

Article

From the Calendar to the Flesh: Movement, Space, and Identity in a Mexican Body Culture

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Abstract: There are numerous ways to theorise about elements of civilisations and societies known as ‘body’, ‘movement’, or ‘physical’ cultures. Inspired by the late Henning Eichberg’s notions of multiple and continually shifting body cultures, this article explores his constant comparative (trialectic) approach via the Mexican martial art, exercise, and human development philosophy—*Xilam*. Situating *Xilam* within its historical and political context and within a triad of Mesoamerican, native, and modern martial arts, combat sports, and other physical cultures, I map this complexity through Eichberg’s triadic model of achievement, fitness, and experience sports. I then focus my analysis on the aspects of movement in space as seen in my ethnographic fieldwork in one branch of the *Xilam* school. Using a bare studio as the setting and my body as principle instrument, I provide an impressionist portrait of what it is like to train in *Xilam* within a communal dance hall (space) and typical class session of two hours (time) and to form and express warrior identity from it. This article displays the techniques; gestures and bodily symbols that encapsulate the essence of the *Xilam* body culture, calling for a way to theorise from not just *from* and *on* the body but also *across* body cultures.

Keywords: body cultures; comparative analysis; Eichberg; ethnography; games; martial arts; Mexico; physical culture; space; theory

1. Mexican Body Cultures: From Acapulcan Cliff Divers to Xilam

1.1. Situating Mexico in Time and Space

Mexico is a country steeped in UNESCO protected and world-recognised archaeological sites [1], nationally accredited “magic” towns [2], as well as a rich musical tradition and other forms of “intangible” culture [3]. It is also home to numerous physical cultures, which include localised forms of dance, indigenous rubber (Mesoamerican) ball games, daring cliff diving, and also native forms of wrestling, some of which are now protected and promoted by the Mexican Federation for Autochthonous Games and Traditional Sports [4]. Although these activities might fit (or be squeezed into) the well-established taxonomies of sports, such as invasion games, water sports, etc., they might be better understood in their own terms, as Mexicans often depict their nation in a geographical or regional sense. For example, there are the Northern activities of *charrería* on horseback and their own distinct dances, which include an indigenous “deer dance” depicting a hunting scene, or the Central region, with its numerous native games and activities centred around colonial towns, such as bull fighting. Finally, there is the South, which boasts plenty of activities tracing back (or in reinvented terms for tourism) to the Mayan civilisation, including water-based physical cultures such as canoeing, as well as modern activities of diving, snorkeling, and sailing for the elite.

Besides geography, another way of understanding Mexico is in the overlap between categories and regions is in its history. To start, the nation now known as Mexico was once home to a different civilisation: the 5000 years of Mesoamerican civilisation running through centre and south

down to Honduras and Costa Rica, connecting with the Aridamerican civilisation in the north [5]. The Mesoamerican civilisation was the basis for its own physical cultures developed around the resources of the time, including the athletic body of a highly active population and also clay, which was the material for the rubber balls for the various versions of the *juego de pelota* (Mesoamerica ball game) dating back to the first culture in Mesoamerica, the Olmecs [6]. As the civilisations were built around distant city states with no horses available, runners carried messages from city to city and from the coast to the centre. The Aztec (Mexico) runners and warriors were noted for this, and this was something that the Spanish friars and conquistadors documented in the first years of European contact [7].

Starting from the centre of the country that was named *Nueva España*—New Spain (1521–1821)—the Spanish brought animals that changed the landscape and the national identity. Horses and cattle permitted new activities such as ranching and the inadvertent development of *charrería*. This activity, although seen as part of the popular imagination as the national sport, drew from the Western state of Jalisco and their strong sense of identity [8]. Later, after the demise of the Spanish Empire, other colonialists and entrepreneurial figures visited Mexico, including the British (and the Cornish in particular), who brought football with them, along with golf and tennis for the elites. The mining town of Pachuca and Real del Monte were unsurprisingly the homes of the first football team [9]. Mexico, like many other Latin American countries, soon took football to be their most popular national sport.

Distance running continues in some isolated mountain communities, whose tribes remained less directly affected by the Conquest of central Mexico from 1519 to 1521 and the continued colonisation until independence in 1821. The Tarahumara, featured in the book *Born to Run* [10], are a well-known example, as these people are famed for their capacity to endure harsh conditions in the northern desert and run with sandals. This mysterious desert region, home to the (in)famous figure Don Juan in Carlos Castañeda's works [11], holds other traditions, such as a surviving ball game and other tribal games such as *Rarajpari* and *Lucha Tarahumara*.

The turn of the century saw the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1911 (and a decade of political turmoil following it), and with it, increased urbanisation and population growth from a mere 10 million to over 127 million today. The birth of modern Mexican sport began, with many of its quintessential elements beginning to emerge in the 1950s. *Lucha Libre* (“free wrestling”) is perhaps the one sport that is internationally recognised as an expression of Mexican identity through various elements of popular culture such as a film genre popularised in the 1950s [12]. Technically, it is akin to the masked wrestling from France in the 1950s (famously assessed by Roland Barthes [13]) and is now one of the nation's most famous spectacles, expanding to the United States (which brought this wrestling in the first place in the 1930s). Meanwhile, diving developed as a strong Olympic sport during this period, while another form of dangerous cliff diving (and climbing) became famous in Acapulco, on the Pacific coast, partially thanks to a Hollywood film starring Elvis Presley. With the gentrification of this seaside resort, diving became a continued tourist attraction to this day [14], while Olympic diving remains a strong tradition throughout Mexico. Mexico also became a centre for pugilistic excellence during the second half of the twentieth century, with champions such as “El Ratón” Macías and other colourful characters earning worldwide fame and impacting on the popular imagination and storytelling, as did forms of European dance, like ballet [15]. Now, Mexico remains one of the top producers of champions across weight categories in professional boxing, while many Mexican-Americans, children and descendants of migrants, are now also flourishing north of the border. In terms of dance, professional troupes like Amalia Hernández's Folkloric Ballet group [16] tour the country and the world, bringing together formerly disparate traditions from towns and states, representing them with their own unique forms of dress and music.

In this postcolonial and post-revolutionary society, there is now a renewed interest in the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican physical cultures, including the warriors that came before these modern ring fighters and dancers on stage. Beginning in the 1950s after the establishment of a new Mexican sense of national and ethnic identity, new groups of dancers emerged and were documented by ethnographers and journalists, as in the 1968 documentary *El es Dios*, featuring the dance leader

Andrés Segura [17]. This revived dance of *concheros* has also been studied by other anthropologists such as Rostras [18] as part of a broader study of “*Mexicanidad*”, the national approach to all things that reflect Mexican identity. This development of a specific ethnic and national identity through revived and reinvented activities is an illustration of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s [19] pioneering ideas on the invention of tradition. For these historians, many traditions such as the Highland kilt (and one could include coloured belt grading systems in martial arts) were invented far more recently than in the popular imagination, and have led to nation building and unification. Like many physical cultures, the *concheros* are invented traditions that preserve some of the essences of wider (and former) Mexican culture through the living, moving, feeling body. In other words, they offer Aztec philosophy in the flesh that is cultivated through and on the body.

