

Kiss My Diaspora

I once knew a woman that referred, with knowing exaggeration, to the relocation and estrangement of various members of her immediate family as “the great diaspora”. She had divorced her husband, her daughter had moved away, and her two sons, although they lived far from her and each other, tended to butt heads whenever they got together. Obviously, she was having a little joke at her own expense, to lighten what could be seen as a tragic familial situation.

For most people in the West, The Diaspora refers to the dispersal of the twelve tribes of Israel and Judah to various sections of the globe so that even now they still categorize themselves as either Ashkenazi (from Germany or northern France) or Sephardic (from the Iberian peninsula). But there are also Mizrahi (Asian Jews) and Ethiopian Jews. You can see that the woman in question (who, by the way, was Swedish, not Jewish) was exaggerating more than a little.

There have been many other cultural diasporae, among them several in the martial arts. In fact, the splitting of cultural “traditions” happens so often in the history of budo that it is difficult to follow them all. Some, of course, are minor. Johnnie R. Bell and a few friends decide that Master I. N. Sistence is a little too cautious in his meting out of knowledge so they break away to form their own Shado-do, a system almost identical to Master Sistence’s, albeit more generous with knowledge and with the concomitant ranks.

Other divergences are major. Ng Mui sees the flaws in the Shaolin systems she studies and wants to create something than can handle bigger guys in a real confrontation. She creates a system later to be called Wing Chun. Or even more diverse and significant: Shaolin Ch’uan-fa is exported to Okinawa and Okinawan karate is exported to Japan.

No one jokes about these family splits to lighten what could be seen as tragic situations; nor, ironically, does anyone think them tragic situations.

I felt bad for the woman who experience such a complete break-up of her family, as anyone would. We think of “family” as the unit that we never want to see break-up; rather, we expect to see it grow. In reality it does both. Parents pass away and children get married, connecting with other families to whom they sometimes have stronger ties. They have children who repeat the process. As the clan expands, there is more likelihood that it will also disperse. Any dispersion can mean a diminution of the original family or it can mean an augmentation. We see this happening around us and we concentrate not on the large picture but on the emotions that affect us when a break-up happens or when a union takes place. We see the trees grow and are happy or we see them cut down or die naturally and we are sad. It is almost impossible for us to see the whole forest.

So too in studying the traditional martial arts. If someone we consider important leaves the dojo, it makes us either sad or angry, depending on the circumstances. We feel diminished but continue our training. We cannot see that Johnnie R. Bell may reconcile with Master I. N. Sistence at some point in the future, or that

his refusing to reconcile might result in his own students breaking off because they think Johnnie's standards for rank are not strict enough. They then seek out the aging Master Sistence and add to his clan.

Wing Chun breaks away from Shaolin. So does Okinawan karate. Japanese karate breaks away from Okinawan karate. Shotokan breaks away from Shorin. Wado breaks away from Shotokan. Are these tragic situations? Perhaps. But in the long run, each person has the opportunity to study what pleases him, what seems right for him.

I am sure the woman who jested about her "great diaspora" was not happy about it. But seeing her former husband and her children free to do what they wanted with their lives did feel right to her. Smiling and accepting, she threw them (and her great diaspora) a kiss.