably the first integrated martial arts club in the country. He also proposed the inclusion of martial arts in school curricula. (46)

Ng and Navarro’s mention of both fencing disciplines suggests that they believe Rizal had knowledge of western fencing in 1887. However, there is a discrepancy as there are no existing records of Rizal practicing western fencing before his second trip to Europe in 1889.

Apart from the lack of proof that Rizal had already taken up the study of European fencing at the time, it is also difficult to believe that he had the equipment (weapons, protections, etc.) to be able to teach Western fencing in Calamba. There are no references in this regard. Furthermore, rapiers or small swords have such a specific weight, balance, and handling that they cannot be replaced by sticks. If,

as Capino states, Rizal used wooden sticks to teach the children of Calamba, it is because Rizal taught *arnis de mano*.<sup>7</sup>

José Taviel de Andrade y Lerdo de Tejada, the bodyguard assigned by Governor General Emilio Terrero in 1887 to protect Rizal, whose life was in danger after encountering problems with the friars as a result of the publication of his famous novel *Noli Me Tangere*, also wrote of Rizal's hobbies such as "hunting, fencing and shooting, painting and hiking" (Gregorio and Sophia Zaide 120). Lt. Andrade does not specify which fencing style he was referring to but his claim suggests that Rizal practiced western fencing in Calamba while under his protection. However, by mentioning shooting, a sport that Rizal had not yet taken up at that time—the first reference to shooting is made in a letter Rizal wrote from Brussels, Belgium to his friend and fellow reformist Marcelo H. del Pilar in June 1890 (Epistolario Rizalino 3:61-2)—it is clear that Lt. Andrade was referring to the hero's hobbies in his whole life and not specifically to those during the period when he was his bodyguard.

### **Rizal's Second Time in Europe: Western Fencing**

Back in Europe, Rizal was finally able to start practicing Western fencing. This is documented by two historical photographs during his stay in Paris, France and numerous explicit references in his correspondences to his family, friends, and fellow reformists from various cities in Europe where he used to practice fencing, Paris, Bruxelles, and Madrid.

Among the many references is a letter that Rizal wrote to his family on May 16, 1889, in which he recounts his daily routine in Paris:

Los días de mi vida en París se pasan de la siguiente manera. Una o dos horas en el gimnasio y en la esgrima; tres o cuatro en la Biblioteca y el resto lo empleo en escribir, y en visitar a los amigos. Los días que voy a la Exposición se trastornan y entonces sólo quedan las dos horas de gimnasia y esgrima de la noche. Así mi salud se conserva bien. Mis cuñados y mis sobrinos no deben olvidarse de las paralelas y del bastón. (Escritos 309)

My daily life in Paris is spent in the following manner: one or two hours in the gymnasium and in fencing, three or four in the library, the rest I use up in writing and visiting friends. This is not followed on the days when I go to the Exposition and at those times only two hours at night are left for the gymnasium and fencing. Thus I keep up my health. My brothers-in-law and my nephews should not forget to practice with the bars and the cane. (*One Hundred Letters* 367-368; Zaide, *José Rizal, Asia's* 170; Gagelonia 263)

The term “*bastón*” used by Rizal can be interpreted in two ways: athletic sticks used for gymnastics or fencing sticks. However, the context in which the term is used suggests the latter. Rizal creates a parallelism between his daily Parisian routine, spent between gymnastics and fencing, and how they spent their time in the Philippines. He suggests that his relatives not forget practicing with parallel bars for gymnastics and canes for fencing. In fact, Rizal practiced with sabre and foil in Europe, but he was well aware that the weapon used for fencing in his hometown, where he used to teach arnis, was the cane.

Since the famous *Sala de Armas* of Sanz and Carbonell has been mentioned in connection with Rizal’s first trip to Madrid, a few words must also be said about Rizal’s fencing activities during his second stay in the Spanish capital. He stayed in Madrid for six months from August 1890 to January 1891. The practice of Western fencing during this period is evidenced by the words of the future Senator Teodoro Sandiko, another illustrious Filipino fencer who trained with Rizal in Madrid at that time. In particular, in one of his letters to Russel and Rodriguez, authors of the book *The Hero of the Filipinos* (1923), Sandiko writes:

Rizal was fond of physical exercise and so was I. We practiced fencing together and soon became good and close friends. (Russell and Rodriguez 206)

At the same time, several Filipinos in Madrid frequented the famous Hall of Arms of Sanz and Carbonell. In this regard, although there is no specific evidence of Rizal’s presence, the possibility that the hero also attended that Hall of Arms cannot be excluded. Only two months before going to Madrid, he had received a letter from Antonio Luna mentioning the hall. Luna had informed Rizal that besides himself, there were three other Filipinos who attended fencing lessons at the Hall of Arms (Epistolario Rizalino 3:25-26). Therefore, it is possible that, once in Madrid, Rizal also joined the four training partners. In the absence of evidence, however, this remains only an assumption.

