

**LIMALAMA: THE MODERN POLYNESIAN-AMERICAN  
MARTIAL ART WITH ANCIENT CHINESE ROOTS**

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[What do you get when you mix Samoan streetfighting, kenpo karate, Chinese kung fu, nearly every Japanese martial art, plus American boxing and wrestling? You get Limalama, the devastatingly effective martial arts hybrid created by Tino Tuiolosega]

***Old Chinatown, Los Angeles, California, 1966***

It's 1966 in a remote corner of Chinatown in Los Angeles. Haumea "Tiny" Lefiti, a giant 300 pound Samoan with a black belt in Limalama and a black sash in kung fu, is angry. He's taking a private lesson with Grandmaster Ark Yuey Wong, the legendary kung fu master who opened the closed doors of the Chinese art to Americans of all races. But Tiny is unhappy with what Wong has been teaching him lately. He feels that the "Old Man", as many refer to Wong, is holding out on him, not really showing him the true secrets of the art. So, what does any red-blooded Samoan do in such a situation? He challenges him, of course, by saying that with the moves Wong is teaching him, he couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag!

The grandmaster is furious and warns Tiny to shut up or face the consequences. Instead Tiny keeps talking and Wong tells him to put up or shut up. They face off and Tiny, who thought that he had a pretty good side kick at the time, launches one with all of his speed and power behind it. What happened next was so fast even Tiny's practiced eye was unable to detect, but a split second later he found himself on the ground with a sharp pain and an ugly red bruise over his liver. The "Old Man" wagged a finger in his face and warned him to "be careful". Instead Tiny pulled himself to his feet and this time tried a boxer's jab towards Wong's face. Suddenly Wong's feet made an impossibly fast motion followed by his foot crashing solidly into Tiny's bladder! As Tiny collapsed to the ground in agony, Wong calmly walked back to an old desk that had seen better days and sat down to read from a yellowed Chinese newspaper. Tiny crawled into the corner on his hands and knees and pulled himself into a chair where he lay in a crumpled heap. For nearly 30 minutes, neither man said a word, Tiny nursing his groin, while Wong periodically stole furtive glances in his direction while peeking over his paper.

After what seemed like an eternity, Wong finally walked over to Tiny and asked him if he had had enough. Giving him a deep Shaolin salute, Tiny said that he meant no disrespect, he just wanted to learn the truth about kung fu as only Wong could teach it. Wong stared into the distance for several long seconds and then made a fateful decision. "Come back at this time tomorrow night and I'll teach you". With that, a new chapter was reached in the long annals of the Chinese martial arts, and Tiny embarked on a journey that would lead to his learning the authentic Five Animals of the Shaolin Temple, executed Mok Gar kung fu style: with the blazing "snake hands with the rat's step". This would lead to Tiny's core art of Limalama taking a new direction that would transform it into one of the most powerful fighting styles the world had ever seen.

### ***Limalama and Chinese Kung Fu***

Limalama is a hybrid martial art devised by Tuumamao “Tino” Tuiolosega, Tiny’s cousin and instructor. Limalama is a blend of several native Samoan traditions infused with a virtual catalog of both American (boxing, wrestling) and Asian (kenpo, kung fu, karate, judo, aikido, ju-jitsu) martial arts. Tino crafted his art with a soldier’s keen eye for actual combat utility that had been hard won on the battlefields of Korea as a Marine, and on the equally mean streets of Hawaii’s dockside ports and bars as a renowned streetfighter. Over a period of several decades, Tuiolosega modified, adapted, experimented, and finally systematized a lifetime of fighting experience into a brand new art he named Limalama. The term itself comes from two Polynesian words, “*lima*”, meaning five or hand, and “*malamalama*” meaning bright, brilliant, intelligent, or understanding. Simplifying and combining the two words resulted in the term *Limalama*, meaning The Hand of Wisdom.

