

Anthropologizing Aikido

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Abstract

The modern Japanese martial aikido has become a world-wide phenomenon. Western practitioners of the ‘way of unity’ partake of a system of intricate body practices and philosophical ideals, the manifestations of which vary greatly according to locale, style, teacher and individual perspectives. Within this diversity the common element remains incorporation of a disciplined usage of bodies and how they relate to the world. Aikido practice exemplifies that bodies are good to think with. The role of the body is playing an increasingly important role in anthropological understandings of meaning-making. I examine participation in a *dojo* (martial arts school) in Auckland, New Zealand and clarify the complexities of conducting anthropological research in a complex participant-observation setting.

Key Words: aikido, anthropology, embodiment, practices, research

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1 Introduction “AN INTRODUCTION TO AIKIDO”

With a loud, confident shout, I took his right wrist in a two-hand grab. As he extended his fingers I felt a subtle change in the direction of the tension flowing down my arms and into his wrist. This feeling grew as his knees flexed and his weight dropped down into the floor. My confidence hiccupped suddenly. I had just enough time to suspect that I was no longer in control of the situation, even though I still had a firm grip on his wrist, before he closed the distance between us with a shorn step. Pivoting his hips, he drew in close and gazed steadily in the same direction that I was facing, drawing the weight out of my legs and disrupting the alignment and balance between my hips and shoulders. I was effectively now leaning into and relying on my grip on his forearm to stand up; an unenviable place to be in a physical confrontation. My confidence coughed violently.

Smoothly, in a single continuous motion, the held arm extended up toward the ceiling taking my weight with it, before sweeping back and downward toward the vacuum-like space behind my lower back and knees. My feet stayed more or less where they had been when I started, but the rest of me collapsed into that welcoming space. I say welcoming, because falling into it felt like the natural thing to do after having been stretched and physically unraveled. So fall I did. And he stared down at me intently for a moment, before relaxing, lowering his arms and stepping back. Now it was my turn.

This was my introduction to Dave, a student at Aikido of Auckland, an aikido school (*dojo*) owned and instructed by Alan Roberts. Aikido, (the way of harmony) is a modern Japanese martial art founded by Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), and based on the principle of non-resistance. It uses an array of blending, joint locking, balance breaking, throwing and pinning techniques to

subdue attackers. Through his art Ueshiba disseminated a complex ideology based on self-awareness and self-cultivation within a discourse of social obligations. Beyond the systemization of combat techniques, aikido is a microcosm of broader cultural structures and historic trends (Donohue, 1991b; 1997a; Dykhuizen, 2000; Van Horne, 1996). While martial arts as combative forms can be thought of as anachronisms in an age of handguns, stun guns, pepper spray, etc., much of the literature highlights the flexibility of these physical and philosophical systems and their adaptation through the varying needs of historically and geographically situated populations (Czarnecka, 2001; Donohue, 1991b; 1997a; Draeger, 1974; 1978; Jackson, 1978; Klens-Bigman, 1999). Like Japanese martial arts in general, aikido requires learning precise physical skills. Ultimately, however, it is a means of integrating the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of personhood (Draeger, 1974; Friday, 1997; Hamada, 1990; Hamada, 2000; Kauz, 1977; Klickstein & Saito, 1987; Lohse, 1999).

I had practiced aikido and a related martial art called *aikijujutsu* in Japan and the U.S. before coming to Roberts' *dojo* and I felt that I had a solid foundation in martial arts. Still, I knew that each teacher had his or her own interpretation of aikido, and so I wore my white belt, the sign of a novice, to display modesty and a willingness to learn. I knew that Roberts and his students would not need a colored belt to make decisions about me. My experiences to that point convinced me that my general understanding of etiquette and my performance of basic techniques would tell them all they needed to know about my past training. I doubted that there would be a conversation about this past, but I anticipated a communication through practice, through posture and technical application that would speak louder and better than words.

