

## LITERATURE, ETHICS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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### The Search for Infinity. The Number 8 and the Martial Arts

Submission: 10.10.2014; acceptance: 7.03.2015

**Key words:** comparative historical method, cultural influences, East and West, cosmic symbolism and nature

#### Abstract

**Problem/Aim.** Since ancient times, in both West and East, the number eight is present in many cultural expressions, having important functions, both symbolic and concrete. Concerning the human bodily experience, the aim is to strive not to an abstract summary, an idealistic archetype, but to the identification of the specificities of the different historical processes that have produced different body techniques.

**Material/Method.** Moving from the presence of the number eight in martial arts and traditional dances coming from different backgrounds and using the comparative historical method, article traces the similarities among various disciplines.

**Results/Conclusions.** Dance and martial arts are activities well established already in archaic societies as expressions of universal efficiency of rhythmic alternation between opposing, but complementary and inseparable, forces. Through observation of the nature we can perceive this alternation.

#### I. Introduction

Since ancient times, in both West and East the **number 8** is present in many cultural expressions, having important functions, both symbolic and concrete, from the religious sphere to mathematics, from philosophy to the nomenclature of the winds and the solar system, from architecture to the game of chess, to bodily expressions such as Raqs Sharqi (Belly dancing; Dance du Ventre), Tango, Qigong and various martial arts.

With regard specifically to the human body experience, movements to eight - originated from the basin to be transmitted to the limbs - are present either in traditional dances and in different martial arts, both activities already well established in the society as the most archaic expressions of the universal efficiency of rhythmic alternation between opposing forces inspired by observation and perception of nature [Lash 1979; Lenoir, Standaert 2005].

After having reviewed many meanings of the symbol eight in cultural contexts differentiated both by geographical position that historical period, the research

traces the similarities between martial arts from different backgrounds, moving by the presence of the number eight in the cultural context, in the underlying philosophy, in the practice of various disciplines. Following the comparative historical method [Pettazzoni 1957; Rossi 1990; Bears 1999], the goal is not an abstract synthesis, the construction of an idealistic archetype, but the identification of the characteristics of the various historical processes that have produced different body techniques. In fact, according to the founder of the comparative historical method, the Italian Raffaele Pettazzoni, each appearance presupposes training, every event has the support of a development process. Unlike the classic comparative method from the British anthropology, Pettazzoni has therefore developed over half a century ago a historical-comparative method, still profitable, aimed at identifying the particular features of each irreducible cultural product through a meticulous preliminary research of affinities and analogies.

The disciplines involved in this research originate in China (Baguazhang, Chen Taijiquan, Qigong) Philippines (Kali Arnis Escrima), India (Gatka). Some thoughts are

also made on the so-called Belly dancing from the Middle East and on the Argentine tango, without losing sight of the symbolism inherent in a game so fiercely confrontational like chess, also of an Eastern origin.

## II. Harmony, resurrection, redemption, eternal, infinite: the multiple meanings of the number eight between art, science and religion

In order to really explore the multiple meanings expressed by the number eight over the centuries in many regions of the world we should set an editorial work much wider than an article in a magazine. A review of these meanings is however necessary to support the authentic core of the research, that affects the comparison between the various disciplines of the body with particular regard to certain martial arts, exposed in the next paragraph.

### *Christianity*

In Christian symbolism, since Early Church Fathers, the 8th day represents the transfiguration and the New Testament. After six days of creation and after *sabbath*, the seventh, the 8th day announces eternity, the resurrection of Christ and that of man [Ambrosius, *Opera omnia*. XXII; Le Goff 1964; Iraeneus, *Adversus Haereses*, 18.2, 18.3; Kraft 1965]. Ambrosius, IV after Christ, wrote that it was right that the hall of the Sacred Baptistery had 8 sides, because it was granted to the people the true salvation when, at the dawn of the 8th day, Christ rose from the dead. The octagon appears in San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy (AD 547), in the Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne, Aachen, Germany (AD 786), in many churches named Holy Sepulchre and in many baptisteries.