### **Rizal’s Last Period in the Philippines: An Experienced Fencer and Arnisador**

During his exile in Dapitan, Rizal formed a school for boys where, in addition to school subjects, he also taught sports. Among these was fencing, but, as with the historical reconstruction of the events of Rizal’s youth, the sources on this subject are conflicting.

Some speak simply of fencing, while others specify that Rizal used to teach arnis. Others mention both activities. For instance, in the article “Short Anecdotes About

Rizal in Dapitan” published in 1931, we read:

Rizal’s program of instruction consisted of: Spanish and English Grammar, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Philippine History, Shorthand, Gymnastics, Fencing, and Natural history. (17-18)

The author of the above quotation, writer for the History Club of the Philippine Women’s College Fraternidad J. Gonzalez, uses the English term “fencing.” In his 1964 book, Gagelonia added the term “*arnis*” in brackets soon after the word “fencing”:

He not only taught them boxing, gymnastics, wrestling, fencing (arnis), swimming, boating, but also participated with his pupils in the performance. (385)

Juan Claros Orendain in his 1966 book *Rizal, Model Citizen of Dapitan* goes back to the English term in his list of sports: “Fencing, swimming and target practice were part of athletics indulged in as recreation” (55). Orendain further writes that Rizal is remembered as a man “who spent much of his time in the afternoon competing with his students in athletics - swimming, boxing, fencing and other manly art of defense against men ready to assault him” (78). Zaide, in the aforementioned 1966 book, speaks only of “fencing,” while in *Jose Rizal, Asia’s First Apostle of Nationalism* (1970), he includes arnis or “native fencing” in the list of sports (248).

Maria Corona Salcedo Romero, Julita R. Santa Romana, and Lourdes Y. Santos made the same point the year before in their book *Rizal and the Development of National Consciousness*:

Believing in the dictum that a sound body makes a sound mind, Rizal also taught his boys boxing, swinging on parallel bars and rings, swimming, wrestling, and arnis (a kind of native fencing). (166)

Celia Bocobo Olivar in *History of Physical Education in the Philippines* (1972) mentions both disciplines separately:

Besides the exercises on the apparatus, the Great Malayan taught his pupils judo, wrestling, Spanish fencing, American boxing, the native arnis, and marksmanship. (33)

Finally, in the 1983 “A History of Philippine Physical Activities: Pre-Spanish to 1946” by Janice Beran, the term arnis completely replaces the word fencing:

Rizal was soon arrested and exiled to Dapitan, on the island of Mindanao, where he opened a school for boys. Following plans he had formulated while in Paris, the student’s education included such activities designed

to strengthen the body as gymnastics, boxing, wrestling, stone throwing, swimming, boating and arnis. Rizal joined his students in the physical activities during the four years prior to his execution on December 30, 1896. He is acknowledged as the first Philippine educator to implement a physical education program. (35)

Fortunately, in *Rizal in Life and Legends* (1974), Alfonso P. Santos records the account of Rizal's sister, Trinidad Rizal, as reported by Aurora R. Ricacho. In her narration, Trinidad Rizal describes in detail a training session in Dapitan between her brother and his pupils (which in time increased to 23). It is clear from her account that the discipline Rizal taught his pupils was Filipino fencing or arnis de mano; in particular, the style with one long and one short stick called Espada y Daga:

After some period of training, Dr. Rizal asked the boys if they would like to be tested. They took this as a challenge and they all answered "Yes". So they arranged that the fencing test should be held in the moonlight on the beach. . . .

For swords, the boys were required to use wooden canes of two feet long. They were told to smear the end of their canes with a colored paint so that their successful hits would make a mark on his shirt. Dr. Rizal dressed himself in spotless white so that any smudge would show clearly. His sword was a rattan club of two feet long held in the right hand, and a wooden dagger of six inches long in the left.

After they had all eaten a good supper and rested well, the group went to the beach in the moonlight. Doña Trining, the sister of Dr. Rizal, went with them to act as judge. . . .

