

A Study of the Attitudes of New Zealand Martial Artists in Regards to the Concept of “Rei” : An Analysis of Kendo Practitioners

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1, Introduction

Like most countries around the world, Japanese budô is gaining a significant following in New Zealand in recent years. This can be attributed to two social trends: (a) A shift away from traditional New Zealand values in areas such as sport and religion; (b) and the growing number of Asian immigrants to New Zealand.

With regards to (a), I am alluding to a distinct distancing from traditional organized religion, and hence a growing number of individuals seeking “spiritual fulfillment” through alternative means. ‘Mystical’ Asian culture and ideals are recognized as providing a holistic approach to physical and spiritual wellbeing, and are thus gaining in popularity.

Also, a move away from so-called mainstream sports in New Zealand is occurring, and recent generations are opting to engage in unconventional athletic activities such as the martial arts. It may be argued that increased violence in society is also a motivation for many to undertake the study of martial arts. In this sense, by far the most popular martial arts in New Zealand are karate, judo, and taekwondo.

However, this paper will briefly outline the perception of “rei” (etiquette and respect) and “discipline” in the New Zealand kendo community. There are also a small number of iaido and naginata practitioners in NZ. As the majority of these practitioners also study kendo, I will contain my comments to kendo, but have included the other two arts in my deliberation.

2. What Kind of People Practice Kendo in New Zealand?

Given that the practical application of kendo is limited compared to karate or judo, what is the main motivation for New Zealanders to undertake its study? To date, due to the relatively small population of around 500 members, aspects such as competitive aspirations do not figure highly. There are few tournament events in which practitioners can participate, and the overall level is still quite low. Broadly speaking, there are three significant groups of kendo practitioners, and their motivations are different:

1. Naturalized New Zealanders (approximately 50%)
2. Immigrants (30%)
3. Transient Asian residents (20%)

Starting with the smallest group first, transient Asian residents comprise of mainly Japanese, Korean and Chinese company employees and students. Most of the Chinese students start kendo for the first time in NZ, but the majority of this group are Japanese and Koreans in their twenties through to forties who are experienced kendo practitioners usually 2-dan up to 5-dan level. Typically, they stopped doing kendo in their home countries only to discover it in New Zealand, and decided to take it up again out of nostalgia or as a way to make new friends.

Immigrants are the second group which also consists mainly of Korean, Japanese, and some Chinese.

As is often the case, it is the children of these immigrants who become members of local kendo clubs rather than the parents, who tend to take a passive role in club activities. Parents send their children in the hope that they will maintain a link with their Japanese or Korean (or Asian) heritage, and also learn discipline and traditional forms of

etiquette which would otherwise be lacking in their typical course of education in New Zealand. This motivation is reminiscent of Japanese parents in the kendo boom of the 1970s and 80s.

Currently the largest group of practitioners are naturalized New Zealanders. Their motivations vary but can be summed up in the following groups:

- a. Teenagers or students who have a keen interest in Japanese pop culture such as anime, samurai movies, and traditional aspects such as bushidô and so on.
- b. Young men or women who have spent some time in Japan and dabbled to varying degrees in kendo there.
- c. Mainly adult men who have trained in other martial arts but are dissatisfied with the emphasis on competition, and are seeking something more ‘spiritual’ in nature.

These factors sometimes overlap but the common thread running through the groups is the comparative lack of preoccupation with competition. Although the interest is there to a certain extent, the opportunities are few. Those who start kendo for competition or as a form of self-defense inevitably give up before long. This immediately makes kendo distinct from other martial arts in NZ. Although there are exceptions, generally speaking, only those who immediately recognize or come to view kendo as a way for personal-development and self-discipline stay the course.

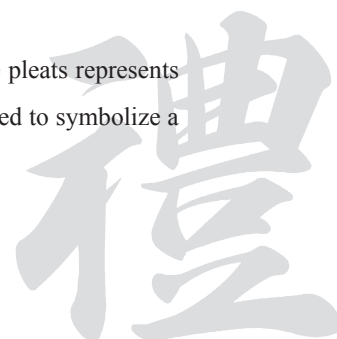
3. The Ever-present Japanese Influence

Despite the rapidly increasing number of Korean immigrants practice kendo (often in Korean-run dōjō), most of NZ kendo is still influenced by Japanese ideals of rei in form and manner. This is in part due to the policy of the NZKF to abide by Japanese protocol. Undoubtedly one of the attractions for many kendōka in NZ is the emphasis placed on ritual forms of etiquette. NZ students consciously bow when entering and leaving the dōjō, bow deeply and carefully to the shōmen, seniors, training partners, and perform sonkyo awkwardly but diligently before engaging in a bout.

Having lived in both countries, I can attest to the fact that rules of etiquette are often conducted with seemingly more passion and exactness in NZ than in Japan. The reason is precisely because all of the ritual forms in kendo are completely foreign to New Zealanders, and are thereby not apt to be abbreviated, as seems often the case in Japan. Ironically, not to bow deeply when entering the dōjō would be considered sacrilegious by many New Zealand kendōka. It is part and parcel of the accepted formal procedure in kendo that is emphasized by visiting high-ranking Japanese teachers and local instructors, who frequently lecture students on the basics of rei in kendo as demonstrated through the forms of etiquette and the required meticulous application.