### *China*

Ancient Chinese culture conceived the Bagua to illustrate the whole cycle of the universal possibilities, that is, the harmony. It consists of the Yin-Yang diagram - representation of equilibrium in continuous evolution of both male and female principles, opposite and complementary - surrounded by Eight Trigrams, images of what happens in heaven and on earth continuously passing into one another [Shaughnessy 1998].

Marcel Granet argues that at the basis of *Yi Jing* (*The Book of Change*) there are Eight Trigrams stacked in various combinations, giving rise to the 64 Hexagrams that composing the entire universal knowledge contained in this book: the 64 Hexagrams represent the whole of reality, the Eight Trigrams reproduce the universe in a concentrated form.

In China number 8 is considered lucky because it is a perfect symmetrical shape: you can cut the number 8 in half vertically or horizontally, and both halves mirror themselves perfectly. It is the same in Yin-Yang

diagram. Perfect symmetry lends itself to a perfect balance between opposite forces harmoniously combined.

The same concept was born in Ancient Egypt, in India, in Arab, Iranian and Islamic cultures.

### *Ancient Egypt*

In Egyptian cosmology of Hermopolis, Eight Deities personify the chaos before creation. Their collective name is Ogdoad. They are four male and four female forming four duality intended as equal and opposite forces but harmoniously combined. In addition to creation, Ogdoad also had the task of enabling the sunrise every day protecting in the Underworld [Hart 2005].

### *India*

For the Buddhist doctrine there are eight ways of redemption, as the petals of the lotus, symbolized both in the octagonal plan of the temples and in the number of spokes of the wheel of Dharma [Buswell 2003]. The classical Buddhist texts describe the universe as a table of  $8 \times 8 = 64$  squares, fastened with golden cords, which correspond to 64 kalpas [Epstein 2003, vocem]. Kalpa is a Sanskrit term that indicates a cosmic cycle - period of time so long as to be necessary measurement in eons, that in billions of years [Bhagavad Gita, VIII-IX] - a basis of cosmological theory of the universe.

The classic text of Yoga that collects the aphorisms of Patanjali is divided into the so-called Eight Arms [Swami Hariharananda Aranya 1983]. The one hundred and twenty sutras that divide the text *Yoga Sutra* constitute a practical and theoretical way, a kind of exo / exoteric map which has its completeness and resolution in the unfolding of the same way described. The eight arms which divide it are part of the one body of the teachings of Yoga. Four arms represent the mental way and four the physical one, all of them are related to the five elements: earth, faced by Yama (five restraints), Water, led by Niyama (five subjects), Fire, directed by asanas (postures), Air, directed by Pranayama (control of Prana), ether, sailed from Pratyahar (Synchronizing senses and thoughts), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (Meditation deep), Samadhi (Awakening and absorption in the Spirit).

The eight is also found in the series of mantra called Astangha Mantra, i.e. eight (astangha) vehicles sound (mantra). All mantra of this series have the peculiarity of having the first part direct to infinity and the second from infinity towards the finity.

### *Middle East*

In traditional Arab, Iranian and Islamic cultures, the octagon and the eight-pointed star have many meanings associated always with harmony and the ways, especially Sufi, to reach it. These symbols are in marble, in the basins of the fountains in the gardens of paradise, in ceramic decorations, fabrics, art and jewelry.

These Middle Eastern cultural matrices influenced also, as well as the military architecture of the Templars, the mysterious Castel del Monte of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen [Barber 1994; Cadei 1995].

## Sciences

### *Geography*

Since ancient times, observation of nature has suggested the use of the number eight in some classifications of natural phenomena. As the winds nomenclature, which in ancient Greece was interested in eight directions then also represented in modern Rosa dei Venti (Compass Rose), and the structure of the solar system, that consists of eight planets, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune in order of distance from the sun.

