History of Black Karate

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The 1960s and 1970s brought sweeping changes to the American landscape, particularly as seen by the black community. The civil rights movement, which had begun in earnest during the 1950s, had reached its peak with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. When many people think about this era in American history, they think about nonviolent marchers demonstrating against racial segregation in the South. Images of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) come to mind. However, there is another side of the civil rights movement. As early as the 1920s and 1930s, organizations in the African-American community trained in self-defense. Organizations such as the African Blood Brotherhood disguised themselves as gymnastics clubs in order to train to defend their communities. Numerous organizations in the black community struggled to achieve a greater sense of justice within the United States. As the ‘60s wound down, the mood shifted from one of nonviolent civil disobedience to one of self-determination and self-defense. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968 and rebellions took place in over forty cities around the country. Wherever a large black community was found in an urban area, people rose up and fought back.

During this same period, more and more young men, many of them black, were being sent to bases in Asia

and the Pacific region to fight in an escalating war in Vietnam. Just a few years earlier their older brothers and fathers had served in this region during the Korean War. Bases in Korea and Japan were exposing a generation of American soldiers to a culture many knew very little about. Many of the men who returned from service in Asia had learned some form of martial art while serving their tours of duty. Some of these men continued their training when they returned to the United States, and still others, with enough experience, began their own schools and taught the arts themselves. As the child of the civil rights movement, the black nationalist movement made a call to self-defense that motivated many young black men and women to take up the martial arts. This new generation of black martial artists often saw it as their responsibility to somehow connect their martial arts training and experience to their communities. Occasionally, this desire to bring martial arts into better service of the black community led to the creation of new schools, organizations, and even new martial arts. This paper will examine two examples of this phenomenon: the Black Karate Federation (BKF) and kupigana ngumi.

A few scholars have begun to write about the role of self-defense in the civil rights movement. Akinyele Umoja wrote his doctoral dissertation on resistance in the Mississippi freedom movement. Christopher Berry Strain also wrote his dissertation about the role of self-defense in the civil rights movement. He focused on Robert Williams of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP and Martin Luther King. However, very little has been written about unarmed self-defense in the civil

rights and black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. An early example is the Nation of Islam, formed by Elijah Muhammad in the 1930s. All male members of the Nation of Islam were required to be in the Nation's security force, the Fruit of Islam (FOI). The FOI trained in judo and hand-to-hand combat and served as bodyguards for Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and other national leaders of the Nation of Islam. Essien-Udom, writing in *Black Nationalism: The Rise of the Black Muslims in the U.S.A.*, details how the FOI had a policy against carrying weapons, and therefore trained in hand-to-hand combat. According to Essien-Udom, the FOI often put on demonstrations for the community of "the art of self-defense, such as boxing and judo."[1]

Along with the Nation of Islam, many other black organizations trained in unarmed self-defense techniques in order to protect their leadership and provide security at events sponsored by their organizations. The Black Panther Party, Revolutionary Action Movement, US Organization, and many others are known to have trained members in various styles of the martial arts.

Promoting martial arts became a regular theme for black nationalist organizations as part of the philosophy of self-defense. As early as 1964, Max Stanford, of the Revolutionary Action Movement, stated that:

> Being outnumbered 9 to 1, each *Black American must be physically, mentally and spiritually superior to the enemy*. All forms of self-defense must be well known in the Black community. Karate, Aikido, Kung Fu and other forms of martial arts should become the new national past time for Black youth [italics original].[2]

This sentiment was also reflected in contemporary black movies and fiction. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* depicts a black man who goes undercover for the CIA learning judo in order to teach street gangs how to properly fight back against the police. Dolemite and other blaxploitation movies were filled with bad fight sequences as Rudy Ray Moore and other black actors did their best impersonations of Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly.[3]

The Black Karate Federation was founded in 1969 by Steve Sanders and Donnie Williams. Both men served in the Marine Corps, Sanders learning combat techniques in Vietnam and Williams studying taekwondo while stationed in Korea. Originally from Topeka, Kansas, Sanders settled in California after serving in Vietnam and began to study kenpo karate under Ed Parker. He also studied under Dan Inosanto and Chuck Sullivan, who awarded him his first black belt.

