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# ANCIENT WISDOM MODERN WARRIORS

## THE (RE)INVENTION OF A MESOAMERICAN TRADITION IN XILAM

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## ABSTRACT

*Xilam* is a modern Mexican martial art that is inspired by pre-Hispanic warrior cultures of ancient Mesoamerica, namely the Aztecs (Mexico), Maya and Zapotec cultures. It provides a noteworthy case study of a Latin American fighting system that has been recently invented, but aspires to rescue, rediscover and relive the warrior philosophies that existed before the Spanish Conquest and subsequent movements beginning in 1521. Using the thought-provoking work of anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo*, I aim to analyse the Xilam Martial Arts Association through the way that they represent themselves in their three main media outlets: the official webpage, the Facebook group and the YouTube channel. Overall, the data suggests that certain elements of Mesoamerican civilisation may be transmitted to young Mexicans through a mind-body discipline, which in turn acts as a form of physical (re)education. Overall, xilam is both an invented tradition (in a technical sense) and a re-invented tradition (in a cultural sense) that provides lessons on the timeless issues of transformation, transmission and transcendence.

## XILAM IN THE INCLUSIVE FIELD OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

The *México Profundo* is formed from a great diversity of peoples, communities and social sectors that constitute the majority of the population of the country. What unites and distinguishes the Mexican society are carrier groups that have the way to look at the world and organize life, and which originate in Mesoamerican civilisation, forged here through an expanded and complex historic process. The current expressions of that civilisation are very diverse: From the cultures that some Indian towns have known how to conserve with a high grade of internal cohesion, to the great quantity of isolated characteristics that distribute different ways in the distinct urban sector. The Mesoamerican civilisation is a neglected civilisation whose presence is essential to know.

[Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, prologue, *México Profundo*].

Xilam is the reformation – from contemporary Mexico – of an important part of the experience of ancestral life. It does not just imply a martial art, but a complete life philosophy; it is a project of personal development where the individual is discovered and discovers ways ‘to remove the skin’. It is also a historic project representative of awakening, maintaining and transcending the ancestral memory of a nation.

**Xilam is a work that seeks the memory of that which we have been and the affirmation of what we will be.**

**Today we are witness to the renaissance of a Mexican martial art.**

[[www.xilam.org](http://www.xilam.org)]

To date, social scientific research on martial arts has moved from earlier considerations of Asian martial arts in the West [Goodger 1982; James and Jones 1982] to contemporary issues in sweeping martial arts movements such as mixed martial arts (MMA) [Green 2011; Spencer 2013], ‘reality’ schools of combat [Bar-On Cohen 2010], and also topical issues such as masculinity and homosexuality [Channon and Matthews 2015; Matthews 2015]. As Channon and Jennings [2014] contend, there remains a need for a balanced study of different martial arts and combat sports (MACS) from around the world. As fresh research on MACS in Latin America has indicated [Assunção 2004; Downey 2005; Ryan 2011a, 2011b], there is a wealth of warrior traditions in countries such as Brazil and Venezuela. Each country brings its own richness in culture and philosophy through African, indigenous and European influences, and Mexico is no exception.

In this article, I present the little-known case of Xilam (pronounced shi-lam), a Mexican martial art system developed in the 1980s and registered in 1992 founded on the principles of eclectic pre-Hispanic philosophy. Xilam is taught and practised in and around Mexico City and it is a registered association that aims to spread the art across Mexico and also nationwide. Although Mexico is a modern, industrialised and capitalist nation, it has its basis in the pre-Hispanic (also known as pre-Columbian) Mesoamerican civilisation including the cultures of the Olmecs, Toltecs, Maya and Aztecs. Although existing over thousands of years in different areas of Mexico and Central America, there are some key commonalities that unite them: The calendar system, the scientific-astrological philosophy and the deities, sacred animals and stepped pyramids. Furthermore, all of these peoples were also warrior societies. Despite the fact that the martial arts were not transmitted from student to teacher through direct body lineages [see Brown and Jennings 2010], elements of their philosophy interest many Mexicans today. Many of these elements are taught in an academic sense to Mexican children, but there are small groups of people that have tried to recover, rediscover and share this core philosophy with people in a dynamic and physical way. Xilam is such a case study.