### *Mathematics*

The number 8 put in plan,  $\infty$ , is a graphical representation of the infinite. This symbol was invented by the English mathematician John Wallis in 1657 to treat indivisible factors, but already in the Pythagorean conception number 8 indicated symbolically eternity. Number 8 put in plan is also the topological structure called Moebius strip where you can go from one surface to another without going over the edge, the realization of a **spatial infinite structure** [Aczel 2001; Rucker 1995].

## III. The number eight in the experience of the human body: dance, calisthenics, martial arts

Various experiences of the human body, originated from cultures, geographies, different eras, are united by the significant presence of the number eight in the movements that characterize them, as well as in their complex theoretical systems. They are dances, martial arts, calisthenics exercises, that are bodyweight exercises that connect the beauty (*kalos*, in Greek) by force (*sthenos*). In several martial arts as Baguazhang and Taijiquan (China), Kali Escrima (Philippine), Gatka (India) and dances as Raqs Sharqi (or Belly dancing, India/Middle East) and Tango (Argentina) the pelvis rotates to **eight** ( $\infty/8$ ) as in the dynamics of a piston rod. The rotation is transmitted to the ends of the limbs, arms and legs. In addition, various calisthenics exercises, collected under the generic Chinese term of Qigong, are sequences of movements that follow the shape of the eight.

Finally, the game of chess was born under the decisive influence of this ubiquitous symbol.

## Martial Arts

### *Chess game*

That is certainly very unusual to enter the game of chess in a survey involving martial arts, because it is an activity that does not include an integral sphere of mind, body and emotional as with psycho-physical disciplines known as martial arts. This choice, however, intends to highlight not only that chess is the obvious representation of a fight - so much that, among fans, it is generally considered to be the most violent game in the world - but, above all, that it is based on some philosophical content making it suited to the spiritual search inherent in the practice of martial arts.

As you know, the game of chess comes from the Indian culture. The shape of the chessboard corresponds to the Vastu-mandala, a diagram which is also the basic layout of a temple or a city in the Hindu culture. This diagram is a symbol of existence, conceived as a field of action of the divine powers. The structure of the board of 64 squares (8x8) represents the path of time and cycles, the higher influences that act upon this world and the ties that connect with the human soul.

The fighting represented in this game is the evocation, in its most universal sense, of the combat of the devas against the asuras, deities similar to the angels of the monotheistic traditions facing demons and titans. All other meanings of the game deriving from this.

It is important to note the similarities between the symbolism of the game of chess and the theme of the relationship between will and destiny of the Bhagavad-Gita, text addressed primarily to the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste. If you transpose the meaning of the different pieces of the game in the spiritual, the king will be the heart or the spirit, and the other figures are the different faculties of the soul. Their moves correspond to different modes of realization of the infinite cosmic possibilities represented by the chessboard, summarized in a universal spirit symbolized precisely by the geometry of the chessboard. The human being is free if it acts in the truth of this spiritual quality, and is a slave to fate if it falls outside of it. The Kshatriya who is dedicated to chess can then find a way to sublimate his passion and his thirst for adventure, but also a speculative support, a way that from the action leads to the contemplation [Burckhardt 1980].

### *Gatka*

We have mentioned the importance that the number eight takes on in Indian culture, where it is often seen as a symbol of infinity. The philosophical contents of this symbolism become movement in Indian martial arts, particularly in Gatka, which means "ecstasy", "state of grace", "stop the mind". It should be remembered that the martial art is inserted in the Vedas (Small Veda) along with the medicine of Ayurveda and dance. It is

therefore necessary to follow the dynamics with which the thought is expressed in movement thus shaping the holistic structure of the warrior.