Born in Utulei, Tutula, American Samoa on July 2, 1932, Tuiolosega was initially introduced to the basics of fighting by various family elders, including his father, grandfather, and uncle. The movements he learned were very basic and almost completely unorganized. It would fall upon him to systematize and name the many components of the new fighting system he would eventually create. Finally, after years of effort, Tuiolosega classified his art into 13 groups:

1. ***Afikau***: the study of the warrior’s traditions, specifically dance.
2. ***Amofoe***: the understanding of the manipulation of weight, shifting and swaying tactics to off-balance weight.
3. ***Fa’aelise***: the study of coordination, reflexes, balance, holds, breaks, and throws.
4. ***Fa’ako’elau***: movements similar to wrestling, including holds and tripping.
5. ***Faufusu or Ku’iku’iga***: movements similar to hand to hand fighting, boxing, or streetfighting.
6. ***Lua’aga or Le’iga***: the study of pressure points, nerves, and joints.
7. ***Milosia***: the study of the execution, delivery, and application of circular movements, such as locking wrists.
8. ***Pepelu ma Pega***: the study of knife fighting, including cutting coordination. This is a conceptual method in the use of weaponry.
9. ***Uma Ma Kaupi’i***: the study of holds, breaks, and takedowns.
10. ***Vaeka ma Kavae***: the study of foot movements, kicks, and foot counter-movements.
11. ***Ti’apega ma Lo’u***: the study of *Kaoi’a*, stick fighting
12. ***Tal’amo***: the study of combining several of the other concepts together.
13. ***Upaga ma Lo’ulo’uga***: the study of trapping.

Tuiolosega assembled this mass of information by experimenting, creating, modifying, and adapting everything he was learning and devising on his own based on his many experiences in streetfighting and boxing. After serving several years in the Marine Corps as a hand-to-hand combat chief instructor and participating in the Inchon landing during the Korean Conflict, Tino was exposed to the Japanese martial arts and would go on to study several of the major ones including karate, judo and ju-jitsu, and aikido.

Back on the US mainland, Tuiolosega would continue his study of the Asian martial arts, but this time the influences were more Chinese: Ed Parker's kenpo karate, and Ark Wong's Shaolin kung fu. He became the first person of non-Chinese ancestry to earn a master instructor's certificate in kung fu from Wong. He would become a local legend in southern California for engaging in some of the most thrilling informal fighting matches ever held in the early karate tournaments, even if he was usually disqualified for excessive contact. He would help Ed Parker organize the International Karate Championships for many years, frequently serving as the chief referee for some of the most exciting grand championship matches.

Finding the legendary kung fu master Ark Yuey Wong in Los Angeles' Chinatown led Tuiolosega to put many of the finishing touches on the still developing art of Limalama. The rapid, machine gun-like hand strikes from kenpo were combined with the circular five animal strikes from Wong's kung fu. These included the Five Animals of Shaolin:

1. The **Tiger**, to develop the bones. Uses a raking claw executed with dynamic tension.
2. The **Dragon**, to develop the spirit or shen. Uses a wide claw with long arm motion.
3. The **Crane**, to develop the sinews and balance. Uses sharp beaking and pecking hits, plus open hand cuts, pokes, and slaps.
4. The **Leopard**, to develop strength. Uses tight claws and knuckle strikes with speed.
5. The **Snake**, to develop the chi or energy. Uses flicking finger strikes for Dim Muk, the infamous "death touch".

These five styles, known as Ng Ying Kuen or Five Shapes Fist, formed the core of Shaolin and were instrumental in Wong's other five specialty styles: Choy, famous for its circular hand strikes; Li, known for short hand movements and rapid stance changes; Liu or Lao, noted for its staff work and medium range hand movements; Hung, famed for its long, strong hand and arm movements performed in deep stances; and finally Mok, noted for its kicks, leg work, and blistering rat steps for speed, flexibility, and maneuverability, and the snake hand and body movements for weaving with the darting poison hand or Dim Muk strikes.

When he was finally ready to unveil Limalama to the world in 1965, Tuiolosega assembled five local martial arts legends in the LA area who would become his first black belts in the new art: Richard Nunez, Saul Esquivel, John Makaalu Louis (aka "John the Bull"), Solomon Kaihewalu, and Mr. Tino's cousin, Haumea "Tiny" Lefiti. Tiny, at over 6 feet tall and 300 pounds of Samoan muscle, speed and power, would wind up studying with Tino at Wong's kwoon or dojo in Old Chinatown on Ord Street.

In addition to studying Tuiolosega's new art, Lefiti had accumulated an impressive martial arts background himself. This include many years of boxing and streetfighting, several years of Japanese karate, and two years of study with a Chinese general while stationed in Taiwan in the Marine Corps. The general's art used the fighting techniques from the Mok Gar kung fu system. Upon leaving Taiwan and moving back to the States,

the general informed Tiny that the only person who knew the style in the US was Ark Wong. But he warned him that getting Wong to teach the secret art would not be easy. And, as we have seen, learning it would require that Tiny endure a great deal of pain as well. How much pain he was only just beginning to find out.

