Legitimacy and Authenticity

In my last article, *The Anti-Martial Arts Mentality*, I suggested that criticisms of fellow martial artists boil down to these three: (1) lack of legitimacy, (2) lack of accurate representation, and (3) lack of functionality.

In the 1970s, when martial artists were still arguing about the “best” style or art, there were also in-style arguments about the authenticity of one’s technique or kata. Some of you may even remember. For example, one dojo claims that the first movement of Heian Five has to be performed in a *fudo-dachi* (rooted stance), otherwise one could not do a powerful reverse punch after the initial block, while another dojo demands a *kokutsu-dachi* (back weighted stance) so one will be forced to concentrate on hip rotation. An older style thinks the argument is off base. Since it uses a *neko-ashi-dachi* (cat stance), it assumes the other stances are too immobile to be practical. Students argued based on limited knowledge of stylistic history and even less knowledge of what makes a technique work. The implication was always that the more authentic the technique was, the more legitimate, accurate, or functional it must be. Authenticity was the short cut to true evaluation.

**LEGITIMACY vs. AUTHENTICITY**

Although they are related, there is a difference between legitimacy and authenticity. Legitimate implies *legal* while authentic implies *original*. Many original things are not legal and many legal things are not original. Neither should either imply *accurate* or *functional*. If we could somehow get an old VHS video of Sakugawa performing an early version of Naihanchin or Seisan (the oldest kata taught in the Shorin tradition), it would be a marvelous historical artifact, but it would neither prove legitimacy or authenticity, let alone accuracy or functionality. “Where did Sakugawa get this kata?” we would ask. Then someone would discover an old super-8 film of a Chinese master from Fukien where Sakugawa studied doing some version of a root form. But where did *that* form come from? In other words, authenticity can be pushed back until the form itself is unrecognizable. So which style is legitimate? The one that uses Tekki and Hangetsu or the one that uses Naihanchin and Seisan or maybe the one that uses proto-Naihanchin and proto-Seisan?  

Speaking of styles, Funakoshi’s Shotokan is certainly considered a legitimate style. But why? Because it is widely practiced in several varying forms by several varying federations, or because Funakoshi was the titular founder of karate in Japan? Here’s where legitimacy gets as dicey as authenticity.

Years ago, a student of mine, running his own dojo, attempted to join a web-based group that recognized only traditional systems Their criteria for a “traditional system” was that it could be traced back to one of the big four Japanese karate systems — Shito, Goju, Shotokan, or Wado. Since my student was ranked nidan in Shotokan under me and since my teacher was ranked yondan in Shotokan, having studied both from an American and a Japanese, my student was confident that our system was traditional. He was, however, refused admission. The manager of the site didn’t recognize our specific Shotokan root and also felt it was sullied by our rankings in another karate art that he considered to be non-traditional. “Not-recognized” it seems to me has more to do with the recognizance of the recognizer than the validity of the art being recognized. I neither
recognize his website nor his method of recognizing traditional karate arts. So there! (Add a Brooklyn cheer here.)

RECOGNIZING vs. RECOGNIZING

It is because of all this “legitimacy” foolishness that Westerners came up with effectiveness as a measuring stick. Who cares, they argued, if it is original, old, or recognized? The only important thing is that it works, they’d argue. It didn’t matter if Bill Wallace had earned only a nidan in traditional karate — he could kick your butt (more likely your ear) in a karate match. It didn’t matter if Bruce Lee was a junior to several of his fellow Wing-chun training brothers, he could deck you on the street. Effectiveness had to be recognized, traditional or otherwise. Now came the question, “How do we measure true effectiveness?” Bill Wallace might be challenged in a match that allowed groin kicks. Bruce Lee might not fare well against a big grappler like Gene LeBell. I have an idea! Let’s do no-holds-barred fighting. Of course, we’ll forget the fact that only young athletes practice NHB fighting, with holds that are barred, functioning in a confined space, with rules and time limits. We all recognize the toughness of the NHB athlete, but do we recognize its legitimacy for middle-aged, civilian self-defense? How about for personal or spiritual development? How about for long-term growth?

RECOGNIZING ILLEGITIMACY

It is not easy to recognize legitimacy or authenticity, but it seems to be easier (although not easy) to recognize illegitimacy. If I guy is wearing a black belt and can’t tie his gi, you get the idea that he may have bought the belt, not that he comes from a non-gi-tying style. However, this gets us into a problem, too. One tends to judge another’s illegitimacy based on one’s own legitimacy (which, as we have shown, is difficult to measure).

In the 1970s, people applied the legitimacy argument to karate while ju-jutsu practitioners ignored the politics and interacted with each other, interested in what they felt worked in self-defense rather than whose lineage was older, wiser, or better. Currently, the arguments are coming back, however, as they always will when people emphasize authenticity over functionality, or authority over practicality. I have been told that I do not do real “aiki” because my art is not a recognized Japanese aiki-art. The fact that Takeshin Aiki descends from Daito-ryu, the root of all aiki-arts, seems to be irrelevant. We are back to round-eyes don’t know what they are doing while almond-eyes do. Criticisms like these, of course, come from those associated with self-proclaimed “legitimate” Japanese arts. Now refer back to LEGITIMACY vs. AUTHENTICITY above.

LEGITIMACY AS TRUTH

Legitimate can mean genuine, as in “born of married parents” or “having a hereditary right”. I would like to suggest another implication: legitimate means truthful. I hold that if an instructor makes up his ancestry, he is illegitimate. If an art’s techniques do not do what they are claimed to do in the context they claim to do it in, it is illegitimate. That’s it in a nutshell. I don’t care if it is Korean, Siamese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Japanese or
On your knees, if it is old, young, or middle-aged, if it is street-wise, ring-wise, or just exercise, I favor honesty and integrity. You gotta problem wit’ dat?