Let's imagine a sphere, corresponding to the female principle, which circumscribes a cube, the representation of the male principle. These two volumes share a common centre and touch themselves in exactly eight points. While rotating independently, they will maintain both the common centre and these eight contact points. The eight then appears as the symbol of a dynamic balance and harmony in a relationship in flux, although apparently stable. Since Gatka is a martial art which provides attack/defence in 360° against multiple opponents at once and often using two weapons together, the figure 8 is omnipresent, not only in the weapons rotation, but in every body movement. The gatkier moves in every direction revolving in his/her own *axis*, the spinal column, and rotating around the bent form of number 8.

In fact, the main pantra - or form, dynamic model, equivalent to the Japanese term *kata* - of Gatka bases its motion on two eights, orthogonal to each other. An eight is drawn by the legs on an imaginary square on the ground, the other eight is drawn by the arms in a plane perpendicular to the first. The movement is infinite, there are no interruptions and it can be continued for two hours and a half. On a time of two bars and a half a summary it is created in the activity of the two hemispheres of the brain that puts them in balance, thus favouring neutrality of mind, a "zero" (*shunya*, in Sanskrit), a state of inner calm and silence. The same happens in the Sufi dances, from which the Gatka was definitely contaminated, but Dervishes whirl in circles, gatkiers rotate around the bent form of number 8/∞.

This condition creates in the brain a time of three cycles and a half that leads to a kind of ecstasy and trance condition in which the practitioners, instead of consuming their Prana (literally life, but also translated as breath or spirit), produce the Prana directly connecting infinite pranic energy [Yogi Bhajan 2003]. Another key factor is the electromagnetic field of the human being defined auric field by the yogic physiology that considers it as one of the ten bodies that make up a human being. It can expand and contract with important effects on the flow of vital energy under the influence, among other things, also of particular movements. The auric body is the first protection and projection of the warrior, in fact in Gatka all movements based on the infinite eight help to expand the aura, from the pantra previously described to all the fighting movements. The movement can be more or less wide, even internal, but it is essential that it is fluid, without blocks. This movement, the secret of the two times and a half, expresses the continuous search for the point of junction of the two circles of the infinite eight. In other words, the continuous search of a condition in which space and time are joined!

### *Arnis, Kali, Escrima*

About the Filipino Kali, the legendary master Dan Inosanto wrote: "The figure eight is a fundamental movement, not only for the Kali-Escrima, and I do not master it yet. It 's definitely easier to work first on the basic strokes and then on the figure eight, but the fundamentals originate from the figure eight. Circling the stick in front of you with a move to eight, allowing it to wrap you slightly. Concentrate on moving it over your head and you'll get your fundamental shot from overhead. Concentrate on the descending backhand and you'll get your fundamental backhand shot. Reverse the movement to practice shots upwards" [Inosanto 1987: 48]. In other manuals it clearly appears as the practitioners of this discipline are well aware that this movement to eight calls the mathematical symbol for infinity [Galang 2004; Maltese 1995].

### *Baguazhang, Taijiquan, Qigong*

Baguazhang literally means Palm of eight trigrams. It is a Chinese martial discipline of unknown origin but from the nineteenth century it has reached a considerable spread. From the name itself, you immediately understand the close link with the symbol of Bagua, the foundation of the most classic of the Chinese classics, the *Yi Jing* (The Book of Change). To summarize we can say that: "Baguazhang uses not only the palm techniques to compare with the Bagua diagrams, it has also borrowed the Bagua figures to symbolize the different parts of the body. From these fundamental linkages, the keys of the techniques were created and developed" [Liang Shou Yu, Yang Jwing Ming, Wu Wen Ching 1994: 31].

Even Taijiquan is based on the theory symbolized by Bagua, as it is evident from the main classical reference text of the style of the family Chen [Chen Xin 2007]. Encoded in the seventeenth century, as verified by historical research, this style is credited as the original one between several ones practised today in the world of this now popular discipline. The exercise of this fundamental style is also known as Reelink silk, which is carried out by rotating the pelvis to eight, once again as the mathematical symbol for infinity.