From the outset, it is important to declare that there is no way that xilam can be described as truly pre-Hispanic. It was developed in 1989 and registered in 1991, long after the Spanish conquest of 1521 ended the millennial civilisation of the pre-Hispanic people. Furthermore, it was founded by a contemporary figure, Marisela Ugalde, who hails from a mixture of Mexican, Spanish, French and Jewish heritage. Although she, like the majority of Mexicans, possesses native blood, she is from the swarming metropolis of Mexico City and currently resides in the metropolitan zone, far removed from the poverty and agricultural life associated with Mexico’s original people. Thus, Ugalde is not indigenous, neither in a genetic nor in a social sense.

What, then, makes xilam interesting as a case study for this special issue of *Martial Arts Studies* on the invention of martial arts? For one thing, in a field focused on MMA and capoeira, it is a rare exemplar of a recently invented Latin American martial art. Another noteworthy aspect of xilam is the fact that it was invented by a woman facing many social, political and economic obstacles and subcultural dismissal over the course of almost three decades [a life history is provided in Jennings 2015a]. A third important issue is the insertion of ancient Mesoamerican philosophies into a modern system which binds the concepts, forms and rituals.

This contribution extends the work of some of my previous projects looking at traditionalist martial arts cultures. The perception of

wing chun as a secular religion [Jennings, Brown and Sparkes 2010], alternative narratives of ageing and learning in Chinese martial arts [Jennings 2012] and utopian views on ecology in a taijiquan organization [Brown, Jennings and Sparkes 2014] are all examples of different ways to view the world: Not what society or martial arts necessarily are, but ways they can be – now and in the future.

This study forms part of a broader movement of martial arts studies that endeavors to break barriers between academic disciplines and fields of interest [see Bowman 2015a, 2015b]. As a qualitative sociologist of physical culture originally trained in exercise and sport sciences, I venture into the new territory of post-colonial studies, cultural anthropology and social history through the study of xilam via the insights of the anthropologist, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla.

My first publication on xilam put the life of the art's founder, Marisela Ugalde, under the academic spotlight [Jennings 2015a], and to date, no further published academic research exists on this little-known martial art. Marisela began martial arts in the 1960s, and experienced sexual abuse, discrimination and personal suffering during the first few decades of her life. However, she chose not to adopt a feminist approach to the martial arts, and instead created a new martial art for Mexicans and Mexican Americans to develop the human being, reintroduce these people to their pre-Hispanic roots and provide a programme of nation building for future generations of her compatriots, as well as people from all over the world. Marisela pointed out that her daughter, Mayra, is her lineage holder, and it will be interesting to see how xilam continues to be practiced, taught and portrayed as technology and society change in the years to come.

As a second publication in an ongoing study of xilam, the objective of this article is to assess how the art is promoted to the public as a re-invented, rediscovered and reimagined martial tradition. It achieves this by focusing on multimedia and textual data obtained over the course of three years' study of the art, and the findings are illuminated by the theory of a deep Mexico (*México Profundo*) put forth by the anthropologist and essayist Bonfil Batalla. Together, these elements serve to illustrate how the invention of xilam provides an alternative way to look at Mexicans and even Mexico itself: a country with profound customs, beliefs and cultural treasures.

## MÉXICO PROFUNDO SEARCHING FOR A DEEPER, HIDDEN MEXICO

The country now known as Mexico is a complex, developing nation with over 120 million people in a large territory that is approximately the size of Western Europe and that spans desert, woodland, and jungle. Despite its modern exterior as evidenced by sprawling cities, such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, it is home to over 60 indigenous languages and hundreds of indigenous groups, including descendants of the ancient, and often thought extinct, Maya. In fact, several ancient civilisations occupied its territory well before the Spanish invasion and conquest of the Mexica (Aztec) empire of 1521: flourishing from its humble origins seven thousand years ago, when settlement first began [see Smith and Mason 2000]. These include the Olmec, Toltec, Maya and Zapotec peoples in what is now central and southern Mexico and also Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua in what is known as Mesoamerica. The northern regions of Mexico have quite a different culture, with a heavy influence from their neighbours, the United States.

It is this foundation of Mesoamerican life that forms the basis of the work *México Profundo* [Bonfil Batalla 1994, 1996] by the Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla. For Batalla, there are two facets of Mexico: The real (profound) and the imaginary (superficial). The real Mexico is derived from the rural and native traditions of the various ethnic groups and tribes: The diet, the geographical names and local knowledge, the family culture and upbringing. The imaginary Mexico is postulated as a modern, democratic, industrialised nation that forms part of the Western world: Western (Occidental) civilisation, much like the United States, Canada, Western Europe and Australia. This imaginary Mexico is the public face issued by the various governments of this Latin American nation, which hides the deeper traditions of medicine and healing, philosophy, spirituality, esotericism, physical culture and ecology that has continued over thousands of years, and in a clandestine fashion under Spanish rule and attempts at modernity.