Finally, building on this pursuit and celebration of *Mexicanidad* through invented traditions, there are the “postmodern” physical cultures operating in the megacity of Mexico City. These borrow from modern sport and also try to resist it and add a national, ethnic, and folk tradition, as in the case of post-sport physical cultures such as parkour, yoga, and fell running (see Atkinson [20,21]). The warrior cultures of the Aztecs (Mexico), Maya, Tlaxcalteca, and other militaristic city-state groups would have undoubtedly had their own martial arts and forms of warfare, although there is little remaining evidence of them following the Conquest and colonisation, which disbanded the Aztec Eagle and Jaguar warrior knight orders and banned the ritualistic dance tradition. As I have accounted for in [22], some pioneers have attempted to recreate and reinvent warrior traditions, using the name of the supposed Aztec martial art *Yaomachtia* or fusing Asian martial arts together (such as *Tae Lama*, a mixture of *Taekwondo* and *Lima Lama*) or even adding Aztec weaponry to mixed martial arts (MMA), as in the case of SUCEM (“Universal System of Extreme Combat for Mexico”). These new martial arts provide further examples of invented traditions in the martial arts as in Japan such as Judo, which helped to invent the tradition of coloured belts and other seemingly ancient Asian traditions. Judo was invented for humanistic purposes and reinvented for different ultranationalist and militaristic ones during the imperialist era of the 1930s [23]. From a post-colonial perspective, one can see how like many Japanese and Asian styles, martial arts can return to act as forms of self- (and collective) cultivation and moving meditation, and Xilam is a particularly rich case of this potential.

1.2. The Creation (and Creativity) of Xilam

Xilam is one such example of a new Mexican martial art following the wave of *Mexicanidad*. It maintains itself as a traditionalist martial art more concerned with self-defence and self-cultivation but also national identity and community development [24]. A rarity in the martial arts world in terms of gender, Xilam was founded (and registered) in 1992 by a woman, Marisela Ugalde, who created the art after decades of practise of Asian martial arts and in light of a lacuna of indigenous Mexican fighting traditions post-conquest [25]. Interestingly, Xilam does not follow a feminist philosophy but an *indigenista* (pro-indigenous) one concerned with duality and balance between not just the masculine and feminine but all aspects of life-death (see also León Portilla [26]; Maffie [27]). Marisela apprenticed with the aforementioned shaman and dance leader, Andrés Segura, who, according to her, passed down oral tradition and knowledge from pre-Hispanic times. Following the death of her mentor, she continues to work on the philosophical basis of Xilam by examining codices, pottery, and ruins for more insight about the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican past. Her team includes her daughter Mayra, a specialist in the Aztec calendar and astrology (dealing with one’s *tonal* or destiny), as well as long-term devoted students leading Xilam demonstrations, workshops, and classes in Mexico City, the neighbouring State of Mexico, and other regions in the republic.

Xilam offers an interesting case study of hybrid Mexican physical culture and what a physical culture can become—one that absorbs national history yet also offers creative ways for changing society. It blends interesting elements that are noted by the philosopher Allen [28] with regard to Asian martial arts: they are works of art, but are not dance; they are games, but not sports. And it is easy to perceive Xilam as transcending apparent dualism. It is traditional in the sense that it is based on

ancient philosophy, yet is modern in terms of its uniforms, belts, gradings and other characteristics seen in Asian martial arts. It is an art through its beauty and expression of culture and has so far resisted becoming a combat sport like boxing or a staged and arranged spectacle like *Lucha Libre*. In fact, it stresses non-violence, and through its campaigns for a more peaceful Mexico such as “Poder Xilam” (Xilam Power)—an educational programme for teenagers at risk of drug abuse—attempts to support the nation (currently rife with drug-related violence and femicide) and is against the damage to the body through combat sport competitions. Instead, Xilam promotes lifelong learning, healthy and holistic development through cooperative partner training and intricate solo exercises. Yet this can change over time, as martial arts are never fixed and undergo transformation as part of the process of their creation. This has been shown in work on Wing Chun Kung Fu, which has modified to suit the various economic, political, and social conditions of its times [29]. In recent videos since my absence from the field, Marisela Ugalde revealed an interest in entering martial arts competitions [30]. At the same time, she, her daughter Mayra, and other key members of the Xilam community that I interviewed expressed a desire to host a Xilam show, *Los Siete Guerreros* (The Seven Warriors), for youngsters using high technology and professional performers in the city centre [31].

1.3. Aims and Overview of the Article

This section has outlined the breadth and depth of physical culture in the nation of Mexico. Its history has been very briefly accounted for, which has allowed for the situation of the case study of Xilam as a unique physical culture that is inspired by the past but also works with presently existing physical activities, aiming toward a utopian and positive future for the Mexican people. This article aims to study Mexican physical culture through one of its elements—the contemporary martial art of Xilam. My research project to date situated Xilam within the broader range of new Mexican martial arts, has assessed the organisation’s official discourse, and has explored the life history of its founder as well as its relationships to gender and sexuality. By considering the interconnections, influences, and indignations that have occurred over the centuries across the territory, I will first map the martial art through the theoretical framework of Henning Eichberg. I will then move to explain the ethnographic fieldwork that forms the basis of the impressionist tale of a typical Xilam training session and its close relationships with other physical cultures and Mexican culture in general. This data is then assessed in light of the comparative and interdisciplinary model developed by Eichberg, which leads me to my final argument of the imperative of studying other physical cultures through one case study and how it relates to them. This case study of Xilam illustrates Eichberg’s model and its pertinence to exploring movement and identity through the dimensions of time (both experiential and historical) and space (both immediate and territorial). It is hoped, then, that this ethnographic case study will indicate the utility of a historical and comparative approach to studying body cultures in a given nation, country, or region.

2. Body Cultures: A Legacy of Henning Eichberg

The late German (or perhaps more accurately, Silesian) theorist Henning Eichberg (1942–2017) provided a new framework with which to appreciate the forms of human movement he called ‘body cultures’ in his English-language writings [32], which include organised sport, dance, native games, and martial arts. Forming the foundations of this approach [33], he focused his attention on how space is used in different ways over time, using examples such as outdoor and indoor gymnastics in what turned from Prussia to contemporary Germany. He was also critical of modern ‘mass’ sport and its numerous deficiencies in the pursuit of producing records, such as doping [34]. Critiquing the modern Olympic Games as a form of neo-colonialisation [35], Eichberg identified four alternatives for physical culture: (1) national cultural games, (2) the open air movement, (3) expressional activities, and (4) meditative exercises. These do not exist in isolation, as many martial body cultures such as *Taijiquan* (Tai Chi Chuan) and Xilam combine some of these alternatives in their regular training practices and exchanges, as well as in special events and festivities.

The example of gymnastics shows elements of historical change as well as directly felt chronological time of a class. It explores the organisation and layout of spaces and the political development of designated places as countries change over time. The living, feeling, moving body is central to all of this, and its directions of movement are contrasted within and across time periods within the same space or place and between seemingly related physical cultures, such as other forms of gymnastics. In terms of movement in space, Eichberg examined the lines of movement in particular spaces, such as rectangles (swimming pools, for instance), or open air environments, or intriguing, puzzling ones such as labyrinths. Meanwhile, in terms of expression and literary and oral culture, he was very sensitive to alternative expressions and linguistic relativism, always striving to explore different ways of understanding and giving meaning to the world through language.