## **Calisthenics**

### *Qigong*

Some other exercises of Chinese origin, directly addressing to health care, refer to number eight. These are included in the broader category of Qigong, very well known outside of China among fans of this beneficial discipline and usually practiced by the writer. These are sequences of movements known as Eight pieces of brocade and Eight animals to strengthen the kidneys. Both sequences are composed of eight figures, but the choice to adopt this structure is obvious because of the

correspondences between the natural forces represented in Bagua and the human body, even if it is not possible here to dwell on details.

## Dance

### *Tango*

According to Miguel Angel Zotto, considered among the greatest tango dancers of all time, the essence of tango is fulfilled when the woman draws a figure eight with the pelvis turning it, first forward and then backward, while the man accompanies her. Even Zotto is perfectly aware that the eight symbolizes infinity, it states that these same concepts were already supported by his teacher Carlos Alberto Estevez "Petróleo" [Azzi 1993; Crippa 2013].

### *Raqs Sharqi*

The rotation to eight of the basin is the basic technique of the typically female dance also known in Egypt as Raqs Sharqi, one of the oldest dances in the world, probably the original Indian region of Rajasthan, from there spread to the Middle East by the gypsies [Bonaventura 1998]. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europe took to indicate this dance with the French term *dance du ventre* or the British belly dance, while in Egypt it was called Raqs Sharqi, literally "oriental dance" [Karayanni 2004]. The pelvis rotates to eight while the dancer remains in place almost as if she dug in the ground to plant even more firmly its roots, in contrast to what happens in the western ballet that constantly search the elevation, the lightness, the challenge to the weight body and gravity.

## Arts

### *Juggling*

Among bodyweight exercises, even if they use instruments, that combine beauty and strength we can also enter those associated with juggling, namely that art which is to throw and catch a continuously variable number of objects so that, for each roll, at least one of the objects remains in the air. This art is expressed already launching a single object from one hand to the other according to a specific schedule because when you are able to juggle with one object you can do it with two, when you are able to juggle with two objects you can do it with three, etc. There are no winners and losers, you compete only with yourself, with the rhythm, with the force of gravity, gradually developing patience, determination, self-analysis, self-confidence thanks to the physical and mental relaxation. By juggling you learn that making mistakes is not a sign of failure, but the index of the challenge of your own limits in the search for a new advance.

The first figure of juggling is called Waterfall, a single, simple movement, identical for both hands. It is the basic pattern of juggling, the one to which the juggler can always come back at any time. When this game plan is acquired, one of the most difficult steps in juggling is fulfilled, because it is now possible to create a harmonic continuous and speculate movement, whose execution becomes for the juggler natural and spontaneous. When the Waterfall is properly executed, creating a circular motion, where the start and end are no longer identifiable, objects follow a trajectory that draws in space an eight overturned, the mathematical symbol for infinity [Finnigan 1997: 36-37].

## IV. Results, discussion and conclusions

The comparison of different sources, both bibliographic and iconographic - these unfortunately impossible to present here for reasons of space - allows us to lay the theoretical basis for a more comprehensive and broader search, supported by a more substantial body of text and images, from the observation in the field and from interviews with experts in the various disciplines gathered in China, India and Europe.

The current stage of the research corresponds to the phase of the theoretical system, animated by the historical comparative method that has contributed in particular to the development of the history of religions. It is therefore necessary to further research with an empirical work in the field. They are however already possible some important considerations. The observed martial disciplines seem to share a search of the infinite, not intended so much as immortality but as eternal change. In this sense they are techniques that make the practitioner capable of accepting and conforming to perpetual change that underlies the great universal order of nature. The observation of nature from which all these disciplines originate is therefore their true common denominator, a stretch of extreme importance for contemporary society which, having so radically departed from the natural spontaneity, has lost the ability to understand and to give themselves an address of progress. It turns out that nature itself provides human beings with greater guarantees of humanity than they can create themselves by deploying artificial means. Psychophysical disciplines from Asia, especially if you study in comparative historical perspective, can therefore provide an address of civilization to the lost modern man, engaged, like a western classical ballet dancer, to defy the law of gravity to hover at the top rather than plant himself more firmly in the ground, digging their roots, as is the case in the dances and oriental martial arts.