The various Mesoamerican cultures, city-states, peoples and tribes combine to form one of the few original civilisations on Earth (like those of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia), and is quite different from Western civilisation. For Bonfil, the Western civilisation and the Mesoamerican civilisation coexist, and can (in an ideal or utopian sense) continue to work together for a better future for the Mexican nation. The 'civilisations' he writes of are ideal models for societies to develop – two contrasting worldviews – which have been in conflict over hundreds of years. This is particularly important, as their views of how to live, what to eat, how to organize society, how to dance, and how to

treat one another hold the key to the country's future. This is despite the diversity within both ideal projects, which are composed of different peoples and communities, like Britain and the United States or the tribes and peasants of the centre and south of Mexico. Many important processes, such as colonization, urbanization and 'de-indianization' have weakened the presence of indigenous identity, but not indigenous culture rooted in mestizo society. 'They' are posited as different to 'us' (the modern Mexicans). According to Bonfil Batalla, the living and breathing 'Indians' are marginalized in contemporary Mexico. Despite the different 'cultures' that have different names and speak strikingly different languages, they share the same values and worldview: the very same Mesoamerican civilisation.

The key argument in this seminal text is that Mesoamerican society, seen from an infrastructural and technological vantage point, is portrayed as dead – abandoned pyramids and ruined cities akin to the lost city in *The Jungle Book* [Kipling, 1985 (1894/1895)], and vanished citizens in a mysterious diaspora or racial mixing with Europeans and other settlers. In its place, the Western model is implanted as a foreign project that began with the conquest, and continued well after the declaration of Mexican Independence (1821) and the Mexican Revolution (1910). This project has never been under the control of everyday Mexicans, who continue to live their everyday lives.

Bonfil Batalla's work argues that Mexico should emphasize its unique characteristics and traditions – the colour, flavour, and sounds that form the backbone of Mexican society – rather than trying to emulate foreign models. He suggests that arts and crafts and other artisanal enterprises are the heart of Mexican society. Despite these thought-provoking insights, he overlooks the physical culture of the ancient and contemporary Mesoamerican people – the so-called 'native games' [Hallinan and Judd 2013]. These native games, such as dance, wrestling and ball games – including the famous Mesoamerican rubber ball game – are now a subject of increasing academic and public interest [Whittington 2001]. The Mexican Federation for Autochthonous and Traditional Games and Sports [<http://goo.gl/4SgJnd>] protects the traditions of various regions and tries to promote the traditions to other areas of the country. However, the complex fighting systems of the warrior classes of the Mexica (Aztecs) and Maya were eliminated with the conquest, colonization and inquisition in Mexico. To date, no complete martial art exists that can be compared with those of the pre-Hispanic times. Nevertheless, there are small groups of patriots and martial arts researchers who are trying to rediscover, salvage and rebuild these martial arts systems and philosophies. One such effort is xilam, modern Mexico's first martial art inspired by pre-Hispanic martial arts that communicates with the public through various open-access media.

## MULTIMEDIATED METHODOLOGY

**From the outset, a concha [shell] is blown strongly, which is followed by a screech of an eagle and a woman's voice. Then, modern music sets it, which blends into the background with the continued sequence of the other sound.**

**What does this mean? The merging of the ancient with the modern? Under a photograph of an instructor holding two shells, the home page says 'listen to the call and recognize your ancestral heritage'.**

**Sounds and voices: Not just what they say, but how they say it.**

### [Reflexive journal notes]

This article forms part of an open, ethnographic case study of xilam as part of a wider consideration of martial arts and combat sports in Mexico. Like many ethnographies, this study adopts a multimodal approach including full participant observation, observation life history, interviews and media and textual analysis – each of these interwoven in different stages. It is the latter two methods of media and textual analysis that form the basis of this particular paper, as they are the most relevant to the construction and public demonstration of xilam as a restored, re-invented and rediscovered pre-Hispanic martial arts tradition in a modern, accessible form.

There is yet to be published a formal text (academic or instructional) on xilam, yet the public information on this art is now available in a wide variety of online and written sources. The association's official website [[www.xilam.org](http://www.xilam.org)], Facebook group and YouTube channel were the main sources of data, along with flyers, posters and hand-outs that I gathered during my ethnographic fieldwork since 2011. Alongside the association's own material, I also examined formal interviews, documentary videos and online discussions on this art with journalists and martial arts specialists – some of these going back to the early 1990s. I listened to the videos, interviews and music at home between long periods of visual analysis. This helped me consider the hows of talk: How people speak, emphasize certain themes and convince their audience by making an 'authentic portrayal' of a given physical culture. In sum, the raw data was in reality multimedia: Text, images, music, videos, music and sounds working in unison to re-invent a martial tradition.