What I experienced during that first of many training sessions was a different

feel to partner practice and the execution of techniques. The etiquette and sequence of the session were not dissimilar to other schools, but there was something distinctive about the physical nature of the training here that intrigued me. It was no more strenuous than other *dojo* I had known, and most of the techniques were similar, but at Aikido of Auckland the physical shapes and expressions embodied in practice were markedly different.

I attributed this to my inexperience with the Iwama-style of aikido that Roberts teaches. While there are stylistic differences between aikido schools, I was now particularly struck by the ways that these were inscribed on, and expressed through, trainees' bodies. I found that my own embodiment was in some ways at odds with Roberts' approach, such that I simply could not perform some of the basic techniques the way I was told to. This meant unlearning and re-learning some fundamentals of bodily practice. I had to re-examine basic concepts of body movement, such as hip-generated power, and weight distribution in my posture and movement. I had to conform to Roberts' and his students' ideas to learn and gain acceptance in the group.

Over the next few months I struggled with this learning process. Occasionally, I glimpsed changes in my physical expression of techniques as I gradually learned to perform them in ways that felt right, which in this case meant that they began to feel more like the practices of Roberts and the senior students. Occasionally Roberts explicitly reinforced this, but it came primarily through mimesis and physical interaction with other students. I began to display the signs that the other students recognized as commitment and dedication, which seem to be just as important as technical ability for gaining respect and for being viewed as a member of the *dojo*.

2 Anthropologising Aikido

Geertz (1973) has noted that little things can speak to much larger ones. With this in mind I view Aikido of Auckland as an example of a cultural phenomenon that enables its members according to principles incorporated in aikido practice that they embody in New Zealand's cultural milieu. I approach the complexities of aikido training and membership in a *dojo* by exploring the question: What ramifications does membership in an aikido *dojo* have on individual participants' sense of identity?

In pursuing this question, I rely on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990b) concept of habitus to interpret aikido as a culturally inscribed practice. Bourdieu's concern with collapsing dualities such as social/individual, and mind/body seemed especially apt for analyzing aikido concepts of integrating body and mind. Also, as Bourdieu maintains throughout *Distinction* (1984), an understanding of the socially constructed nature of bodies and practices helped me to think about my own experiences during the first months at Aikido of Auckland as I unlearned old "truths" and habits. Rather than the body as vehicle, I was beginning to think of the body and its muscle memories as an intermediating category. Bourdieu's idea of habitus expounded on this relationship and the dialectic between self (subjective) and social (objective), or, in other words, synthesis of the particular and the general (Bourdieu, 1990a: 160). This approach, while at times criticized for not going far enough in challenging dualism (Csordas, 1990; Jenkins, 1992; Reyna, 1994), or for over-determinism (see Fowler, 2001; Lindsay, 1996:199, Lock 1993:137, Rothman, 2000:17), locates and clarifies the body in ways that seemed vital for interpreting the experiences of martial artists. Bourdieu argues that "sporting practices are practices in which understanding is bodily" (1990a:166). Others have spoken of knowing and intelligence as

"embodied states" (Lewis, 1995:232), or of a "sentient body" (Wacquant, 1995:520), a "somatic unconscious" (Jackson, 1983:335), or "a body of all eyes" (Zarilli, 1994:44) all perspectives which struggle with standardized dualisms and struggle to re-elaborate body-mind concepts. Similarly, martial arts studies on Brazilian capoeira (Lewis, 1995) and on Vietnamese Vovinam (Carruthers, 1998) have used habitus to clarify states of being and ways of knowing that vary distinctly from earlier, less theoretically grounded literature on combative systems.

Thus, although I began this study with the twin interests of Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital and the practice of aikido, my approach soon changed. Originally I was interested in analyzing how practitioners converted capital from an imported practice into their daily lives in New Zealand. However, the stories of my fellow students soon led me toward exploring the body and embodiment rather than culture and power. The lingering reminder of Dave's forearms kept me asking not only how are aikido practitioner's (*aikidoka*) bodies shaped through practice, but why and how are those of diverse *dojo* different and reflective of *dojo* social dynamics? Here, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus became more prominent than cultural capital for understanding the themes of identity and membership and to approach them as interpenetrating with bodily performances in the experiences and accounts of *aikidoka*.