With these themes of time and space, embodiment, language as well as critical comparative analysis, Eichberg's approach does not fit directly into any academic discipline, as it is part historical, part ethnological, part geographical, part political, and even partially linguistic. It is unique and interdisciplinary, and might therefore be useful for scholars interested in physical cultures from various disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical approaches (as indicated in Section 6). As Jarvie has highlighted [36], it is a theory (and approach in general) based from the body and about the body rather than an entire theory of society seen in the established canon of Marxism, feminism, phenomenology, figurational sociology, and other approaches. This is a useful lens to explore Xilam, as it is directly focused on the given physical activity within its own unique cultural environment. Unlike 'physical culture', which might be described as ways of being physically (in)active [37], body cultures (translated from the German *leib* or 'living body' as opposed to the *corp* or 'material body') are concerned with the active, feeling, and moving body in space. Body cultures run parallel with other expressions of a culture, as Eichberg [38] explained,

Body culture shows the different levels of which we call 'culture' in human life. Body culture ranges side by side with 'spiritual culture', which consists of the ideas, symbols and meanings of societal life. And body culture ranges side by side with the 'material culture' which is the world of human-made things, instruments and technology. The body tells us an underground story, which is passing underneath the well-known history of civilization. [38] (p. 194)

In order to study body cultures, then, we must appreciate them in light of the wider set of cultures they correspond with and contrast with. In Mexico, this might include national festivals like the Day of the Dead, which reflects continued Mesoamerican spirituality, and also communal, intergenerational festivals such as the *Festival de los Abuelos* (Festival of the Grandparents, which Xilam is involved in) and materials such as the Aztec Calendar—pivotal to the philosophy of Xilam. Eichberg's approach also requires a deep historical sensitivity that requires a detailed study of how body cultures have changed over time through the civilisations that they express and contest. Work by the anthropologist Brownell [39] on body cultures in China, for example, followed such an approach. Meanwhile, with an appreciation for materials and space, Eichberg's framework has also been adopted by geographers of sport like Bale and Sang [40]. Alongside detailed accounts of history (see in Section 1), organization, language and space (shown in Section 4), Eichberg was adamant that the study of body cultures should be equally deep in terms of ethnographic fieldwork and direct immersion in the culture in question, and was also open to other emerging approaches such as narrative research. These forms of research acknowledge the constant changes in the body culture of time but also its changing relationships with other body cultures, such as competitive sport and fitness regimes. As I show later (in the Section 5), Eichberg's approach is therefore one of constant comparison:

'Culture' in singular is an abstraction. The study of body culture is always a study of body cultures in plural. Body cultures are human life in variety and differences, assimilation and distinction, conflicts and contractions. This demands a comparative approach to otherness. [38] (p. 197)

This otherness is also apparent within seemingly related bodily arts and practices. The martial arts industry in many ways is pluralistic, contradictory yet interdependent. There are weapons-based martial arts, competitive combat sports, military-derived fighting systems, civilian self-defence arts, among a host of others. Xilam uses weapons at more advanced stages of training, is competitive to some level in its use of playful games, and is inspired by the former military orders such as the jaguar and eagle warriors of the Aztec empire. In the contemporary metropolis, Mexico City, standing over the former Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (and in an event like Expo Artes Marciales, the nation's annual martial arts exhibition), Xilam stands side-by-side with MMA, Japanese *Jiu Jitsu*, Israeli *Krav Maga*, or lesser-known arts such as Burmese *Bando* (see [41] for an overview on these fighting arts), the latter two of which were friends and allies with the association.

Xilam can be understood by its relationship with the pre-Hispanic past, but also with its contemporaries. Some of these are what Eichberg [32] termed 'achievement sport', which include elite activities that have their own designated spaces, strict hierarchy, and concerned with the production of results and records. Others are more about fitness sport, with martial arts being adapted for the general public, such as health-orientated *Taijiquan* or boxercise. Meanwhile, some martial arts remain rather traditionalist and what Eichberg [32] classified as being 'aproductive', being instead concerned with ethnic and regional identity, clan traditions, and the development of communities in which all participate as practitioners across age, gender, position, etc. This is the 'experience sport' element of his triadic model. These three points are ideal types, as any given body culture will fluctuate across the model and will also possess characteristics of the others. Xilam in 2011 was against competition but is now open to this possibility. It was closely connected to Bando during my fieldwork but later aligned itself with a Krav Maga academy, with an increased interest in women's self-defence classes.

Overall, Xilam is chiefly concerned with experience and experiential learning, and tends to follow an oral tradition rather than a literary one. It makes use of indigenous languages to craft its identity as a Mexican martial art and uses seven animals native to the region: snake, eagle, ocelotl, monkey, deer, iguana, and armadillo. It also expresses this identity as a human development system more than just a martial art, as claimed on its website (www.xilam.org) [42] and my analysis of its documentation. Like *Kalarippayattu* in Kerala, India [43], Xilam is interesting for its politico-phenomenological depth as a bodily practice and as a form of critique to dominant social trends. Eichberg himself actively called for an interdisciplinary approach to studying non-European sport culture, such as his own early study of the Indonesian martial art *Pencak Silat* [44]. This, like my study of Xilam, resists a singular theoretical way of understanding modernisation in European terms and concepts. This has been a postcolonial, multimodal and interdisciplinary study that unfolded in a "messy" yet organic manner as a continued dialogue with the Xilam community. Eichberg [45] advocated the avoidance of extreme positions on knowledge, the known and the knower. Instead of the positivist "it" language on the researched or the purely alternative "I" tone from the researcher, he suggested a third way to express the dialogical dimension of human existence, the "thou," through bodily dialogue between human beings—a dialogue explained later in the discussion yet accounted for in the methodology below.

3. The "Messy" Ethnography

Life in one of the world's mega-cities like Mexico City can be hectic, if not chaotic at times. It is hard to navigate across its extensive, confusing and saturated space (above or underground), and one's interactions and roles can be in a constant flux moving from a Metro station, past a modern shopping centre, through a market place to squeeze past tourists and find a cultural centre that offers classes in a martial art. Meanwhile, the study of a martial art can be equally complex and chaotic. There is a myriad of ways to study the world's fighting systems, as seen in the *Fighting Scholars* collection [46] interested in studies of habitus in martial arts and combat sports, which range from retrospective autoethnography to long-term, two-handed fieldwork. And, as Wacquant [47], has pointed out, one's habitus can be both a topic (in terms of the skills and dispositions of a particular martial art) and a tool (the moving body as a mechanism to study these skills and dispositions). In terms of the topic, I first studied the

practice of Xilam itself, and later became interested in its origins, founding, organization and wider community, and how it related to other martial arts and body culture. Like many martial arts scholars, I come from the position as a practitioner-researcher, but with a background in martial arts with more compact movements like Wing Chun, which did not readily transfer to the low, elaborate movements of Xilam.

As a rare study of a Mexican martial art, my project on Xilam is in many ways a reflection of the “messy” nature of ethnography, which in turn reflects this “messy” nature of reality that is forever changing and requires diverse methods to study grasp it [48,49]. Yet, as I have accounted for [50], it was initiated with all intentions of a “tidy” ethnography, although, inevitably, the subject (me) and the object of study (the art of Xilam and its community) changed over the course of several years. The study began with ethnographic fieldwork using a phenomenological approach focused on my embodied experience and the bodily pedagogy involved in one branch school led by the instructor Tonatiuh (pseudonym; “sun” in the Nahuatl language). As a beginner student already competent in martial arts, I took part in the weekly classes in a community centre and reached the level of attainment to pass my first grading to the second level (eagle) and belt (yellow). I was also able to help with complete beginners toward the end of my year’s fieldwork. However, the branch school closed after August 2012, and I resorted to my collection of print (particularly flyers and leaflets) and later online documents for analysis of the official discourse of the group, as well as later interviews with the leaders of the Xilam community and the life history of its founder. Despite no longer residing in Mexico, my study is in some ways ongoing due to publication opportunities, allowing a revisiting of data, new theoretical analysis, and potential collaborations with other scholars. Overall, the various data sets built up since 2011 include: (1) the field notes (explored in Section 4); (2) life history interviews with Marisela Ugalde; (3) my interviews with instructors and promoters of the art; (4) official media analysis (of the Xilam website, Facebook page and YouTube channel); (5) an assessment of unofficial videos, public comments (and debates) about them on YouTube, and (6) a qualitative secondary analysis of media interviews conducted by martial arts and popular journalists make up the various data sets of the study. Because of the volume and diversity of data that reflects the complexity of Xilam as an art, body culture, community, organization or cultural phenomenon, I have studied them separately in previous and ongoing publications, while acknowledging their interconnection as parts of the changing, “messy” objects of study. For each data set, I have thus attempted to use different forms of analysis, different theoretical concepts and manners of representation while remaining within a post-colonial body cultures framework.