In addition to these conventional academic methods, I rehearsed the basic xilam forms, postures and rituals between periods of sedentary analysis. This provided an opportunity to physically assess

the philosophies, narratives and discourse – to psychosomatically evaluate how the invention of xilam offered a non-academic way of rediscovering and reassessing pre-Hispanic history.

The theory inspired by Bonfil Batalla's *México Profundo* was not a conventional academic theory that I had learned at university, or had been introduced to by my academic peers. Instead, the core xilam practitioners such as Marisela and my old instructor, Xolotl (pseudonym), spoke openly about this seminal text during the 'circle of warriors' after one class, which is a time for reflection and discussion.

As Paulus, Lester and Dempster [2014: 142] point out, 'multimedia data is often overlooked as an opportunity to deepen our understanding of social life'. Following the digital and multimodal approach for this particular article inspired by the increasing importance of digital tools for qualitative research, I not only read the *México Profundo* text, but also took photographs of key extracts and read them whenever I had the chance in order to reflect upon the themes outside of my academic environment. Moreover, at home, I listened to audio versions of the book on YouTube while performing domestic duties, which allowed me to gain a further grasp of these anthropological ideas in native and second tongue.

I took the same approach with the xilam association's data: I both read and listened to the multimedia data and used the interview and field notes data to reconsider the public information. There were no discrepancies between the public and personal data that I gathered, and in the discussion that follows, I focus chiefly on the public data issued through the official website, Facebook group and YouTube channel – the three media through which the Xilam Martial Art Association communicates to the general public and the Mexican martial arts community. Overall, this approach is used, as Paulus et al. [2014: 142] explain, 'to explore how meaning is produced within and across space and place'. Considering this, my choice of using xilam's official material was supported by an analysis of articles by Marisela Ugalde and other important characters in the xilam story, alongside video interviews conducted and writings produced by other professionals, such as the journalist Arturo de la Peña [2014].

With this array of data, I thus adopted a holistic form of analysis that examined the main themes (content analysis), the core stories being told (narrative analysis), how specific forms of language were being utilized (discourse analysis), and the ways in which practitioners were engaging with specific audiences, such as interviewers (conversational analysis). Overall, this holistic strategy enabled me to assess the extent in which the xilam association presented itself to the public for martial arts and general audiences as a modern martial art based on ancient traditions. I therefore employed both the whats (content, themes and ideas) and

hows (methods, language and rhetoric) outlined by Smith and Sparkes [2014].

The analysis developed over several stages. First, I looked at each source of raw data as singular units and assessed their content. Later, I looked for core narratives and discourse, an approach that links to my consideration of central philosophies underpinning them [Jennings 2015]. Third, I looked at the ways in which the messages were being shared through images, sounds, metaphors and other forms of rhetoric. Finally, as the information is interconnected through hyperlinks and references, I examined the different sites through video links on YouTube and related sites. This final stage provided me with an insight into how different forms of information on xilam could be accessed by a member of the general public or prospective student.

I have chosen to represent the data as a form of a reflexive realist tale incorporating my own voice [Sparkes 2002] while considering calls for an ethnography of the senses in physical culture [Sparkes 2009], the voices and musings of the official xilam movement in their three main media outlets: The official website, the Facebook group and the YouTube channel. With new patriotic and nostalgic movements like xilam, there are, quite naturally, many negative comments and critiques that deserve academic attention in future efforts to study this little-known art. However, adopting an interpretivist approach [Markula and Silk 2011], I have strived to interpret the realities and collective identity/knowledge of the group, with no political interests in intervening with, challenging or changing this social group and movement. In order to construct the discussion that follows, I represent the findings through sights, sounds and physical feelings. All the data shown here is originally in Spanish, and therefore all the extracts are my translations.

## DISCUSSION

From the holistic approach to analysis, I discovered two clear themes: First, a comical critique of contemporary Mexico, which was at times accompanied by talk of Mexico's unique characteristics such as creativity and ingenuity. This is in turn connected to the more serious (and even academic and poetic) tone of writings and documentary videos on Mesoamerican culture – particularly the general philosophy and warrior philosophies that they shared. A second theme was the presentation of xilam as a way to recover seemingly lost traditions for modern Mexican citizens. This was to be achieved via physical (re)education to form strong, healthy, and proud citizens to help their country as it struggled with its own identity in relation to its own past and to other nations and cultures – perhaps the term 'civilisations' would be apt.