Tiny's late wife, Alice, often stated that she sometimes had to actually drive from their Huntington Park home in southeastern Los Angeles to Chinatown to pick Tiny up after his lessons with Wong. She would find him black and blue, limping and covered with painful welts, and have to drive him home as he was incapable of driving himself after many sessions with the "Old Man". This was ironic considering that Wong was also an accomplished doctor of Chinese medicine who used both acupuncture and herbal remedies as a skillful healer. But he appeared to not let this healing skill interfere with his attempts to instill fighting spirit into specially selected students like Tuiolosega and Lefiti. Indeed, during World War II when China was invaded and partially occupied by Japan, Wong returned to his native China to fight the invaders. He claimed to have perfected his Dim Muk or "death touch" while fighting Japanese soldiers by trying out the deadly strikes on their bodies until they expired! It was in this kind of martial culture that Limalama would find its darker influences.

### ***The Fighting Principles of Limalama***

Upon witnessing Limalama for the first time, what is immediately evident is its incredible hand speed. Many practitioners of the art have been known to be able to strike a man as many as 12 to 15 times or more within one second! These supersonic blows are delivered with hammering power relying on correct anatomical relationships, good bodily posture and physical structure, and several combative principles that enhance both speed and power. Most of these principles were particularly stressed by Haumea Lefiti.

One such principle is ***relaxation***. Unless the practitioner knows how to move in a completely relaxed manner, it will be very difficult to develop the type of speed and coordination necessary to move with both rapidity and power. The blows often will tense just at the moment of contact and then, after releasing their energy and power, return to a more relaxed state once again.

Another is ***smother***. This is similar to the trapping and sticky hand methods found in other Chinese, Filipino, and Indonesian arts. Limalama stylists try to move in close and stay within trapping range in order to limit or smother the opponent's limbs by immobilizing them. Bone breaking frequently follows.

Similar to this is another concept known as ***punch the punch, and kick the kick***. Limalama fighters will initially damage the opponent's tools, namely their arms and legs, or hands and feet. By striking or kicking at the enemy's offensive and defensive weapons, their limbs might be broken or at least damaged enough to limit an effective attack or prevent the opponent from blocking the defender's counterattack.

***Touch and go*** is another strategy used in the art. When an initial contact has been made with the opponent's hand or arm, Limalama will explode with a barrage of focused strikes designed to induce "shock and awe" by overwhelming their nervous system. Faced with this explosive beginning, most opponents will rapidly change their mind and simply try to find a hole to crawl in.

***Flow like water*** is how the art constantly attempts to express itself. Like water, it is relentless and overpowering. At the same time, it is soft and flowing, able to execute changes in direction and focus instantly. Yet when massed together, nothing in nature has more force than water.

These and over 100 other principles and concepts provide the guidance for Limalama practitioners to be responsive and dynamic in combat. The art often will alternate between unleashing patterned responses that have already been "overlearned" and are instantly on call, with spontaneous new moves the body generates to in response to the opponent's motion.

#### ***Using Drills and Exercises to Develop Contact Sensitivity***

The art features a collection of partner drills and paired exercises which improve the skills necessary to trap, immobilize, and smother an opponent's limbs. Some are simple trapping patterns repeated in rapid succession to build speed and power while sticking to the partner's arms. Some use candles, paper, or water as natural elements to develop speed and flow.

Others are more involved. The Locking Set is a series of locks and joint breaks organized at five skill levels that develops the ability to break a finger, arm or joint immediately on contact with the opponent. It is often even practiced in the dark to reduce the need for any visual input and to further encourage the nervous system to respond quickly.

Corner Capturing is a way to learn how to fight into and out of corners. By using the walls or floors, with body shifting it is possible to learn instant maneuverability in any situation. This may require learning how to do all of one's techniques and even forms from any conceivable position: in a corner, on the ground, sitting down, having either body side out front, having the use of only one hand or leg, or only hands and no legs and other possible fighting scenarios. The objective is to have absolute versatility no matter what the situation.