Retold from an account by Doña Trinidad Rizal, sister of Dr. Rizal, Sta. Cruz, Manila, as reported by Aurora R. Ricacho. (50-51)

The use of wooden weapons for Rizal's lessons in Dapitan is confirmed by his great-niece Asunción López Bantug, who, although in a slightly different way, describes the same anecdote of the "challenge" between the teacher and his pupils in two of her books. An interesting detail is that, according to Bantug, the sticks were not dipped in colored paint but dipped in soot. In *Indio Bravo: Story of José Rizal* (1997), she writes:

Maestro José Rizal had just finished giving one of his lessons in the art of fencing. His classroom was a shady patch of ground on his Dapitan property. Instead of real fencing foils, he and his teenaged pupils used thin bamboo poles and sticks.

Confident in their newly acquired skill, the boys dared their teacher to face them all together in a fencing match. *This ought to be fun!* thought Rizal. He went into his hut and changed into a white suit. When he emerged, he offered a prize to any boy who could soil his suit with his weapon.

The boys dipped their foils in soot. Poles and sticks clattered as the teacher dodged the thrusts of his pupils. To the boys' amazement, the maestro's suit survived the swordplay without a smudge. (13)

More briefly in *Lolo José, An Intimate Illustrated Portrait of José Rizal* (2008), she writes:

During one fencing lesson, his pupils dared him to take all of them on at the same time. When the mock fray ended, his coat was still immaculate, unmarked by the sooty ends of the bamboo swords they wielded. No one won the prize he had offered to whoever could smudge his clothes. (135)

Dipping both end and tip of the sticks in soot and charcoal to mark the opponent's clothes was a trick used by old-school *arnisadores*. In *Negros*, for instance, this traditional form of competition was called *Estokadas Blanco y Negro* (White and Black Thrusts [Sy 23]).

Though Rizal gave an *arnis de mano* test to his pupils in Dapitan, this does not mean that he did not teach them Western fencing as well. The fencing equipment possessed by Rizal in the last years of his life before his execution suggests the practice of both disciplines.

His fencing jacket and two foils, from the classic "figure 8" guard, are displayed at the Museo Ni Rizal Fort Santiago in Intramuros, Manila. They were donated to the museum by the heirs of his youngest sister Trinidad Rizal in 1948 (Ay-Ay).

In the book *Lolo José, An Intimate Illustrated Portrait of José Rizal*, a photo labelled "Rizal's fencing equipment" portrays a "cane-sword," a cane containing a hidden blade, curiously crossed with a German tobacco pipe, very likely a souvenir from his stay in that country (107). These objects have been handed down by his family as an heirloom.

## Conclusion

In cases such as this study's subject matter, it is clear that actual historical knowledge—that is, the interpretation of information and past events about historical facts or characters—can be affected by the perception scholars and researchers have of the sources of a particular historical period. Much of what was written about *arnis* in the post-colonial period was the result of a nationalist

sentiment among practitioners. For this reason, many current FMA scholars and researchers consider the fact that Rizal was an arnisador one of the many promotional attempts to instill “Filipino pride” among practitioners. They associate a possible but unverified piece of information with the remaining falsehoods, myths, and legends spread during the same historical period about the origins and development of Filipino martial arts and, in particular, with the tendency of early authors of FMA books to link their martial art to Filipino national heroes. The Lapulapu myth, for example, is the one most indicted narratives. Asserting that the victor of the Battle of Mactan was an arnisador implies that Filipino Martial Arts have precolonial origins and are technically superior to Spanish fencing. Many contemporary FMA scholars have been influenced by this inaccurate claim. As a result, they rejected the possibility that Rizal may have practiced arnis without conducting proper research.

However, if a seemingly trivial detail such as Rizal’s practice of arnis is considered important to a given community, it should be treated with a scientific method.

This article employed source criticism and the philological approach to answer whether Rizal played *arnis*. The information to be considered are only those that Rizal himself left us through his letters and his autobiography, the first-hand information from the priest arnisador Aglipay and those from people closest to Rizal such as his neighbor Conrado Ustariz and his youngest sister Trinidad Rizal. Based on these accounts, the national hero’s fencing experience can be divided into four phases: his practice of arnis de mano in his youth in Manila during his college years, his teaching of arnis in his gym in Calamba in 1887-1888, his study of Western fencing in Paris and other European cities, and his teaching of *arnis de mano* and Western fencing during his exile in Dapitan.