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## Poszukiwanie nieskończoności. Liczba 8 a sztuki walki

**Słowa kluczowe:** historyczna metoda porównawcza, wpływy kulturowe, Wschód i Zachód, symbolizm kosmiczny, przyroda

### Abstrakt

Problem. Od czasów starożytnych, zarówno na Wschodzie i Zachodzie, numer osiem był obecny w wielu kulturach, posiadając ważne funkcje, zarówno symboliczne jak i konkretne, począwszy od sfery religijnej po matematykę, od filozofii po nomenklaturę wiatrów i układu słonecznego, od architektury po grę w szachy, a także w wyrażeniach dotyczących ciała, takich jak taniec brzucha, tango, *qigong* oraz w różnych sztukach walki. Jeśli chodzi o doświadczenia ludzkiego ciała, ruchy w postaci 8 można znaleźć w tradycyjnych tańcach oraz w kilku sztukach walki. Są dwa rodzaje działalności, zarówno dobrze znane już w społeczeństwach archaicznych, jak i wyrażenia uniwersalnej efektywności rytmicznych przemian pomiędzy przeciwnymi, ale uzupełniającymi się i nierozłącznymi, siłami. Zmiany te mogą być dostrzeżone poprzez obserwację przyrody. Metody. Używając historycznej metody porównawczej można prześledzić podobieństwa między sztukami walki wywodzącymi się z różnych środowisk, obserwując obecność liczby osiem w kontekście kulturowym, w filozofii oraz w praktyce

różnych dyscyplin. Celem nie jest dążenie do abstrakcyjnego podsumowania idealistycznego archetypu, ale identyfikacja specyfiki procesów historycznych, które stworzyły różne techniki ciała. Rozpatrywane sztuki walki pochodzą z Brazylii (*capoeira*), Chin (*baguazhang*, *taijiquan chen*), Filipin (*arnis kali escrima*), Indii (*gatka*), Włoch (szermierka z Salento). Badaniu podległo również kilka ćwiczeń *qigong* i tzw. taniec brzucha z Bliskiego Wschodu, tango argentyńskie i gra w szachy.

Wyniki. Ocena porównawcza tekstów i obrazów prezentowanych w niniejszej pracy stanowi teoretyczną podstawę do szerszych i bardziej pogłębionych badań empirycznych, wspieranych przez bardziej obszerny zbiór tekstów i obrazów, dzięki obserwacji w tej dziedzinie oraz poprzez wywiady z ekspertami w różnych dyscyplinach z Chin, Indii oraz Europy.

Dyskusja i wnioski. Techniki i filozofie badanych dyscyplin walki zdają się podzielać impuls do poszukiwania nieskończoności, nie w sensie nieśmiertelności, ale jako wiecznych zmian. W tym sensie owe techniki powodują, iż ćwiczący jest w stanie przyjąć i podlegać ciągłym zmianom, które są podstawą wielkiego uniwersalnego porządku natury. Można zatem powiedzieć, że obserwacja natury, z której pochodzą wszystkie te dyscypliny, jest ich prawdziwym wspólnym mianownikiem, a jest to głównie istotne dla współczesnego społeczeństwa, które tak radykalnie odeszło od naturalnej spontaniczności, straciło zdolność rozumienia siebie oraz zapewnienia ideału postępu. Okazuje się, że sama natura zapewnia większą gwarancję człowieczeństwa niż ludzie mogą tworzyć sami sztucznymi sposobami.