This article represents the first stage of the project in which I was physically present: the embodied fieldwork as a student of Xilam in the branch school and a direct member of its community. I entered the field as a new migrant from Britain, a white, able-bodied European man of 27 years settling into life and work in Mexico as an English teacher and an independent researcher. Having only a basic grasp of the Spanish language, I came across the group by accident: with a poster showing *Maestra* Ugalde in a native headdress in a snake-like pose. Being local to the community centre, I was able to attend every Saturday afternoon session, arriving early to greet my instructor, Tonatiuh, and fellow students, and take responsibility for cleaning the studio and leave it in a good condition. We often went for food or snacks in the nearby market afterward, with food being so central to Mexican culture. I also engaged with martial arts events where Xilam was showcased, such as the Expo Artes Marciales and other cultural events and more private affairs, such as the anniversary celebration of the art’s founding. Over the year, I was able to converse in Spanish and received respect for my command of Nahuatl, an indigenous language of central Mexico that I had already started to learn in the cultural centre in the mornings. Nahuatl, along with Maya, Zapotec and Mixtec, was one of the principle languages utilised in Xilam through counting and even homework. With its central importance to the identity of Xilam, I have used Nahuatl pseudonyms for the core practitioners, but have retained Spanish ones for the newcomers. Beside language learning and skill acquisition, I collected such homework documents, and kept a journal for my learnings and notes on the theory behind Xilam,

reading it whenever possible, including the crowded public transport during my movements around the city, where some inquisitive people even started to read over my shoulders.

Following my early ethnographic efforts of keeping things “tidy”, field notes were taken after the sessions, where I devoted an hour to record the ninety-minute sessions and the interactions and reflections around them, including the short walk home. Instead of following the practice advocated by the likes of Emerson, Shaw and Fretz [51] by writing directly after the exhausting session in the busy market place and touristic zone of the city, I took the walk to reflect on the class and my interactions and returned to my apartment to an area of silence to compose myself before taking the notes. These tried to depict specific elements of the classes, from the greetings and camaraderie at the beginning to the closing plenaries with the students and instructor. A few notes were written around themes, and I tried to give each small field note a short, memorable title. These field notes, in turn, helped guide further observations and future questioning.

It is important to highlight that I did not initially follow a predesigned theoretical framework, although I had started to experiment with one within the initial weeks. This flexibility later allowed a variety of theories to be employed following a postcolonial approach to social science in which non-European theories by Mexican scholars written about Mexico with the intentional readership of Mexicans was used. For example, in [24], I used the Mexican anthropologist Bonfil Batalla's [5] *Mexico Profundo*, a thesis on the underpinning and ever-present Mesoamerican society to understand the ideological basis of Xilam. I later employed Octavio Paz's [52] *Labyrinth of Solitude* to examine the idiosyncrasies of Mexican national identity. Recently, I have pondered on the pedagogue and philosopher José Vasconcelos's [53] work on *La Raza Cosmica* (The Cosmic Race), which also fits with the core ethnocentric and critical vision of Xilam in terms of the past, present, and future destiny of Mexico. These are extremely useful when looking at Xilam in an ideological, cosmological, and discursive fashion. However, one European theorist remained key to my analysis: Henning Eichberg. His cultural sensitivity, study of folk games, and pluralism in body culture seemed even more appropriate when looking at the actual pedagogy and practice of Xilam and the physical doing of the martial art in movement.

In terms of ethical considerations, this project was an interesting case. I began the investigation as an independent scholar with the supposed ‘freedom’ from research ethics committees, so I had to produce my own information sheets and consent forms for the interviewees. However, after one year, I secured a position at a Mexican university, where I obtained retrospective ethical approval for the entire project from their research ethics committee, who examined my practices such as the use of pseudonyms, member checking of transcripts and continued communication with the Xilam group. Working between the disciplines of anthropology and sociology as well as comparative philosophy, I was also flexible to borrow from such good research practices from various organisations. I also shared example publications with a key informant in the Xilam group, Tlanesi, as she was fully bilingual and worked at a university and so was able to explain the nature of my study to the others, who did not speak English. I also decided to provide Nahuatl pseudonyms to all the core members of the group apart from the public figures of Marisela and Mayra. These are increasingly common names in a modern Mexico where people are interested in their pre-Hispanic roots (there are over 500 places to learn Nahuatl in Mexico City). Spanish names are given to those new students who never formed part of the regular group or its supporting network of parents, friends, and former members who extend to form what I term the Xilam community. It also indicates a certain ‘outsider’ status from the group. This was especially important because some of the figures who appear in this article eventually left Xilam to form their own pre-Hispanic dance group and later joined another martial arts organisation. I always aimed to follow the core principle of respect and dignity, which are in the Xilam mantra and creed. Hopefully, the ethnographic writings are read in this manner and are also accessible to a variety of readers.

The representation for this special edition therefore shows Xilam as it was 2011–2012 in one of several branch schools in Mexico City through my own senses and experiences. It attempts to highlight

the essence of Xilam practice as it is also taught elsewhere, with some personal twists from Tonatiuh, who is an indigenous man from the mountain region of Tabasco. Tonatiuh added the element of a shamanistic meditation at the end of classes, occasionally brought in two pre-Hispanic dancers to teach a class (which he later adapted to a martial arts-inspired choreography), and also extended this arduous class far beyond the official 90-min sessions, which later caused problems with him in terms of teaching authority and also the managers of the cultural centre. In terms of space—equally important to time in Eichberg's approach—I show this class within the confines of a relatively bare dance studio with a mirror, bar and some chairs for guests, along with a broom and table for tidying the space. This was my basis to learn the art of Xilam, transform myself through its practice and isolate my analysis on the special practices that make up the broader art and relate it to wider (physical) culture.

With this interesting case study of intense and culturally specific training and its physicality and the need to portray the actual practice of Xilam after contextualising it in my previous works, I decided to present the ethnographic notes as an impressionist tale split into vignettes of episodes within this class. This, following the advice of Van Maanen [54] and Sparkes [55], is a lengthy and detailed account from a first-person subjective perspective, often written in the present tense. Like other work seen in phenomenological sociology [56], it tries to bring the reader into the scenes and also considers key aspects of time and space. I have used Eichberg's theory of body cultures as a guiding principle in terms of how space is used within a given place (the studio) in a specific time (Saturday afternoons). How is space used with specific bodily movements and physical interactions in Xilam? The following impressionist tale will reveal this, as represented through short vignettes. It is a mosaic of various field notes drawn together and recomposed in the present tense (from the former realist/past tense format) to produce a depiction of the living, feeling, moving body (and bodies) in a typical class under Tonatiuh's command, which commonly followed a certain order: sweeping the floor, greeting classmates, oral mantra, warm up, basic exercises, forms, stance training, physical exercises and conditioning, games, applications, and meditation. These show the use of space in a symbolic manner, the interactions between members of the body culture as well as the use of native languages to reconstruct an ethnic identity. It is thus hoped that the reader might be able to see the essence of identity constructed through the notion *Mexicanidad* and wider Mexican culture embedded in the practices that make up the art of Xilam: to show how elements of the pre-Hispanic worldview like the Aztec calendar are cultivated into and through the body—from the calendar to the flesh.