Sanders was soon a champion on the tournament circuit, winning his first victory at Azusa State College in 1965. He went on to win the California State Championship three times, the International Lightweight Championship eight times, and the World Professional Championship three times. He racked up numerous other titles along the way, and his peer and frequent competitor on the tour circuit, Ron Van Clief, states that Bruce Lee once said that, "Steve had the fastest hands he had ever seen."[4] During this time Sanders embraced Islam and changed his name from Sanders to Muhammed.

Donnie Williams claims that racism was what initially motivated him to learn martial arts. As a child growing up in Georgia, he was exposed to the racism of

the Jim Crow South. As a teenager he was severely beaten by a group of white teens. This led to him searching out martial arts classes to defend himself. In a 1988 newspaper article Williams talked about how he continued to encounter racism once he joined the Service and began to take martial arts classes in Texas, and that the other students were particularly hard on him, which only served to make Williams a better martial artist. "No one gave me any breaks," said Williams, "but after one and a half years (of unrelenting combat at the school), you become very good."[5] Williams, a couple of years younger than Muhammed, also decided to settle in California after leaving the Service. He began training first with Byong Yu, developing into a powerful kicker. He then met and began training with Muhammed. At the same time, Williams also became a champion on the tournament circuit, earning the nickname "the Clown Prince of Karate" because of his antics in the ring. Williams won the Grand Championship at the Long Beach Internationals in 1977 and 1978 among his many victories.

The two men trained together for fourteen years, and along the way they decided to form a new organization to help combat what they saw as racism and discrimination in tournament karate, which was dominated by white martial artists at the time. The Black Karate Federation began as an organization to support black martial artists and soon grew into a chain of schools that dominated the tournaments they participated in, all the while making martial arts on the West Coast much more accessible to black communities. The symbol of the organization was a

black fist wrapped in red, black, and green, the black nationalist colors. Rising up in front of the fist was a cobra, with the words "Kenpo Karate" on either side and the initials "BKF" at the bottom. The clenched fist itself is the symbol of black power. Muhammed and Williams trained under Ed Parker and continued to teach kenpo karate once they branched out on their own. In fact, in 1983, the pair co-wrote a book titled *Championship Kenpo*. The conclusion of the book states:

> Steve Sanders' and Donnie Williams' kenpo karate as presented here is an art being assimilated and reinterpreted in the 20th century by the black American.[6]

While Williams and Muhammed focused their martial arts practice on tournament competition and instilling self-esteem and discipline in the black community in general, Watani Tyehimba and Nyoka Chini had an entirely different idea in mind. Tyehimba and Chini were active in the black nationalist movement and felt as though by participating in Asian martial arts they were promoting Asian culture and Asian nationalism. For example, in a typical taekwondo school in America one might find a South Korean flag hanging next to an American flag. Students learn basic commands and possibly how to count in Korean, and practice forms named after significant figures in Korean history. Some schools even expect students to be familiar with the history of the art, which by default requires a general knowledge of Korean history. For example, the regulations of the World Taekwondo Federation are a perfect example of the connection

between culture and the martial arts. Article one states:

> Taekwondo is a product of traditional Korean culture. The purpose of organizing a world governing body for taekwondo is to standardize and propagate worldwide the sport along with its traditional taekwondo tenets and spirit.[7]

All of this is very positive, particularly for Korean culture and nationalism.

Tyehimba and Chini felt this was a contradiction to the aims and objectives of their movement. They also experienced the subtle racism of martial arts schools that refused to promote black students to the higher ranks, thus preventing them from being able to open their own schools. In an interview with the author in 2001, Tyehimba credited Steve Muhammed as being the most important black martial artist on the West Coast during the late 1960s and 1970s. According to Tyehimba, who lived in Los Angeles during this early period, Ed Parker had the only school that was accessible to blacks in Los Angeles. This was partly due to his openness, but also to the proximity of his school to the black neighborhoods. Ed Parker is credited for opening up the martial arts to blacks, and Muhammed built on his model.