In terms of this national identity, I had considered using the Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz's famed essay, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* or *The Labyrinth of Solitude* [1994] but later felt *México Profundo* provided the strongest theoretical basis for my analysis. The xilam media do not relate to the text in a direct way, but their dismissal of Western models of capitalism, finance and government are juxtaposed with images, talk and writings on the wisdom and brilliance of the ancient Mesoamerican/pre-Hispanic societies and how their philosophy still lives on in a physical art form. I begin my interpretation through the consideration of the sometimes scholarly and other times tongue-in-cheek viewpoints of the Mexico of today.

*A Critique of Contemporary Mexico and a Glimpse of Mesoamerican Philosophy*

Ancient Mesoamerica, as I have briefly explained, was home to one of Earth's original (and isolated) civilisations, which was based on settlement in city states, the cultivation of maize and the establishment of trade networks of necessary resources. This later led to the flourishing of art, poetry, writing and other aspects of culture [Smith and Mason 2000].

In contrast, the globalised Mexico of today is a member of the G20, home of the world's largest Spanish-speaking population and is Latin America's second biggest economy. However, as Bonfil Batalla has commented, many Mexicans do not feel part of the Westernization project. Indeed, many use social media platforms to express their outrage in response to fiscal reforms made by politicians far removed from the daily reality of the bustling streets and scorching fields. On the xilam Facebook group, some advocates share jokes about the banking industry. For example, a cartoon cat with a book and spectacles is depicted with the following text: 'I am going to measure your opinions in a bank and see if it generates me any interest one day'. Fierce criticism is also issued to the Bank of Mexico and jokes are made of its famously overweight chief director, Agustín Carstens, who 'hasn't tightened his belt'. Other funny videos show builders' labourers jumping off the first floor of a building to land safely on a heap of sand between repetitive work operations, and a man using a Coca Cola bottle – the epitome of Americanisation, bad health and capitalism – as a musical instrument.

On a more serious note, the xilam community attempts to instill pride in the underlying indigenous society that forms the bedrock of modern Mexico. They criticize the strong interest from many Mexicans in foreign cultures (particularly Western and East Asian) in terms of fashion, beauty ideals, sports and general life philosophy. On the group's website, they write of the suppression of native culture:

Throughout the passage of time in Mexico, there has been the belief in the concepts and disciplines of development from foreign cultures. During the period of conquest, the native culture was pushed underground, yet this was retained in the collective subconscious and multiple traditions, being in this way transmitted to this day by shamans and teachers who survived silently while the course of time and history brought the country to its modernity.

[www.xilam.org]

This marginalized native culture, like all cultures, is said to have resisted over time. The key terms 'rescue' and 'renaissance' are common in the lexicon of xilam, as they claim below in relation to the above statement:

In contemporary times, and responding to a basic need – a people unaware of their culture and inserted within imposed beliefs that cannot flourish – there has reemerged an interest in a search for the culture that was guarded during this invasion. There are many stories of this renaissance, which propose an awakening of the people from their internal force after more than 500 years of submission.

[www.xilam.org]

Furthermore, the association provides examples of scientific discoveries and discussions of the achievements of the pre-Hispanic cultures, in particular the elements that unite them: An apparently esoteric (from a somewhat Orientalist posture), supposedly barbaric (from a Western viewpoint) and perhaps highly scientific philosophy based on the 'exact' sciences of astronomy and mathematics (as we understand science today in the West). For example, there are documentary videos offering a great paradigm shift: Claiming that the Greco-Roman calendar is inaccurate, like that of the Chinese, and the only accurate one is the Maya, which perceives time as a spiral.

Unsurprisingly, there is little mention of the 'darker' aspects of ancient Mesoamerica in their different stages of development, specifically the many sacrifices and domination through violence that is evidenced in tombs and other sources. Instead, the association opts for a more utopian perspective, like some taijiquan organisations do today in terms of ecological relationships with the Earth, animals and the elements [Brown, Jennings and Sparkes 2014]. The personal pronouns used by the xilam group are intimate: The pre-Hispanic people are perceived as being 'us', and there are many references to 'our ancestors' and 'our grandparents'. This is a key issue, according to Bonfil Batalla, as Mexicans often talk of the ancient Mesamericans as 'they', with the 'we' being the Mestizo (racially and culturally mixed), cosmopolitan and Westernised people. The xilam community reverse this discourse,

and refer to 'they' as the corrupt politicians and capitalists that favour foreign investment over internal development, and still consider Mexico to be Tenochtitlan, the ancient Aztec capital, as expressed on Mexican Independence Day, 15th September:

**Mexico!!**

**A warrior with name and surname, that is predestined to fly like an eagle, that knew to wait for the time and soon take the place in history that was prepared for it, no matter how much abuse it suffered, how many have defamed it, how many have wanted to violate it without honour, its richness, its territory and the most valuable, the heart of its children that so many times have turned their backs, rejected and depreciated its treasure, its culture, its greatness.**

**Mexico Tenochtitlan lives and will live forever while the world still exists!**

[<https://www.facebook.com/silam8/>]

Overall, the Facebook group provides the best example of the three media sources in terms of a general look at Mesoamerica, modern Mexico and what it means to be a warrior. In terms of the last issue, here are some general quotes of wisdom issued to the members and general public:

**When the question is to value or not to value, to walk alone or to be accompanied, the most important thing is to give yourself consideration of the magnitude of the required commitment, crossing a path on which herds will follow your footsteps.**

**It is not necessary to be followed to be valued. The lion walks alone, while the sheep walks in a herd.**

[<https://www.facebook.com/silam8/>]

This respect for the solitary, alternative way of living is advocated in xilam's classes and courses, as I observed in a year's participant observation. In the next section of the discussion, the specific elements of Mesoamerican civilisation, pre-Hispanic cultures and warrior philosophy are analysed in conjunction.

### *The Warrior Philosophy of Xilam and México Profundo*

With the gradual destruction of Mesoamerican society as the official paradigm for life in Mexico, the philosophies of life and death, health, the body and warriors have slowly diminished. The ideal of a warrior – in this case, the eagle and jaguar warriors – is reinterpreted for modern-day warriors who, as Marisela Ugalde explained to me [Jennings 2015a], is a person whose thoughts, feelings and actions are in unison, who fights every day to pursue their non-selfish and often altruistic goals for their family, nation and the Earth. This non-literal, perhaps metaphorical notion of a warrior is the guiding point for xilam, and it may be a factor that connects it to other traditionalist movements in the martial arts worldwide. Furthermore, xilam is posited as part of a broader set of physical cultural practices, games and rituals that could be described as a Mesoamerican 'body culture' [Eichberg 2000], including dance, the ball game, interactive and reactive games and wrestling.

As may be expected, the bulk of the media on xilam concerns introducing the art itself and the core warrior philosophy that binds its inspiration from the seemingly disparate Maya, Mexica and Zapotecan cultures, although there is mention of other aspects of the body culture, such as the so-called Mayan Yoga and pre-Hispanic dance [for a video, see <https://goo.gl/JHB81>]. As I have shown in the previous section, this philosophy is posited as being both scientific and pragmatic: Scientific through its connections to astronomy and mathematics and pragmatic for its ability to be applied and readily understood by people living thousands of years after its foundation. Researchers in martial arts studies have begun to look at the connections between martial arts and elements of religion [Brown, Jennings and Molle 2009] following earlier work looking into the links between martial arts philosophy and phenomenology. Xilam provides an insight into how a Latin American martial art has rediscovered and re-invented an ancient warrior culture, one which the organization uses as a basis for the art. In the official website, they clearly lay out the overall aims of this martial arts system:

**A project for the integral development of Mexicans through the retaking of their national identity by means of physical, intellectual and social activities.**

**Xilam seeks personal development [through] willpower, emotion, intelligence and conscience. It merges sport, discipline and the identity with Mexican pre-Hispanic origins.**

[[www.xilam.org](http://www.xilam.org)]

Xilam is the name of an ancient Maya city in Yucatan, Mexico that means 'to remove the skin'. However, like the idea of a warrior, this is non-literal and metaphoric. In an interview recorded on the YouTube channel, Marisela Ugalde claimed:

**For us, xilam is to remove the ego, to remove our old beliefs, our resources, without self-interest. Xilam is to remove this skin and give oneself to others, to do things for other people. This is for the rescue of a discipline and for Mexico to have its roots again – its philosophical basis strong among the youth.**

**To create a martial art, it is not enough to have the physical movements, but a philosophical rescue ... xilam is a total rescue ... A youngster without goals and a course is a youngster lost in our society, lost in humanity. Xilam tries to give a goal to every young Mexican: To find their culture.**

[<https://goo.gl/V24lNB>]