Although we all agree that the historical knowledge widespread during the period of Filipino nationalism was one-sided, current research should be prejudice-free about the dating of sources, except after proper investigation. One should not fall into the easy temptation of generalizing, but focus on the specific case. The history of Filipino martial arts was written at a time when, as is typical of many former colonies, attempts were being made to build a national identity of their own separate from the culture of the colonizing countries. This does not mean, however, that everything written during those years is false. The fact that Rizal was an arnisador is proof of this.

## Notes

1. While acknowledging the martial skills of native warriors of the precolonial period, recent studies (Nepangue and Macachor 43-80; Rollo 14-37) refute that the art of arnis was already in existence before the arrival of the Spanish in the Philippine archipelago. My description of arnis as native espada y daga fencing, often practiced with one long and one short stick, reflects what arnis looked like in Rizal's time. My research on over 260 FMA (Filipino Martial Arts) systems shows that most of the oldest arnis systems practiced in various areas of the archipelago under Spanish rule were originally based on the espada y daga style (Rollo 11-13). Traditional arnis has evolved greatly over the past decades, and the current configuration is a consequence of the development of new fighting techniques carried out in recent decades by famous Filipino and Filipino-American masters to promote their systems worldwide.
2. Filipino Martial Arts (FMA) is the collective name for the various styles and systems of stick and blade fighting originating in the Philippines.
3. *Moro-moro* is a term used for various kinds of Filipino performances depicting the struggle between Moors and Christians. The game played by the young Rizal was strictly linked to the moro-moro plays, the Filipino theatre with the theme "Moros y Cristianos," where the actors practiced arnis (with wooden swords) during the *batallas* (battles) and *torneo* (tournament) scenes. The fact that arnis was included in moro-moro plays was documented as early as 1916 by Epifanio De Los Santos in *Florante: Versión Castellana del Poema Tagalo con un Ensayo Crítico*, "the most complete description of the folk fencing in the country, espada y daga, and even of the batallas of the moro-moro" (my trans.; 64). This has been reasserted by several theater and arnis scholars. Among theater scholars are Nicanor G. Tiongson (44), Alfredo Roces (Briones 96), Felicidad M. Mendoza (37-40, 59-61, 283), and Nikki Serranilla Briones (52-56, 96, 170). In particular, in her book *The Comedia (moro-moro) Rediscovered* (1979), Mendoza describes the level of mastery in arnis that actors needed to possess based on the role they played in the plot (i.e., sultan, prince, soldiers, princess, etc.) (37-40). Almost all writers on *arnis*, relying on the history of the Filipino martial art recounted by Mirafuente in the first book on the subject (12-13; R. Galang 33), even claim that arnis techniques were hidden in the dances of the batallas to circumvent a ban on practicing the native martial art imposed by the Spanish authorities. This mistaken belief is still widespread among FMA practitioners today.

More details about the interrelation between moro-moro and arnis are found in my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis for the University of Alicante, Spain, which is an extensive study on the history of arnis.

4. Nowadays, the three terms “*esgrima*,” “*escrima*,” and “*eskrima*” have different meanings. The first refers to Spanish fencing. The other two refer to the Filipino martial art, also known as “*arnis de mano*” or more briefly “*arnis*.” The use of the letter “k” instead of “c” in “*eskrima*” is due to the introduction of the abakada alphabet in 1940 as the Tagalog-based Filipino national language, which replaced “C” with “K.”

The distinction between the two martial disciplines, *esgrima* versus *escrima*/*eskrima*, was particularly emphasized in the last three decades of the last century when the first English-language *arnis* books were published to popularize Filipino martial arts around the world. At the time of publication of Orosa’s book (1963), however, the three terms were used indiscriminately to refer to fencing. They could be used to refer to both the European style of fencing and the Filipino style. Paradoxically, in some cases, *escrima*/*eskrima* referred to Spanish fencing; think of the many sword duels in the 1955 film *Eskrimador*, which was based on a *komiks* serial of the same title by Clodualdo del Mundo (Spindle). In other works, *esgrima* refers to the Filipino style, often described as *esgrima de espada y daga* (Los Santos, *Florante* 64; Los Santos, *Vida de Florante y Laura* 55; Reyes 19-20).

In the case at hand, Orosa uses the Spanish term *esgrima* to refer to the native style, *arnis*.