In 1972, Tyehimba and Chini created a new martial art they dubbed *kupigana ngumi*, a Swahili term they loosely translated to mean "The Art of Self-Defense."[8] Tyehimba received his early martial arts training in shotokan karate, Northern Shaolin tai mantis kung fu, Chinese kenpo, and yangumi. His partner, Chini, also had training in several art forms. The creation of kupigana ngumi was the outgrowth of martial artists

from several different black nationalist organizations coming together to train and develop their abilities to defend themselves and their communities. Members of security details for the House of Umoja, Revolutionary Action Movement, the Black Panthers, and the Republic of New Afrika sought to find a way to demystify the martial arts in the black community. They came together to train with Tyehimba and Chini in this new system, and through their network of activists around the country, learned about the Afrikan Institute of Martial Arts (AIMA)[9], an umbrella organization that represented various African centered and nationalist martial arts schools around the country. AIMA had been formed by a group of black martial artists in Philadelphia who had similar political ideas as the kupigana ngumi group in California. Other members of this network were a group calling their martial art al-jihad, and a group out of New Orleans who practiced what they called New Afrikan karate-do. Tyehimba stated that as part of their belief in self-determination, many socially conscious black martial artists named their systems in the same way that Bruce Lee named his own system.

The founders of kupigana ngumi acknowledge that many of the movements in various martial arts are similar. A roundhouse kick in kupigana ngumi is similar to a roundhouse kick in taekwondo or kung fu. However, for the founders, the main difference was the culture of the art itself. Instead of learning the commands to bow, assume a stance, begin or end a round, or how to count in Korean, Chinese, or some other Asian language, Tyehimba chose to use Swahili terminology. Exercises were counted off in Swahili by

students and commands were also given in Swahili. However, because Tyehimba was a member of the New Afrikan Independence Movement (NAIM), he also included aspects of what could be considered New Afrikan culture in the martial art. The NAIM is a movement of black nationalists who advocate black people struggling to build an independent black nation in the southern United States. Begun in 1968 at a conference in Detroit, NAIM claims a right to the land that a majority of African slaves worked on and where many counties and cities continue to have majority black populations to this day. They use the term *New Afrikan* to indicate that black people in the United States are the descendants of enslaved Africans who were taken from many different African nations. During slavery, the various languages and cultures of these nations were suppressed and a new culture emerged with survivals from many different African cultures. This new culture, along with the shared history of slavery and the common territory of the southern United States, were the characteristics of a new nation of African people, a *New Afrikan nation*.[10]

To reflect this New Afrikan culture, forms are named after heroes in black history, such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Toussaint, Harriet, Nat, Hannibal, and Chaka. The art also stresses the use of specific *kelele's* (shouts or yells), such as "We Will Win", "Free the People", and "Defend the Nation." The ankh is the symbol used to represent the constant interplay of opposites. The symbol is the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, generally recognized as representing male and female. In a way this symbol represents for kupigana ngumi what the symbol of yin and yang represents for

Chinese kung fu. The founders also created a new ranking system, based on what they called the three fold path to Umoja (Unity-Blackness) and the colors of the black nationalist flag: red, black, and green.

All students begin at the white stage, which just indicates they have not gone through a basic orientation to the system. The first actual stage is "inspiration by emotion" and is symbolized by the color red for beginners. On the flag the color red represents blood and sacrifice, reminding students of the blood shed by their ancestors as well as the blood, sweat, and energy that will be required of them to progress to the next stage of development. At this stage students are seen as having the motivation but still lacking humbleness and developed skill. Once they achieve these they move on to "enlightenment by reason", symbolized by the color green, which represents land on the flag. This is the intermediate stage and demonstrates that:

> Not only is the Sister or Brother ready to make the sacrifices that are required to complete this system, but that through diligent study and hard work, they will begin to internalize the facts and figures that show the need for New Afrikans to be well versed in all forms of self-defense.[11]

The final stage is "sustenance through knowledge", symbolized by the color black which represents people on the flag. This stage is attained when the student demonstrates a willingness to make sacrifices and also understands that study and hard work are necessary. Black is the combination of practice (inspiration) and enlightenment (theory), and is the advanced stage. At

the end of this stage, "a student will have achieved what is considered in most martial arts systems to be a First Degree Black Belt."[12] From here the student starts over again as a senior student, in what are called the golden stages. They are called the golden stages because the student should have the qualities of gold, being soft, flexible, scarce, and resistant.