Like many warrior philosophies, xilam is concerned with continuous hard work towards a specified goal until the time of death – death is not feared, and is seen as being as natural as birth. Again, the metaphorical rhetoric blends with discourse concerning the connection between the underlying nation of Mexico and the individual Mexican who must know his/her origins in order to understand themselves:

**Xilam was initiated to wake the warrior that is strong and powerful, but has been forgotten ... he has his origin as his weapon and his story as his shield.**

**Xilam is a difficult art to learn. Before understanding what it is, you must learn what it is to be a warrior. The warrior is an example of excellence, of wisdom, of knowing oneself, of honesty, of truth, of strength and life itself.**

[<https://goo.gl/I6Zi5x>]

On the basic description on the association's Facebook page, it is claimed that the group's objective is 'to recover our roots and strengthen our nation that is Mexico'. These roots are the pre-Hispanic ones seen in photographs, images and documentary videos shared on this social networking site. The notion of recovering Mexico's pre-Hispanic roots is the focal point of *México Profundo*, in which the use of Mesoamerican philosophy and practices should be the driving point for the national project: The past and hidden present used to guide the country to a future that works for the majority of Mexicans far removed from the capitalist, Western democracy that Mexico appears to be.

Below is a brief description of the art on the Facebook group, which is intended for a public audience:

**A technique of body-to-body fighting, endurance, precision and use of weapons, which are incorporated to structure the system, as well as to give xilam the pre-Hispanic worldview to translate in terms of a fighting art, a vision, a set of life ethics that permit the practitioner a glimpse of their transcendence as a human being.**

**It is the re-composition from contemporary Mexico of an important part of the experience of ancestral life that not only implies a martial art but a life philosophy and personal development project where the individual discovers themselves and their similarities [with others] to 'remove the skin'.**

[<https://goo.gl/FGH7ud>]

As I have demonstrated, this 'removing of the skin' is not a technical destruction of a human body's exterior but a metaphor for the gradual discovery of human nature that is internal to all people, regardless of 'race', ethnicity, gender, biological sex, age, sexual orientation or physical ability. It is the understanding of willpower and determination, self-control and precision and love for humanity, the nation and the world that are possible for all citizens. Xilam is thus an educational platform for Mexicans (and Mexican Americans) to rediscover and understand their pre-Hispanic roots in a carnal, living and feeling way.

Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, by using modern technology like Facebook and YouTube to disseminate indigenous wisdom and warrior philosophies, the xilam association is engaging with both Mesoamerican and Western civilisations. Native or indigenous Mexico, so commonly associated with poverty and lack of technological and economic progression, can be bonded with progressive business models and technological platforms to reach a wider audience in person and online. In an ideal or utopian sense, the half a millennium of conflict might now be resolved. This is important when considering different philosophies under one unifying paradigm, i.e., a civilisation. The xilam association is proud to share the fact that the martial arts are not only part of the cultural heritage of Asian civilisation. Marisela explains the warrior philosophy – perhaps something that connects all traditional martial arts, which may connect to other philosophies, such as ecological ones: 'To have the sufficient willpower to control your emotions, to have clear thinking, and to have the consciousness that all of us live on this planet'.



Nevertheless, the focus on indigenous culture and national identity may to some degree limit the internationalization of xilam that has been seen in other Latin American martial arts like Capoeira and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, which have proliferated across the globe thanks to diasporic immigration and the efforts of various entrepreneurs through varying degrees of business and formal organizations [De Rocha, Esteves, Cotta de Mello and Ferreira da Silva 2015]. Xilam remains a local, relatively unknown martial art due to the central control of its founder. To be spread across the globe requires a change in the organization from a family organization or body lineage [Brown and Jennings 2011] to a modern, 'Westernized' martial arts association – which could damage or disrupt its traditional ethos. Whether it follows the path of many Japanese martial arts like Judo [Villamon, Brown, Espartero and Gutierrez 2004] or maintains a traditionalist, esoteric approach, only time will tell. Its future, like that of Mexico itself, is in the hands of the Mexicans of today: To deliver a new project for a profound Mexico or continue along the path of Westernization. This leads me to consider this case study in the following conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

### XILAM, MÉXICO PROFUNDO AND THE INVENTION OF MARTIAL ARTS

In this contribution to the invention of martial arts, I have made no visible reference to Hobsbawm and Ranger's classic edited collection *The Invention of Tradition* [1983]. This has been well utilized by other researchers in our area [to name a few, Inoue 1998; Nakajima and Thompson 2012], but it is pertinent to briefly consider the case of xilam here, as peers in martial arts studies may find an empirical or thematic comparison useful. Xilam is most certainly an invented tradition, but the prefix 're-' would be more suitable: It is an attempt to re-invent a 'lost' martial arts culture that was suppressed and nearly lost due to years of conquest, colonization and later changes through the Holy Inquisition in Nueva España (New Spain) and movements towards (post)modernity by the Mexican Republic. It is an approach to re-educate the general Mexican population in a dynamic and lively way about their origins, which contrasts to the formal academic approach of conventional education. It is also a way to re-invent Mexico's image, as part of a broader approach to the México Profundo.