5. Orosa does not explain where the information about the martial activities practiced by Rizal comes from, but given the extensive scholarship surrounding the hero, it is evident that Orosa’s statement is a compilation from multiple sources. For example, the information on the practice of *Jiu-Jitsu* in Japan could be taken from Camilo Osias’s 1948 book *José Rizal: His Life and Times* (152, 458), as a title cited by Orosa herself in her book *José Rizal: Man and Hero* (259). Osias’s source in turn was Francisco Villanueva Jr., who in his 1936 book *Reminiscences of Rizal’s Stay in Europe* recounts two anecdotes related to Rizal’s knowledge of the Japanese martial art told to him by Dr. Felix Pardo de Tavera and Don Ramon Ramirez (8). The second anecdote was also told by Jose Maria Hernandez in his 1950 book *Rizal* (121, 276). As regards *arnis*, Orosa’s assertion that in Calamba the hero practiced “**esgrima**, the native way of fencing” (*José Rizal: Man and Hero* 64) comes from the story of Dr. Conrado Ustariz’s father, the neighbor of Rizal who tells of two duels against the champion of Calamba (*José Rizal: Man and Hero* 65).
6. In November 1891, Marco Espada concluded his article “A Fencing Session” by congratulating the Filipino community for taking up fencing and at the same time wishing for the spread of the sport in the Philippines (664). The journalist

was a firm believer in the importance of learning this sport fencing. In addition to the physical benefits of fencing, he saw this sport as a tool to create a *forma mentis* for dealing with social “battles” without resorting to violence. Also following Juan Luna’s visit to Madrid in June 1890, Espada concluded the article “A Party at the Lunas” by praising the Filipino community for taking up the study of the “noble art of fencing.” On that occasion, Espada wrote:

We sincerely praise the interest of the Filipino colony of Madrid in the noble art of fencing. The handling of arms gives one moral strength. He is thus strengthened to fight the battles of society in a peaceful and commendable way whenever he is acquainted with the very great dangers which the use of the force brings. (435)

In the above quotation, Espada states that fencing was not just an exercise for physical strengthening. The “moral strength” was the real benefit derived from the handling of weapons. The journalist’s thoughts were fully shared by Jose Rizal, who highlighted the importance of his words by repeating them in a complimentary letter addressed to Antonio Luna. Furthermore, Rizal considered fencing as a physically and morally healthy alternative to the gambling habit of young Filipinos (Epistolario Rizalino 3:74). Juan Luna also saw another benefit in the practice of fencing. It could win the esteem and admiration of the Spanish for Filipinos. In a letter written the month after his visit to Madrid, Juan Luna tells Rizal about his stay in the Spanish capital. He proudly states that “the Filipinos already have fame as brave and proficient in the use of arms” (my trans.; Epistolario Rizalino 3:86). In another letter to Rizal written on August 13, 1890, Luna states that fencing “will make of the Filipino youth a bunch of ready combatants for the honor of the so despised race of Egyptians as our immortal poet D. Pedro used to say” (my trans.; Epistolario Rizalino 3:92-93). From his words, we clearly see the importance of fencing not only as a physical and moral activity but as a symbol of strength and honor. In this regard, in *The Rise & Fall of Antonio Luna* of 1971, Vivencio R. Jose writes that, through fencing, Filipinos were developing both their physical agility and their moral strength, gaining “more power” (50). In *Love, Passion and Patriotism* of 2008, Raquel A. G. Reyes writes that “fencing captured the essence of aristocratic gentlemanly values . . . and prepared young men to fight” (98).

Ultimately, Espada’s two articles show how Juan Luna, who was already an established painter at the time, represented a sort of testimonial for the promotion of fencing as a means of social affirmation of Filipinos living in Europe. Moreover, both in Paris and Madrid, his studios were meeting places where the noble art of fencing could be practiced.

7. There is a further element which, although of legendary derivation and of little academic value, is consistent with the thesis that Rizal was an arnis practitioner: the belief by a mystical-religious sect in Calamba that the hero possessed a magic cane used to defeat his opponents. The *anting-anting* (Filipino amulets) expert Dennis Santos Villegas in his book *You Shall be as Gods: Anting-Anting and the Filipino Quest for Mystical Power* (2017) writes:

Tales of Rizal's magical powers abound all over the Philippines where Rizalista cults venerate him as a God. According to the Rizalist group Iglesia Watawat ng Lahi (Church of the Banner of the Race) based in Calamba, Laguna, one of the anting-anting that Rizal owned was a magical cane given to him by Mariang Makiling, the goddess of the holy mountain of Makiling. With this cane, he was able to defeat numerous attackers employed by the Spanish to hurt him. (116)

A cane, used as a weapon, is certainly very akin to an arnis stick.

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