#### ***The Root of Limalama: The Stem***

Perhaps its most unique aspect is how much of the art can be taught through the use of a single pattern of five movements. This tool, called the ***Stem***, is a combination of attacks and defenses executed with open palms to check, stop, hinder, slap, immobilize, and strike an enemy using a continuous flowing pattern. It includes the constant use of both hands and legs, right and left, up and down, high and low movements that get the

opponent caught in a crossfire of motion that makes escape and defense very difficult. It uses simultaneous blocks and strikes and can easily integrate with any of the other principles, such as touch and go, smother, flow like water, punch the punch and many more. Flexible wrist manipulation is a key feature of the stem and the entire art.

The results of this action, like the constants or givens in a mathematical equation, are that the practitioner almost always knows what to do without thinking at any given moment while engaged in fighting. The highest expression of combat utility has always been the ability to execute a powerful defense instantly without thought, having the body and mind working together with automatic reflexes. The Stem not only provides this, but can be shortened or expanded at will with extensions numbering into the dozens on call if necessary. The mathematical combinations possible by combining the Stem with other movements is almost infinite. The Stem may also be practiced with a partner to improve timing while conditioning the arms.

Limalama practitioners learn how to *graft* one movement pattern, such as the Stem, with other techniques to provide a nearly endless toolkit of potential responses. Many Limalama formal techniques have colorful names that enhance memory and make learning grafting easier. Some names include “The Big Kahuna” (dedicated to Mr. Tino), “Whipping the Bear”, “Strangling the Boar”, “The Hurricane”, and “The Riptide”. These technique patterns, although instantly changeable, are taught to give the student confidence in their ability and provide a vocabulary or encyclopedia of motion which can be studied to yield even more techniques. Tiny often talked about developing proper bodily *habits* that would counteract some of a practitioner’s more negative and nonproductive habits. The best way to develop these is to combine natural reactions with trained responses that improve on what nature has already provided. Movements thus developed can be rearranged and combined with others instantly as combative changes occur.

Depending on when an observer watches a Limalama workout, the art may look quite different. For example, one day may feature ground fighting, another may work on choking, arm locks, or joint dislocations. Another may stress basic stances, blocks, strikes, and kicks, while another may focus on fundamental or animal forms, weapons, or multiple attack defenses. A common thread will be the use of the Stem which links most motion and movement into a cohesive art form. The use of whipping blows with a relaxed attitude combined with penetrating power is always present. Many of the kicks use snapping lifts or twisting arcs delivered to the groin or other vital areas.

### ***The Book***

In the history of many Chinese martial arts there is often reference made to a secret book containing many of the hidden aspects of the art. It is usually only passed from master to disciple when there is total trust and the student has proven their loyalty. Limalama has such a book called the *Instructor’s Manual* which is no longer generally available and is

closely guarded by those lucky enough to have been provided a copy by Tuiolosega. Besides having a detailed history of the art and rank requirements for different levels, the book details the spiritual meaning of the salutation, the emblems and patches worn, a comprehensive description of the arts many techniques, forms, basics, and technical aspects with a glossary of Samoan terms. It includes a detailed, full color section illustrating the anatomy of the human body for learning the vital striking areas, nerves, and pressure points, plus instructions for providing first aid in emergencies.

### ***Limalama: Today and Tomorrow***

Tuiolosega always refers to Limalama as the *arts* of self defense which acknowledges the contributions of the many styles which influenced its development. In keeping with this tradition, the art has a ranking system with both Asian and Samoan aspects. The lower ranks range from white, orange, purple, blue, green, and brown belts, while the black belt ranks are organized as follows:

1. ***Limamua*** - 1<sup>st</sup> black, Associate Bachelor of Arts
2. ***Limalua*** - 2<sup>nd</sup> black, Bachelor of Arts
3. ***Alolama*** - 3<sup>rd</sup> black, Bachelor of Letters
4. ***Lamakele*** - 4<sup>th</sup> black, Associate Master of Arts
5. ***Malama*** - 5<sup>th</sup> black, Master of Arts
6. ***Malamamua*** - 6<sup>th</sup> black, Master of Letters
7. ***Malamalua*** - 7<sup>th</sup> black, Associate Doctorate of Arts
8. ***Malamamai*** - 8<sup>th</sup> black, Doctorate of Arts
9. ***Malamakoa*** - 9<sup>th</sup> black, Associate Doctorate of Letters
10. ***Malamalama*** - 10<sup>th</sup> black, Doctorate of Letters
11. ***Limalama*** - Grandmaster, a brilliant gold belt, beyond the ranking system, worn only by Tuiolosega as the founder. The ranks have academic titles reflecting Tino's commitment to education and the depth of knowledge expected of those who reach the black belt level in the art. He is a graduate of the University of Hawaii who went on to obtain a degree in law.