4. An Impressionist Portrait of Xilam

4.1. Sweeping and Hugging

It is 14:55 and almost time for the class. Many people are on their way, so I leave my water and snacks on the table in the corner, and our teacher Tonatiuh enters with a beaming smile. He is a man of dark complexion, Mesoamerican features, and athletic build (with broad shoulders and toned forearms and calves exposed) in his mid-thirties. We exchange hugs and informal greetings of "hola!", and he leaves his bag and instruments, including a flute and a wooden stick often used to manipulate our bodies. Like the other established members, he wears the black Xilam t-shirt and has his long, dark hair tied behind a red bandana.

"Whose is this?!" He exclaims, seeing my large and half-empty packet of crisps on the table, and picking it up in disgust.

"It's mine." I own up, having admitted to being in a rush and without a proper lunch.

"Bad food." He says rather scathingly, which reminded me of a time when he judged me choice of a heavy Mexican dish, *mole*, when we went to the local food market for a post-training dinner.

I nod and realise it is my turn to sweep the floor of the many sequins and hairs that follow the numerous classes held in the studio, especially with the belly dance classes that are popular in the cultural centre. Picking up the broom, I proceed to move as Tonatiuh routinely does: up and down the

studio, as if mowing a garden lawn. I notice the trails of glittery material and dark hair collecting as I move along steadily.

“What the *fuck* is that, George?” asks the powerfully-built Tenoch in English, emphasizing the expletive, as I stop in surprise.

“I’m sweeping the floor,” I answer, amazed at his tone and language.

“I’ll do it from now on.” Says Tonatiuh, chuckling, taking the broom and committing all his energy to the task, devoted in speed and energy as if training line work in Xilam. So, whereas I was engaging in the sweeping in a leisurely and slightly doubtful manner, he is doing it as if his life depended on it, with total absorption.

The Xilam classes begin with the usual Latin American camaraderie and greetings seen in other martial arts such as *Capoeira*, with hugs, firm taps on the back for the men and warm smiles, and a kiss on the right cheek for the women. The three pats on the back for men is typical in Mexico and reflects a sense of toughness yet also a strong bond between males. The group is diverse, but balanced in gender, with about six students of each gender, and two foreigners: me, as a British researcher, and Rodrigo, a Chilean student. We are both martial arts converts with backgrounds in various Asian martial arts. There is also Tenoch, a tough former police officer in his late thirties who trains with his daughter, eight-year-old Xochitl (flower). On the other side of the hall are Quetzalli (little bird), a research assistant at a university, and Xolotl (dog), a trainee chef. A few other newcomers glance excitedly around the room, waiting for the action to begin. Hopefully a few others—like Cuauhtémoc (descending eagle) from the main Xilam school—will join us soon!

4.2. Collective Warm-Ups

We gather together in two lines, with the seniors at the front. Tonatiuh faces us and begins the count to 20. This is very important number in Xilam, as the basic movements of the foundational forms total to 20, which is the number of articulations in the human body and is also the number of months in the Aztec calendar, which inspires the movements and entire cosmological philosophy of the martial art. Counts are in Spanish but also stretch to Nahuatl for some learners and more advanced students. I still have to revise the numbers in Mayan that were given to us the other week. We move from exercises dealing with the neck all the way down to the ankles, using circular and spiral movements and also martial arts-derived exercises utilising the Xilam stances. One particularly gruelling exercise is for the hands fingers and wrists, as we open and fully extend our hands straight in front of the body for counts of 20 per person. We then move our arms parallel to the floor, again with a count to 20:

“Ce, ome, yeye, nahui, machuilli, chicuacen, chicome, chicyeye, chicnahui, matlactli . . . ”

We move to the further numbers as our voices start to strain. A beginner managed to count all the numbers in Spanish, but his voices falters with fatigue:

“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez, once, doce, trece, catorce . . . quince . . . dieciseis . . . ”

He sighs in relief. We laugh a little as the counting goes around the room, only to be extended now that Tonatiuh beckons us to raise our hands above our heads to continue the very same motion. He giggles as we struggle, making the movement seem effortless and simple. My forearms seem tired and thick, and my movements so slow and drained. They had begun too rapidly and lightly, and I now feel as if I could barely hold a pen in my hand. Lucky I’m not writing my notes until much later!

4.3. Stance Work

After the workout, it is an apt time for some heavy leg work on the all-important stances in Xilam. The seven stances represent the seven indigenous animals, and we always do them in order of the system (snake, eagle, ocelotl, monkey, deer, iguana, and armadillo) and according to the ability

level of the group. This is like the horse stance seen in many Asian martial arts—a deep and wide training stance, with the hips and shoulders parallel. To begin, Tonatiuh shows us the snake stance and how to move from one site to another. We make the most of the space, and he asks us to move around the perimeter of the studio as a group, extending our unification. Again, he leads by example, never backing away from his inclusion in the action. We first face each other in pairs and push into each other’s warm palms. Each person gets to feel the other’s strength and give feedback, smiling and grunting as we move through the activity. The eyes and gaze are also important here, as I read total confidence in some and slight dis-ease and perplexity in the newcomers.

I keep in this low, wide posture, trying to keep my back straight (“not like a turtle” as Tonatiuh had joked with me before), and use a circular motion, clipping heels together as the right foot meets the left and the hips twist to allow the right foot to lead. I press my hands together as if praying, as this is the “hands free” position in Xilam and helps me concentrated on the chest and back alignment. I am aware of Quetzalli in front of me and the eager Tenoch behind me, so I try to keep a steady rhythm and acute distance from them. My thighs feel thicker after several months of intensive training, and they have adapted to the totally different body movements in my core art of Wing Chun, which hasn’t transferred so readily as I had first expected.

4.4. *The Snake Form*

After walking and running around to shake off our legs, we take on some badly needed water. It is cool in the studio, and I am grateful for the shelter from the sun in order to concentrate on the technique rather than outdoor distractions. We line up in our two rows, with the more experienced students in front, and follow Tonatiuh and his partner Tlanesi, who is an intermediate student. She often helps with the class and also teaches the recently formed youngster’s session and even helps with the website and English-language material. We all play a part in the Xilam community, from writing about them, bringing in new students, or handing out flyers in seminars. The seniors provide examples for the juniors, and juniors bring hope for the future of the art.

The dynamic duo of Tonatiuh and Tlanesi sink into the snake stance, and Tonatiuh bellows a call for the *Venda* (snake form in the Zapotec language). They block low and fold their hands into their chests, extending the arms forward before moving them in a circle around the head, which ends in the hands in front of the shoulders. We then follow and try to replicate the movements. The fists remain clenched but relaxed. They then look to their left with their eyes with serious intent and directly block to both sides of the body in a lateral and spiral motion. Only then do they proceed to step 90 degrees to the left to move around the four compass points, which represent North, West, South, and East, as well as four other elements, seasons (spring, summer, autumn, and winter), and ages (childhood, youth, maturity, and old age), according to the philosophy of Xilam. They don’t explain this as we move, though, as it is done with counting in Nahuatl and Spanish, and, quite recently, Mayan (*hun, ka, ox, kan, ho . . .*). That is for our group discussions and homework!

We move anti-clockwise until we return to face the end of the studio and then change directions so that the left side leads, turning us 90 degrees to face the right, where there is the wall of mirrors. I find this particularly helpful to check my hand positions and general alignment. Some beginners, like Sofía, a friend of Tenoch’s and avid gym-goer, end up behind me and try to copy my movements. We exchange a quick look and I give her a reassuring smile—I remember how confusing this was in the beginning!