New Zealanders who commit themselves to something as exotic as kendo make every effort to do what they are told, especially by Japanese teachers. They also unconsciously perpetuate breaches of Japanese etiquette such as wearing a hat in the dōjō simply because they have never been told not to. Moreover, most will not understand exactly why we do sonkyo in kendo, or utilize various ways of bowing, or stand up with the right foot and sit down from the left, but are usually happy to comply with the simple understanding that it represents ‘respect’ to other people in the club, the dōjō environment, and even the equipment that we use in training. It is looked upon as a sacred ritual of respect that must be done properly.

Practitioners also find meaning in folding the hakama properly when they know that each of the pleats represents the five Confucian values; or look after their shinai not only for safety but also because it is supposed to symbolize a





katana; or prostrate to their opponent because “without the bow of deference, the act of hitting each other with sticks amounts to no more than an act of violence.” As part of the ritual they will even say “onegai shimasu” before a bout and “arigatô gozaimashita” after, instead of a simple “please” and “thank you”.

Despite a few unwitting errors in form and circumstance, adherence to “correct Japanese kendo etiquette” is highly regarded in the small New Zealand kendo community. New Zealanders are generally happy to comply because they find solace in the ritual itself, with a general understanding that it represents “respect” – a virtue valued in all societies. In many ways, a New Zealand kendo dôjô looks as if it has literally been transplanted from Japan, but with an arguably higher standard of adherence to prescribed forms of courtesy, albeit somewhat rigidly. And this intensity remains throughout the typical training session.

4. Bokutô Training- An Understanding of ‘Rei’ Born through Fear and Trust

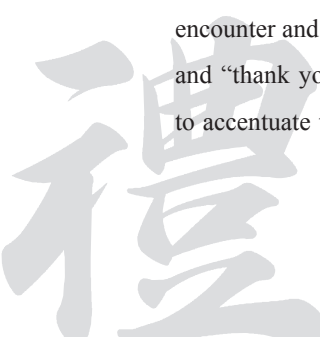
But does an adherence to forms of etiquette equate to an understanding of true rei or respect? And, is that form truly of consequence as long as the same feeling of deference is present? This question is particularly important in the international kendo community now as countries such as Korea are omitting ‘traditional Japanese etiquette’ such as sonkyo because it has no bearing to Korean culture. Regardless of whether kendo is traditional Japanese culture, some non-Japanese sectors are questioning the validity of teaching Japanese etiquette instead of that of their own culture.

Ritual form is important as it provides a framework for expression of respect and solemnity. Still, even in Japan I frequently see instances where rei is either taken for granted in form or feeling, or both. For example, in the naginata dôjô I am always amazed to see two practitioners bowing to each other deeply according to correct form, and then bowing once again informally immediately after with smiles on their faces saying thank you. One is left wondering, what was the purpose of the first bow? Was it simply ritual for the sake of ritual? I believe this situation to be endemic.

For the last four years, I have been running an experiment on students from New Zealand and other countries. Through a lack of expensive equipment, I have conducted classes using only bokutô, and teaching “bokutô ni yoru kendo kihon waza keiko-hô”, a set of nine techniques developed by the AJKF. In courses of 10~15 sessions, we practice these forms interspersed with what I call “soft kendo” (similar to “sports chambara”). I talk briefly about important concepts in kendo such as ki-ken-tai-itchi, zanshin, seme, but not in too much detail. I also teach correct etiquette as the very first lesson, and mention the importance of rei as a key component in keeping the dôjô safe.

At the conclusion of the course I ask students to write reports on their impressions. In many instances the students themselves wrote of the importance of etiquette and respect without any prompting from me. For many, it was the first time they had used a bokutô and the act of making sundome strikes on their training partners, and receiving attacks just above vital targets understandably created considerable apprehension. Typically they were “afraid of making a mistake” and accidentally hitting their partner, and also receiving a painful blow if their partner erred.

Interestingly, it was through this “nerve-wracking” process that students independently nurtured feelings of “care and consideration” coupled with bonds of “trust”. The ritual of the bow at the beginning signaled the start of the encounter and the “need for heightened concentration, care and reliance”; and the final bow signified a job well done, and “thank you for co-operating.” These are the comments that many of the students recorded. Without the need to accentuate the importance of rei too often, students were able to learn for themselves, as they were aware of the



dangers in training with weapons. The dangers are not so obvious when training with shinai and bôgu. Many students have commented that they felt invigorated and excited by the danger and the resulting interaction with their training partners based on “mutual respect”.

5. Conclusion

Instructors emphasize that kendo starts and ends with a bow, and also teach the correct forms of etiquette, often without knowing how it came into existence. A search of historical documents proves that many of the forms of etiquette used in kendo today were developed in the twentieth century, and are not very old. Still, as the simple act of bowing is customary practice in daily human interaction in Japan, the true significance of the act in the dōjō is sometimes overlooked. On the other hand, as it is not customary to bow in NZ, students in kendo clubs have a tendency to abide by the protocol as closely as possible, but have a need to justify why the action is important. For the most part, they are content with the notion that it connotes respect and courtesy albeit in a somewhat exotic form.

In my experience, this understanding became more vivid and appreciated in the NZ context when an element of perceived danger was introduced into training through the use of bokutō. In conclusion, the general consensus in NZ is that rei is an integral part of the study of kendo; and, that executing the forms of etiquette as correctly as possible provides a framework or gateway to focus on or be reminded of the importance of rei in the immediate environment.