Another interesting aspect of kupigana ngumi that separates it from other arts is the form of its bow. Many Asian martial arts have variations on the traditional bow, bending at the waist. In some kung fu schools the bow is made by assuming a cat stance while bringing a closed fist to meet an open hand in front of the face. Again, there are variations on this as well. In kupigana ngumi, the traditional bow is replaced with the Zulu Warrior Salute, which is done at the beginning and end of classes, before performing forms, and by partners before they spar. The Zulu Warrior Salute gets its name from Shaka Zulu, who ruled the Zulu Nation in southern Africa during the nineteenth century. During that time he created new methods of fighting and warfare that enabled him to defeat his enemies as no ruler before him had done. He also saw successes against the British army before he was eventually killed. One of his most famous innovations was to shorten the spear the Zulu's traditionally used in battle and add an extra long blade. He also made shields much bigger and adopted new techniques for close quarter fighting with spear and shield. The salute mimics the motion of blocking with the shield and attacking with the shield. A student stands in *pumziko* (the name of the rest position, literally meaning 'rest' in Swahili), then steps back into a *paka mahali* (cat stance in Swahili). From

there the student crosses his or her arms across the chest, right hand open to symbolize a shield and left hand closed in a fist to symbolize the gripping of a spear. The right hand comes out in an open handed block followed by a straight left punch, then the student steps back into pumziko.

The creators also felt that this new art needed to be accessible to most members of the community and also had to be practical in its self-defense applications. Therefore they stripped down the non-essential elements of the styles they had previously learned. Kupigana ngumi stresses active and passive principles, meeting hard strikes with soft blocks, meeting straight lines with circular movements. The creators also modified certain techniques to account for more realistic life situations that might be encountered within their movement. Weapons techniques were modified to make use of household items such as rolled up magazines. First aid and firearms were also incorporated for advanced students. Tyehimba noted that one of the characteristics that separated martial artists in the movement back in the 1970s from the rest was their willingness to cross train. They were also among the first, along with the BKF, to train women as equals with the men. The inclusion of women stemmed from the internal struggles against sexism within the overall movement.

Tyehimba and Chini were not the only ones to develop new martial arts systems with an emphasis on promoting an African centered culture. Along with the ones mentioned earlier as part of AIMA, several other schools developed around the country. Another group, entirely independent of Tyehimba, also created an art

that they labeled *kupigana ngumi*. One group in particular was focused on an even more cultural interpretation of the martial arts than Tyehimba. Tyehimba was politically active and saw his martial arts as an extension of his political work. Shaha Mfundishi Maasi created his form of kupigana ngumi with a focus on African symbolism and spirituality, particularly that coming from ancient Egypt.

Shaha Mfundishi Maasi was born in New Jersey in 1941, and began training himself in jiu-jitsu from a book he ordered through the mail. He began his formal training in martial arts while in the Marines, studying kenpo in Hawaii. He returned to the United States and began to study karate with James Cheatham. He soon joined the Nation of Islam and began training them in martial arts. A prolific reader, Maasi was just as committed to researching martial arts as he was to training in them. He soon began working as a body guard for Imamu Amiri Baraka (a.k.a Leroi Jones), one of the leading cultural nationalists of the time. Baraka encouraged him to continue his research of connections between Africa and the martial arts. Maasi's work led him to create a new martial system he called *yaa ngumi*, which was later changed to kupigana ngumi through his collaborations with other martial artists, particularly Mfundishi Tola-Naa. Like the kupigana of Tyehimba, Maasi also incorporated the use of Swahili terminology for giving basic commands and other instruction. However, Maasi went even further in trying to promote African culture. He considers kupigana ngumi to be an African martial science. Students in this system not only learn basic techniques, they also learn to read and understand hieroglyphics,

numerology, astrology, and the history of African warrior traditions.

Maasi published a book on kupigana ngumi with one of his senior students, Mfundishi Jhutyms Heru Hassan Kamu Salim in 1992. The text deals more with symbolism and ancient languages than it does with the actual fighting art itself. The book is a good example of how this school of kupigana ngumi stresses the spiritual journey as much as, if not more than, the physical side of the art. Though slightly more metaphysical than Tyehimba's school of kupigana ngumi, Maasi and Salim claim that kupigana ngumi is for the:

> Liberation of Afrakan [*sic*] people everywhere mentally, physically, spiritually, economically, culturally, socially, and politically.[13]

They go on to say that the art was created "as a liberation tool for man to use, for the mastery of Self."[14] From here the text goes into the symbolism and meaning of various animals in ancient Egyptian writing and theology. It is unclear how the actual practice of the martial art itself compares to other arts, although both Maasi and Salim have extensive backgrounds in Asian martial arts.