4.5. *Self-Defence Applications*

These movements are more than ritualistic, physical manifestations of a philosophy—they are also direct self-defence techniques. Each step comes with a hand or foot technique, which is normally taught with the most obvious fighting application. Tonatiuh walks round the rows to test our defences. We can see this with our peripheral vision, and his tests also help visualise the potential responses to common attacks. The low block is for a groin kick, which the forward double-arm press is apt for a

charging opponent. He stands in front of me to lightly kick toward my groin, which I block by keeping low and with the cross-hand block. Tonatiuh then leans into me diagonally, pressing his chest against my extended arms and fists. He then regains his balance and edges closer. I know what he will do next: a grab to my hair, which is badly in need of a trim! He moves to seize my locks, as I cross my hands over my head, circling around and pressing onto his wrists, securing a release. Finally, he delivers a smooth and soft round kick to my exposed ribs (now that my hands are in the air), and I drop them down and out, swinging the hard outer bone out to meet his shin in order to offset this attack. There is enough contact to brace into my stance, but it is gentle enough so that he can do the same with all other ten students and I can continue my training with this technique in mind until we are called to relax and take on more water. The fun is about to intensify.

4.6. Body Conditioning

In Xilam, we often train techniques in the air, and in the spartan studio, we make use of each other's bodies rather than the state-of-the-art equipment. The fundamental punch is delivered from the hip to the opponent's chest in a twisting motion, much like that seen in *Karate* and *Taekwondo*. We drill this in the air first of all, using the upright fighting stance facing the mirrors to help us.

Now we focus on impact, adding to the work on the abdominal muscles we commonly undertake in the middle of classes. Tonatiuh tells us to line up together in the snake stance and gently punch each other in the stomach. I am now grateful for the light snacks I ate rather than a lengthy Mexican lunch! I feel comfortable hitting the hard stomach of the well-conditioned Cuauhtémoc, who nods in approval, and returns the strikes with his small, rapid fists. He has helped me understand the softer elements of Xilam in the past, with a lesson on not relying on strength and speed ("because Xilam was invented by a woman"). Yet with the hyper-feminine Sofía, a complete stranger to me, with her extensive make up and stylish gym gear, I feel discomfort striking her in such a vulnerable area. We have yet to develop a training relationship and shared identity that I have with the other Xilam "warriors" (as they call themselves). Her stomach is firm from fitness regimes, yet soft and yielding, and I use surface strikes rather than penetrating blows.

"What are you doing, George? Hit her!" laughs Tenoch, her friend, as we join in laughing, too. Sofía doesn't beckon me to harden or soften the blows, so I keep up the same level of impact but continue with more rapid punches out of respect for her capabilities. Nevertheless, I keep it light in order for her to want to return the next week and receive the gradual conditioning that I know is necessary in the martial arts. Student drop-out is high in the class, like in many martial arts, and we wish to maintain good standards with capable people like her. After a few more minutes of serious intent and pain, we are called to a circle for the next part of the class: a game.

4.7. Physical Games

There are many interactive games in Xilam, which involve the control of space, timing, balance, and trickery. We are encouraged to use all our guile, speed, and agility to outwit each other, as men and women and adults and children alike develop the mind-body dispositions important in the art: willpower, emotional control, and consciousness of action. One of the most common games is based on the movement of *patos*. "What do you call it in English?" Tonatiuh asked Tenoch, his trusty translator, and he repeated his new word of "ducks." To me, it seemed more like a bunny hop, but we are pitted against an opponent in the middle of a circle.

The sturdy Xolotl did well against the steady and focused Cuauhtémoc, although he almost fell back into little Xochitl, who was small enough to hide under the wooden beam lying across the middle of the mirrored wall. She looks frightened but immediately smiled afterward, moving behind some adults as we all laughed together. I was allocated the slim and flexible Quetzalli, who approached me timidly, possibly embarrassed by the spectacle. We circled each other for a while like professional boxers in the ring, and I quickly spot an opening on her side, and with a gentle tap on her thigh, I knock her flat on the floor. I didn't mean for his to happen, as I had expected a more prolonged

dual as seen with Xolotl and Cuauhtémoc, but she yields, and we return to the circle. Tonatiuh is not following a tournament system but encourages random exchanges. Other embodied interactions become interesting. There is a draw between Tlanesi and the chef Tenoch as they fall down together. “You drew!” I say to Tenoch as he stands up and returns to the circle, and he smiles.

4.8. The Shamanistic Meditation

It has been a long afternoon, and it has extended all the way to the end of the class, which often lasts two hours rather than 90 min. I can hear the gathering of young women ready for their belly dance class in the studio, waiting for us to finish and for their teacher to arrive. My legs and core ache from all the hard physical work. To my great relief, Tonatiuh asks us to lie face down and relax with our eyes closed. We lie in a circle with our heads close together with the legs straight and pointing out. He gives us a visualisation meditation—to imagine that we are a drop of water on a leaf of a tree. This is a fantastic image—one that I have never encountered before—and although I was supposed to be absent of thought, I couldn’t help analysing the situation. Was this derived from Native Mexican philosophy and lore? Tonatiuh is an indigenous man after all. How can I fully visualise and plan the journey of the drop? Would my drop float straight into a river or via a stream? After a while of not wanting to move from the tree, I decide to float into a stream on my leaf, which acts as a dingy. It feels like a bed, as I rest on the hard wooden panels, and the sensation is heightened by Tonatiuh encircling us with his flute and maracas, or at least the Native Mexican version of these instruments. At the beginning of the lesson, I saw the end of his wooden instrument and thought it to be a weapon much like an *Escrima* stick. Instead, he unraveled it casually on the small plastic table at the end of the room, and I detected the characteristics of a wind instrument. The sounds are very relaxing and soothing, the shake of the maracas sounds like rustling leaves at the feet of wild animals, and the flute imitates birdsong. This draws me into a deeper meditative state, but it is soon ceased by Tonatiuh’s firm commands to open our eyes.

“Slowly get up and stand and open your eyes at the end,” he says softly after around five minutes.

I do as he beckons, moving my hands back first so that they can balance my bodyweight. I then move my legs into a diagonal position so that I can stand up slowly. Finally, I open my eyes and share expressions of marvel with my fellow students.

4.9. Council of Warriors

We sit facing each other on our knees (for those who can sustain this pain against the hard surface) in order of seniority in the group. I am now in the middle of the group, with Tonatiuh just next to the juniors. He reminds us of a potential visit from “*la maestra*” (the teacher, Marisela Ugalde) and that we need to prepare for an exam. Many of our discussions are oral tests of knowledge, from the four *Tezcatlipocas* (deities or energies guiding Xilam’s structure) to open questions like “What is Xilam?” and, more recently, “What is a warrior?” and “Are you a warrior?” Only very certain, articulate, and detailed answers are praised, and Tonatiuh’s mode and tone vary significantly and rapidly, depending on the response given.

In the seated and attentive circle, we are asked to provide one word on what we felt about the class, i.e., how we could describe this. For some reason, I come up with “magic.” My Spanish is still in development (whereas my Nahuatl pronunciation is praised), so Tenoch and Cuauhtémoc help me. The moment this is translated into the Spanish equivalent (*mágico*), everyone laughs. I didn’t think of “hard work” or “fascinating”, but “magic.” This is a very powerful word that carries multiple meanings. Although I have limited exposure to magic, it certainly felt like magic must be like: a surprising new experience that brings wonder into your life.