This theoretical framework inspired by México Profundo provides a new way to look at cultures and civilisation and could be fruitfully paired with post-colonial studies, cultural and social anthropology, media studies and a broad range of subject-specific 'studies' that, as

Paul Bowman [2015b] has pointed out, are fundamental cognate disciplines for martial arts studies. By using theories developed in other countries, chiefly former colonies and indigenous societies, we can see the world through different lenses beyond theories from Western Europe (particularly France, with its plethora of outstanding theorists such as Barthes, Bourdieu, Derrida and Foucault) and the Anglosphere. Alternative notions of physical or body cultures from often-overlooked regions of the world [Eichberg 2000] may be seen from the native rather than Western academic perspective, adding to the richness of analysis.

In line with the recent abundance of new studies on Latin American martial arts, the aim of this article was to provide an insight into how one Mexican martial art promotes pre-Hispanic philosophy to the general public using contemporary media like Facebook and YouTube. It was restricted to these three formal and official media for the Xilam Martial Arts Association, which derives from a broader ethnographic study of this physical culture. As part of a special edition of *Martial Arts Studies* on the invention of martial arts, xilam is used as an exemplar of how a recently created martial art may be used to rediscover ancient traditions, re-educate contemporary people about their ancestors and to re-invent a 'lost' body culture for the benefit of future generations.

This part of a wider study of xilam adds to the corpus of knowledge in martial arts studies by using an example of a martial art from Mexico, a country that is often overlooked by scholars in the fields of the anthropology, philosophy and sociology of sport in terms of the contemporary nation. It contributes to the broader studies of Latin American fighting systems, and also provides an introduction to the idea of México Profundo to a new audience, who may find some of the core concepts useful for studies of other indigenous or folk cultures and forms of combat from different parts of the world. This article also provides an example of how a multimedia approach can be useful by considering the different senses (here, sight and sound), as seen in earlier calls in the specific methodological tradition of ethnography [Sparkes 2009].

Despite these small additions to the body of knowledge, this article invites more questions than it addresses. So far in this investigation, I have shared the life history of one of the few living female founders of a martial art, and have also suggested ways in which technology and collaboration can be used to disseminate such stories [Jennings 2015b]. In the specific focus of xilam, how do the practitioners engage with the public information? How does the data serve for a general discussion of authenticity, tradition, ancestry and the re-invention of martial arts? Further research into xilam also needs to look at the critiques and attacks on xilam, how the practitioners and their supporters respond to

this and how the art is taught in regular classes and seminars as well as showcased in demonstrations and martial arts exhibitions. The animal aspects of the warrior philosophy and the pedagogical and didactical methods are also worthwhile themes for future writings and talks.

Further work on xilam and similar traditionalist martial arts could use three terms deriving from the suffix trans-: Transformation (in terms of practitioners as a direct and by-product of self- and shared cultivation), transmission (of the art from generation to generation) and transcendence (for both the practitioner and art). The third term, transcendence, has been raised as a potential aim of the martial arts in a recent article by Sixt Wetzler [2015], who offers a look at the construction of meaning in martial arts. This social construction of meaning [also the focus in Green 2015] and transcendence are core issues for the xilam practitioners, as can be seen in the closing extracts below, offered as a final reflection:

**You are the recognised and exercised being from the effort and the psychophysical coordination, which permits you to integrate as one being, which is one's own individual, where you discover who you are, what you represent, which has the elusive heritage and origin, genetics, history, education, culture, etc. To be able to identify one who can transform or better themselves this day, giving a sense of life that permits one to make a decision and make it transcendental.**

**Xilam is based on a history that dates back thousands of years, having its origin in pre-Hispanic peoples transcending until our times with their discipline, philosophy, spiritual and ceremonial mysticism, these characteristics that combine with the unique influences of the modern era in a Mexican martial arts system.**

[[www.xilam.org](http://www.xilam.org)]

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