

Bowing in international judo – A comparative cultural study –

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I. Introduction

Budo is strongly connected to traditional Japanese values. Judo, the only Olympic sport in budo, was practiced by a limited number of foreign practitioners who were fascinated by its unique set of values, but as it spread throughout the world, people showed more interest in the sports values rather than the traditional values. Because of this, judo is often criticized as no longer a part of budo but merely a sport.

The International Judo Federation (IJF) has been actively reforming the competition system in order to remain in the Olympic family, believing the Games are the best way to diffuse judo throughout the world. During Y.S. Park's presidency (1995-2007), reform was accelerated, but, at the same time, serious issues arose concerning essence of "rei" or the bow, one of the key elements of budo. No matter how much the sports values are preferred, the spirit of the bow characterizes the unique identity of judo and its importance has not been lost in modern international judo.

By examining discussions on bows in international judo society, this presentation will investigate the universal value of bows in a multicultural environment, and discuss conflicts between the traditional values of budo and multicultural values

II. Discussion

A serious lawsuit against judo bows occurred in the United States during Park's presidency. The plaintiff, an American girl and her brother, sued the US judo federation and IJF alleging that it was against the 1964 Civil Rights Act when they were forced to forfeit judo competitions due to their refusal to bow as required. They insisted that forcing bows toward the founder's photo or competition area in public facilities was enforcing the ideas of Japanese Shinto. After a six year court battle, the plaintiff lost the case; the court ruled that judo bows have no religious meanings but are merely a cultural ritual. The case triggered a reconsideration the meanings and the need for judo bows in international tournaments.

While the case was being tried, the IJF repealed the mandatory rule for the bow to "the joseki" or the head table and the bow to the contest area because (1) too many mandatory bows confused contestants, (2) the objective of these bows was not clear, (3) referees could not take full responsibility for behavior outside the contest area, (4) bows are voluntary not compulsory, (5) and it was more effective to concentrate on the most important bow – the bow to the opponent.

III. Conclusion

In modern international judo society, the trend is to recognize the importance of the bow as judo becomes a more competitive sport. Even the Islamic nations which used to claim that the judo bow may conflict with their religious beliefs, agreed to comply with judo tradition.

Nevertheless, because the original meanings of the bow in Japanese budo may indicate reverence for a sacred space and the manner itself is reminiscent of religious practice, it is necessary to pay careful attention when teaching the spirit of the bow in a multicultural world society.