Tonatiuh looks very focused on each of our words, and after the circle is finished, he analyses some of the comments. Little Xochitl had summarised her experiences with “happiness.” Tonatiuh is very pleased to hear this and stresses to us that we can all learn from children, as children see the world in a wonderful way. “Or we can see it as magic, like George,” he beams as the rest of the group laugh.

We now compose ourselves with looks of concentration. Some keep their eyes open, while others close them, arms folded against the chest, sitting firmly in a *seiza*-like posture (on the knees) for the closing mantra of the Xilam class:

*Mi corazón y mi amistad, te los ofrezco
 Mis altas ideas están con el creador
 Mi energía está aquí en la tierra
 Para continuar mi camino con dignidad
 Xilam*

(My heart and my friendship, I offer them to you
 My high ideals are with the creator
 My energy is here in the earth
 To continue my path with dignity
 Xilam)

With this, we stand up from the council of warriors and follow the order of the circle, from the most senior to the juniors. Placing our hands to our chests, we extend the right arm in front of us, meeting it with the left on the right, in a movement from our own hearts to the ones in front of us. “Xilam”, we say sincerely as we shake hands and embrace, then turning to join the semi-circle collective to receive the next student until all have conducted the salutation.

The class is now finished, so we return to the small table, where our bag, shoes, and socks await us. It is time to change and vacate the studio for the next class of belly dancing. Our pre-Hispanic dance class has to be put on hold due to timetabling, and we change together, putting on t-shirts and jeans in front of each other with no shame. There are no gendered changing rooms here, and we feel comfortable with our drained bodies exposed, having worked on the matter within the flesh—our willpower, emotions, consciousness and intelligence—slowly “removing the skin” to develop ourselves as modern warriors.

5. Discussion: A Comparative Analysis of Xilam as a Bodily Art and Culture

So, after reading the preceding sections, it might seem apparent that it is difficult to answer the question sometimes raised in the council of warriors: What is Xilam? And related to this for more academic purposes using Eichberg’s framework: What kinds of body cultures (and cultures, for that matter) does Xilam incorporate and promote? Xilam is a very complex body culture with many levels of personal, cultural, historical, political and social meaning embedded within it. The long-term processes of identity construction (and confirmation) and identification are also entwined here. As a complex body culture, Xilam encapsulates elements of native meditation, instrumental music, “pre-Hispanic” or Conchero dance, ritual, and oral tradition, Aztec/Nahua (Nahuatl speaking peoples) philosophy, modern fitness, and self-defence martial arts. It is therefore pertinent to consider Xilam in light of Mexican cultures as a whole and body cultures in their own right, which I have covered in the introductory sections. Xilam combines elements of musical and sonic culture through the instruments used in the meditation and collective rhythm used in the warm ups, and it is overtly connected to dance in its core philosophy and origins, with Andrés Segura being the philosophical mentor of Marisela Ugalde. Music and dance are key to uniting the so-called division between the tangible and intangible aspects of culture and heritage [57], as well as for fostering social unity. Under Tonatiuh’s guidance, we sometimes underwent dance training following a Conchero tradition with two instructors (and later Tonatiuh’s rendering of this), and also attended large gatherings in a local Zócalo (town square) to witness the music and dance rituals while sharing indigenous snacks, *alegrías*. Beyond his own branch school, the lateral movements and symbolism of the entire system of Xilam is also inspired by the Mesoamerican ball game once played in the ancient civilisation.

In an organisational sense, we can also understand what Xilam is not in terms of body cultures: a “mass” sport for consumption and rapid commodification, such as boxing, football, and *Lucha Libre*,

and expansion in other areas of culture such as cinema. In fact, the group actively critique these sports, as I was surprised when I proudly turned up with my green Mexican football t-shirt after the nation has won the gold medal in football at the London 2012 Olympics against Latin American rivals Brazil—so often seen as their sporting superiors. “Yes, it must be good for the Mexicans,” said Tonatiuh in a rather disparaging tone, as if he was not Mexican, thus distancing himself from the nation. Even iconic t-shirts with images of famous revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata were also critiqued, as Tonatiuh once examined Xolotl’s: “Xilam is based on an ancient philosophy. It’s older than the Revolution (pointing at the t-shirt). Older than the Independence. *Ancient.*” Yet he praised my rather informal design of a tie-dye print of a Mayan warrior in a stance very similar to the ocelotl position (like the cat stance in *Karate*), even suggesting this as a form of evidence during stance work in class. However, Xilam does at least attempt to borrow from some contemporary commercial strategies with its (ongoing) plans for the *Siete Guerreros* show and attempts to deal with public issues such as young people involved in drugs, with its *Poder Xilam* (Xilam Power) campaign in local schools [58].

In terms of physical culture, Xilam positions itself alongside ancient Mesoamerican warrior culture and traditions and critiques mass sport spectacles seen in football, with its *porras* (akin to Ultras), and the seeming damage done to the body in MMA (as Marisela Ugalde once commented in a council of warriors, emphasizing the essence of what a warrior should be). Now that is clearer what Xilam looks, sounds, and feels like as a distinct hybrid body culture, and which aspects of culture it embraces and shuns, I shall also explore Xilam in connection with the burgeoning academic literature on the diverse range of fighting systems known as martial arts and combat sports (MACS) [59], as understood within the field of “martial arts studies” [60,61]—particularly the longstanding ethnographic tradition [62]. In some regards, as seen in the self-defence applications, Xilam remains distant from combat sports such as boxing, kickboxing, and MMA. Instead, it is both a self-defence martial art [63] and a traditionalist martial art akin to many Chinese styles: concerned with the conservation of culture, knowledge, and some traditions but also progressive in terms of pedagogy [64]. Yet, training in Xilam does involve playful competition and mimetic fighting akin to sparring [65], as well as painful methods of body callusing and conditioning for taking [66] and producing pain [67]. Through the philosophy and pedagogy of Xilam explored in this article, the practitioners learn to hate violence but love fighting through the games, as advocated by a recent campaign by other martial arts scholars [68]. Exponents of Xilam embrace the idea of peace and find joy in their arduous training through the many opportunities for play with adults and children, instructors and beginners all coming together in one space—in this case, a rectangular modern dance studio.

Beyond the purely martial culture, then, we can see comparisons with Capoeira as a “dance-fight-game” [69] through the use of music and dance blended with play fights and games for learning and acquiring specific mind-body dispositions/attributes through a long-term apprenticeship in such bodily arts [70]. The circles used in its teaching are akin to the *roda* (circle) seen in this African-Brazilian art [71]. Its creative pedagogy sometimes involves the introduction of rustic objects such as logs for strength training or hand-woven balls pieces with feathers for reaction training during stance work (for playful volleys). It uses Western calisthenics for conditioning, such as crunches for the abdomen and press ups for upper body strength. But no modern weights or distance running as used in modern combat sports or Bruce Lee’s *Jeet Kune Do* (JKD).