Literature on embodiment including work by Csordas (1990), Jackson (1983, 1996) and Farnell (1999) proved fruitful, in some ways paralleling Bourdieu's conceptions of the body and in other ways challenging and adding to it. Csordas (1990) for example, maintains the idea of socially constructed bodies and personhood, but argues that Bourdieu failed to understand the fundamental role of embodiment in culture and takes the additional conceptual step of formatting a paradigm of embodiment. Farnell (1999) also argues for starting with the

body for an understanding of practice and signification. The combination of embodiment and signification, along with ideas of embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1984) led me to the concept of embodied membership as a framework for interpreting embodiment and membership as interpenetrating dynamics in *dojo* social relations.

Utilizing habitus and embodied membership as a dual theoretical approach has proven both challenging and fruitful. My research demonstrates that habitus shifts through pursuing aikido, and these shifts are not only for long-term members, given that even among junior members there were indications of changing conceptions of self, such as increased body-mind integration, and ways of relating socially that they attributed to aikido practice. These shifts demonstrate the flexible, adaptive character of habitus (Lohse, 1999; Wacquant, 1995:507, 510; Zarilli, 1995). But the transformative potential of practice can be emotionally stressful as well. This I attribute to the durable and transposable nature of habitus. As disparate conditionings are confronted through embodiment tensions can and do arise.

Aikido is a physically precise and ideologically charged field of endeavor. Its location within the larger social sphere of New Zealand brings to bear the complexities of foreign practices translated into new places distant in time and space from their origins. One result of this interplay of exotic practice and local meaning is the diversity of interpretations (Howell, 1995; Rafael, 1993) of what aikido is and what its practice means. Even in Japan, where aikido originated, different styles have proliferated. Draeger (1974) recorded more than 30 distinct styles of the art by the mid-1970s, each with its own emphasis. Even before the death of Ueshiba in 1969, different varieties had appeared. More recent forms include those with a focus on competitive aspects (Shin Aikido, i.e. 'new aikido'), or manipulation of energy (Ki Society). With aikido's

internationalization even more eclectic styles have arisen that incorporate techniques from other martial arts such as kick-boxing. New Zealand is no exception to this trend Auckland alone has four different styles and 14 *dojo*.

I spent two years training at Aikido of Auckland. The research upon which this work is based took place during nine months of the second year, and entailed many hours both on and off the mat in participant observation. I initially spent between six and eight hours per week in the school, tapering down to fewer and fewer before being side-lined by an ankle injury. Alan Roberts was enthusiastic and supportive from the first time that I mentioned my interest in doing research. He had already hosted research by Paul Janman, a colleague in social anthropology at the University of Auckland and fellow student in Roberts' school. Roberts told me early on, "Yeah, we're getting used to this anthropology stuff."

Later, I brought the ethics research participant information sheets and consent forms to Roberts and explained their purpose. His reaction mirrored one that he had to a similar request from Paul the year before. When I explained that these procedures and forms helped ensure that all parties were protected, Roberts laughingly replied, "Yeah, OK, but I mean, what can you really do to me with this research?! How can this hurt me?" I resorted to platitudes about protecting his reputation and business. He countered with: "OK, but how many people are gonna read this?" As a teacher of martial arts I should have expected him to go for the jugular. So much for the dreams of glorious scholarship!

Doing the research gave me new answers to his questions. Granted, there would only be 50 copies of this work, but in the Internet age of course the possibility of wider distribution is of course potentially vast, but hard to predict. More important to me at the time of writing however was the fact that one of the printed copies would have a place reserved on the bookshelf at Aikido of

Auckland. While Roberts gave the distinct impression of having nothing to hide, being the topic of in-depth discussion and the subject of analysis, that is, reading about one's self in someone else's words, can be unsettling. Beyond this, of course, is the potential for others in the school to read it as well, which could affect their perspectives about participation and membership. Would they read the brief episode about Dave's forearms and try to figure out who it was? I would. And that influenced the ways I included (or excluded) certain information.