In the past, in the 1960's, testing for rank, especially at the black belt level, was often a frightening ordeal. At times the requirements included engaging in actual street combat while ones teacher watched from a distance. Once, it even required that the prospective black belt actually fight each of the five original founders of the Limalama Association, plus Tino himself. Today, the tests are more in line with those found in other styles and a black belt certificate in Limalama remains a much coveted accomplishment.

Many of the members of TILOA: Tuiolosega's International Limalama Organization and Association, teach different aspects of the art depending on their individual backgrounds. Some have extensive histories in martial arts from China, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, or the Filipino Islands, and often will teach a version of Limalama heavily influenced by one or more of these arts. Often there will be generational differences as well with those who trained in the 1960's or 70's teaching a different form of the art than those who trained

more recently. Most highly regarded are those who trained with Tuiolosega or one of the original five TILOA founders in the original Limalama methods so closely associated with the Chinese martial arts. This is the most comprehensive, dangerous, and rare form of the art known by only a few at the present time.

Limalama instructors are expected to contribute to the art by adding their own techniques or training forms. In this way, the art continues to grow with each new generation of practitioners being able to help expand the art. The largest concentration of schools today are in Mexico, South and Central America, and in Spain. Others are found throughout the United States, especially in California and Hawaii, and as far away as Australia.

### **Who's Who in Limalama**

Some of the well known martial artists who have had training in Limalama are Douglas Wong of white lotus kung fu who trained with Haumea Lefiti, Ted Tabura who trained with John Louis in both Limalama and Okinawa-te, Richard Nunez and Solomon Kaihewalu, the two surviving original students who trained with Tuiolosega, and Tadashi Yamashita, a Shorin-ryu practitioner who has also trained with "Papa", as Tuiolosega is affectionately referred by old timers in the art. Nunez continues to teach Limalama while Kaihewalu now instructs in Lua, the Hawaiian art of self defense. Antoine Alferos trained with Haumea Lefiti and continues to teach both Limalama and kung fu. James McNeil, another Lefiti student, teaches Splashing Hands, the name the Mok Ga part of the art was sometimes given in Taiwan. Al Garza, founder of the innovative new Matrix system, learned from both Lefiti and Tuiolosega. Hundreds teach the art around the world, especially in the many Latin countries. Lefiti passed away in 1973 and Tuiolosega suffered a stroke in 1993 and sustained some physical and speech impairments but remains active in his art by teaching and overseeing the other Limalama instructors.

The next time you see a group of Polynesian or Hawaiian women doing the hula, take a close look at some of the hand and body motions. Many of the early movements that would become Limalama were actually concealed in the dance during the 1800's due to both political and religious pressure which resulted in banning the open teaching of the deadly art. Instead, the movements were hidden within the hula and other Polynesian dances where they remained alive to those in the know who were able to decode the graceful, flowing movements as the lethal martial art it contained. Some of these hula-type movements are actually seen in Limalama's flowing salute.

Tuiolosega has always said that his art was a gift from God and that the practitioners should not bow to man, only to God. Therefore, Limalama's salute is a flowing sequence of open hand palm blocks, traps, and strikes with both practical and symbolic, spiritual meanings.

Plans are now underway for training videos and a book to be published on Limalama. This will allow the art to be documented and presented to the larger martial arts community. The links to the martial arts of China and the other Asian countries will then



be even more apparent and Limalama will take its rightful place as one of the most significant and interesting martial arts of the modern era. Tuiolosega, once one of the most feared men on Earth, has mellowed to become one of the kindest and loving of humans. His hands, always the fastest, have finally become true hands of wisdom. This will be his enduring legacy to martial artists and to mankind, teaching not only how to fight, but, more important, how to live life as a better person.

Note: Limalama® is a registered trademark of Tino Tuiolosega. The author wishes to express his gratitude and acknowledgment to Mr. Tuiolosega and to June Radicchi for providing some of the sources for the historical material referenced in this article.

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