In terms of these objects, Xilam also uses weapons at a later stage in training, and this is particular present in its demonstrations for cultural events, which included the use of headdresses for a celebrated visit from a Korean delegate of politicians. The *macuahuitl*, the Aztec obsidian bladed club, has been adapted as a ceremonial weapon, while naturally occurring objects such as *conchas* (shells linked to armadillo level)—key to the *conchero* dancing—are also used as weapons, as well as deer horns (following the deer level of the art). These animal stages of training merge together in real fighting, and the four directions seen in the account of a training session (North, West, South and East corresponding to the four *Tezcatlipocas*) progress to multidirectional movements of jumps, leaps, rolls, falls, kicks and other dynamic techniques of the body [72] according to the forms (or *Kata* in

Japanese)—a central pedagogical tool that is the essence of Japanese *Budo* arts [73]. The students learn to “become animals” as in many Chinese martial arts [74], through the forms, preparatory exercises, visualisation, and meditation as well as playful exercises devised for youngsters, such as writhing across the studio on one’s back like a snake—a surprisingly physically demanding feat for adults. Their Facebook profiles even reveal this through reviewed mugshots being replaced by images of their imaginary animal. There are some connections to shamanism, supposed witchcraft, and *Nagualismo* (refer to [75]) in this manner, especially considering the oral philosophy from the shaman and dance leader Andres Segura, who featured in documentaries on this form of mysticism [76]. Moreover, beyond the time-space and ideological dimensions of Mesoamerica, the Xilam organisation have recently toured China, allying with Wushu organisations in their native country. So, despite being “a very Mexican martial art” (as some flyers advertise), Xilam relates to other martial arts around the world within and outside the Mexican Republic. It is certainly a re-imagination of Mesoamerican philosophy and bodily/martial culture encapsulated within the body: identity constructed using movement from the calendar to the flesh.

6. Conclusions: A Call to Scholars of Physical Culture

Body cultures, as a theory and entire research design, is relatively underused in the social scientific study of sport, exercise, health, dance and the martial arts—all of which combine to form physical culture (and the objects of study of body cultures for that matter). Eichberg’s oeuvre on body cultures, and his later work on bodily democracy and phenomenology, are rarely featured in readers/anthologies, student textbooks, and special editions of journals. With the sad passing of Eichberg, and an academic legacy yet to be fully realised, it is therefore an apt time and space to do this within a special edition on “Physical Culture” calling for interpretive theoretical work fueled by empirical case studies. This article has aimed to explore and illustrate Henning Eichberg’s body cultures approach through the case study of Xilam. In order to show how it can be applied to other physical cultures. I argue that Eichberg’s entire perspective (including theory and method) offers a way of understanding culture from the body about the body that we can use with the body. The framework permits an examination of history and social change, of experience and movement, and of politics and structures. Body culture, his term for physical culture in English, is one kind of culture in which the living, moving body is at the forefront. It coincides with material, spiritual, and other forms of culture seen in festivals, as evidenced in the music, ritual, and meditation seen in Xilam. Modern-day Mexico boasts a range of body cultures concerning the expression of ethnic and national identity, and body culture, with its emphasis on identity and identification, is an apt framework. In short, it is a unique and innovative interdisciplinary perspective and should thus be applied in unique and innovative ways, which I hope this article has achieved to some degree. We can understand this from an interdisciplinary perspective to examine the creativity and diversity of Mexican physical culture involved in the festival of life that is Xilam.

Researchers in physical cultures might find Henning Eichberg’s framework of body cultures to be particularly useful to explore movement in space and across time. For Eichberg, physical cultures need to be understood beside each other and alongside other forms of culture. His approach permits the detailed examination and mapping of a given physical culture in conjunction with its contemporaries and predecessors. It can thus help explain how martial arts change over time between the elements of achievement sport, fitness sport, and experience sport. It also allows for an exploration of a physical culture in space, through the human body in motion: the lines of action and interactions in particular places, from open exchanges in squares to linear motion in swimming pool lanes. Eichberg’s interpretive framework lends itself well to a variety of qualitative designs and data collection methods and analysis techniques. From archival research through longitudinal studies of changes in physical culture to phenomenological examinations of movement in time and space, it even extends to narrative and storytelling within folk games [32,45]. I have tried to show some of these approaches,

as opposed to explain, justify, and critique each one in turn (as well as their possible unification), which is another article in itself.

Nevertheless, it is important to note some of the limitations of this particular aspect of the study. With this multi-modal, multi-staged qualitative project, many things could have been shown, explained and interrogated through the smaller questions that unfolded as the project evolved. The year's fieldwork, modest in terms compared with many long-term ethnographies (such as that of Delamont and Stephens [77]), and returning bouts of fieldwork (as seen in Zarrilli [78]) has around 50 classes, plus seminars, demonstrations, grading, and other events to collate and recollect. Instead of showing these many happenings in different places, I chose to paint a portrait of the body culture of Xilam through episodes of important elements of its distinct pedagogy. It is therefore a portrait of what Xilam looked, felt, and sounded like in 2011–2012 in the Coyoacan branch which I attended under the joyful and vibrant instructor Tonatiuh. His sheer athleticism, fluency in indigenous languages and dynamic persona offer an example of the importance of charismatic leaders in the martial arts. And it is this charisma, which partly leads to the creation, recreation and reinterpretation of martial arts, that can require more detailed research on martial arts coaches, instructors, leaders and pioneers around the world. As an eclectic and inclusive model, Eichberg's framework allows for the incorporation of concepts such as Weber's charisma and institution building [79], and this could expand on the early empirical work by Brown on certain founders of styles [80] that show the importance of charismatic leaders in physical culture at different levels of institutions. The values and practices that they bring, and the creation of new cultures is a new avenue for research on martial arts pedagogy and coaching, as seen in a special section in a forthcoming collection on new directions for sports coaching scholarship [81].

I have opted to showcase Eichberg's theories alone, but it might be apparent for the reader how concepts and theories familiar to them through their own academic disciplines with interpretivist learnings that are interested in physical culture (anthropology, cultural studies, geography, history and sociology to name a few) might be incorporated. Weber's ideas on charisma (and other ideal types) are just one example. Furthermore, the theories of Eichberg can pair well with Marcel Mauss's [71] celebrated notion of techniques of the body (sometimes referred to as 'body techniques'). These are ways in which, from society to society, people have learned to use their bodies. The techniques of the body (always in pluralistic sense like body cultures), show ways of kinetic movement, such as manners of punching, but also the cultural patterns and meanings behind this. The controversy surrounding some of the martial arts techniques in Xilam, which are criticized by martial art practitioners and aficionados (often online) for being too similar to Asian styles of Karate and Taekwondo, is an interesting avenue for future analysis using this rich concept in the sense of the origins and "paternity" of movement and the legitimacy that stems from its use, reinterpretation and presentation. This concept can also be helpful in understanding techniques not just for "producing pain" [82] but for enhancing health and wellbeing through controlled, dynamic and diverse forms of movement as forms of caring for the self and others. Moreover, related to this are the cultivation of the senses and ideas of timing embedded in many martial arts through the rhythms of combat [83]—some aspects which can be explored through (auto)phenomenographic analysis examining specific senses in training, as seen in [84].

This article is a call for scholars examining physical cultures around the world to consider Eichberg's work within the canon of available thinkers and theorists. As theories are best explained through examples, I draw on fieldwork from my study of Xilam to explore this body culture in specific time: a class in 2011–2012, but also in the postcolonial era for a country continually making sense of its own identity. I have also examined this body culture within space: a rectangular studio normally used for dance classes, but also a public and communal space within an urban metropolis within the beating heart of the country. I have illustrated the diversity and depth of Eichberg's earlier theoretical approaches of body cultures through one Mexican body culture, Xilam. Moreover, much like Canadian *Capoeira* enthusiasts imagining travelling to Brazil through their practice [85], it is through Xilam that the practitioners can invoke the deities of the pre-Hispanic past, move through the directions of the

calendar, and feel like warriors, if only for an afternoon, but in hope of becoming warriors of life. I have not juxtaposed, compared, and critiqued Eichberg's work with well-known and widely applied theorists such as Bourdieu, Elias, Goffman, and Foucault, and some of Eichberg's German compatriots and forerunners of (much broader) social thought, Weber, Simmel and Schütz. Instead, I wished for his theory (and entire approach) to stand alone to scrutiny for the reader to interpret. And I hope I have done just that.

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