Other schools promoted a martial system that was much more traditional in the way it was taught, but embraced names such as *black karate*, similar to the BKF started by Williams and Muhammed. For instance, in Chicago in the early 1970s, Russell Meeks founded a black karate school. He stressed that the difference between karate and black karate had to do with his emphasis on self-esteem as an essential component of

survival in the ghetto. He made simple modifications to the traditional art. For instance, in his school, students would bow an "Oriental bow from the waist, modified with a downward thrust of clenched fists."[15]

The social and cultural landscape has changed dramatically in the last thirty years. The conditions under which the BKF and the various branches of kupigana ngumi were formed are no longer the same. The black nationalist movement that once fed a steady and dedicated stream of young men and women into black martial arts schools has nearly vanished, losing virtually all of its mass appeal. The BKF attempted a revival a couple of years ago, with both Donnie Williams and Steve Muhammed attempting to reassert their leadership in hopes of revitalizing their old program. The BKF never stopped functioning, although it is not as popular as it was in the early years of the organization. However, it has also expanded to new territory in recent years. A search of the Internet will unearth schools affiliated with the Black Karate Federation as far away as Kenya, in east Africa. Muhammed still teaches and works with law enforcement. In the late 1990s he was often seen with Wesley Snipes, whom he was training and working for as a bodyguard. Donnie Williams is the pastor of a church and even began a martial arts program through his church several years ago, attempting to instill the principles of Christianity in youth through karate training.

In the January 1993 edition of the official newspaper of the New Afrikan Peoples Organization, there was an article by Tyehimba in which he argued that the black community must organize to defend itself against

"right-wing terrorists, police beatings and killings, drug wars, black on black crime, and outright genocide."[16] The same newspaper also carries an advertisement for kupigana ngumi classes being taught in Atlanta, Georgia and Jackson, Mississippi. Occasionally there will be spikes in the popularity of kupigana ngumi, just like any other art form. For instance, Tyehimba once did security work for slain rap star Tupac Shakur. After Tupac was shot five times in New York City, Tyehimba appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* pushing Tupac in his wheelchair as they left the hospital. Incidents like this bring a wave of new young people to the art, though many drop off just as quickly as they appeared.

Tyehimba states in his interview that the black martial arts really reached a high point in the early 1970s.[17] There was even a conference held for black martial artists. While he himself was political and Williams and Muhammed were not, Tyehimba states that they were all pro-black and worked together. It was a different time and black martial artists were constantly looking to expand their knowledge base and grow. He acknowledges that many of them did not pay enough attention to the financial aspects of running schools and organizations. The results can be seen today, where the schools have relatively small numbers of students and ill-equipped facilities. Tyehimba usually conducts classes in community centers or at schools. The BKF numbers are not nearly what they were twenty-five years ago. As martial arts become more mainstream and commercialized, and the idea of self-defense as a principle of social activism fades further into the American memory, the rise of black

martial arts becomes an ever more distant blip on the radar. While a few schools and organizations still exist, their impact and influence is negligible. The Black Karate Federation and the schools of kupigana ngumi represent a unique moment in the history of martial arts in America, one that may never be repeated.

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Endnotes

[1] Essien-Udom, p. 142.

[2] Bracey et al, p. 517.

[3] Jim Kelly was a black martial artist who starred in Bruce Lee's classic film *Enter the Dragon*. He went on to star in his own series of films as the character "Black Belt Jones."

[4] Van Clief, p. 86.

[5] Kelley, Soik-Hian Tay. "Karate Pastor Gets His Kicks Teaching Kids," *The Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, August 14, 1988.

[6] Sanders and Williams, p. 127.

[7] World Taekwondo Federation Rules and Regulations.

[8] Literally translated from Swahili, *kupigana* means 'to fight' and *ngumi* means 'boxing'.

[9] The 'k' in the spelling of 'Africa', as 'Afrika', is used by those in the NAIM. The logic is that phonetically the 'k' is used more often in African languages to make the hard 'c' sound, as in 'cat' or 'cloud'. The author has chosen to maintain the spelling as used by the various organizations discussed in this essay. Therefore, the spelling will vary within this essay based upon the way the word 'African' is being used.

[10] For more information on the New Afrikan Independence Movement, see *Free the Land* (1984) by Imari Obadele.

[11] Tyehimba, 1994, pp. 10-11.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

[13] Maasi and Salim, p. xvi.

[14] *Ibidem*.

[15] Black Karate: New Concept of Ancient Art, p. 104.

[16] Tyehimba, Watani. "Self-Defense is a Human Right: Build the New Afrikan Militia," *By Any Means Necessary*, January, 1993.

[17] Tyehimba, 2001.