Nearly half of the 12 individuals I interviewed, having already signed consent forms and having been verbally reminded by me of the confidential nature of the interviews, reached certain points in our talk where they paused to confirm, "You said this was all confidential, right?" Even Alan Roberts once said, "Now this you are not to talk about." Obviously, there were sensitive topics that they did not want identified with themselves personally. For my interest in identity and relationships in the school, though, some of these same topics were highly important. In order to preserve the trust I encouraged and received I had to be careful not to threaten our other relationship as fellow practitioners in the dojo. Everyone knew I was conducting research, and of course people often change their behaviors when they know they're being carefully observed, especially in a performance-based activity like a martial art.

I have learned from some of the pitfalls that other researchers (Back & Kim, 1984; Dann, 1978; Draeger, 1978; Jackson, 1978) have stumbled into before me. Broad generalizations, simplified categorizations and lack of historical accuracy plagued much of their work. Much of this work also reflected Orientalist perspectives on Japan. For example, a number of works overemphasize the role of Zen in martial arts (Cleary, 1991; Draeger, 1973a, 1973b, 1974; Herrigel, 1953; Jackson, 1978; Suzuki, 1959). The absence of voices of teachers and

practitioners suggests a reductionist point of view by these authors. As early and foundational works they have reified and encouraged Western stereotypical images of the enigmatic East (Friday, 1997; Hall, 1997; Keenan, 1989; Lohse, 1999).

In contrast to their approaches I foreground my active and ongoing relationship with Aikido of Auckland, which after all, is an institution composed of multifaceted and constantly changing relationships. Myerhoff and Ruby (1982:19) have noted, "[t]he anthropologist and the subject of study together construct an interpretation of a cultural feature, an understanding of the interpreter, that would not have come into existence naturally". In order to do justice to the *dojo* members as individuals, friends, fellow students, and as contributors to this study. As active and thoughtful students of a teacher, a school (*dojo*), a genealogy, they refuse to be neatly pinned down for analysis or simplistically categorized as bundles of rational and clear-cut ambitions. Locating myself as research student, *aikidoka* and friend to these practitioners and contributors is also vital for allowing others to understand my position and how it has affected this work (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982:1-5).

3 On Being Reflexive

One of the major challenges in doing this research was trying to strike a balance between the different ways of knowing as found in aikido and in anthropology. I struggled to produce work that would represent, make sense of, and do justice, to the values of each while being aware of my own biases as an American among Kiwis, a researcher among martial artists and a martial artist doing anthropological research. In the end, I realized that this does not entail hierarchies of better or less truths. Each generates and systematizes

knowledge and pursues goals and that locating myself in terms of these interpenetrating roles is critical for reflecting on the epistemology of this work. Jay Ruby (1980:152) observes that, "[t]o be reflexive, in terms of a work of anthropology, is to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data generation". My approach to this research was permeated by my own experiences over the years as a martial artist and by having been a member of the *dojo* for over a year before starting this project. This, I believe, granted me certain insights into parallels and differences between Aikido of Auckland and other schools, such as social interactions and the feel of bodies inscribed by practice that a researcher less experienced in Japanese martial arts might not have seen, or emphasized. Because I had experienced embodied membership before, I believe that I was expecting to find it at Aikido of Auckland, though not of course in the theoretical terms with which I have framed it here. That first night at Aikido of Auckland I was anticipating a different bodily knowing and tactile experience, due to the differences between *dojo*, and yet knew they would resonate with my earlier training. Without prior experience of it I doubt that I would have come to develop the concept of embodied membership as I have tried to do in this work. My suspicion is that someone new to martial arts and aikido would have attended to these matters very differently, or at least as separate categories.

Conversely, the fresh perspective of a researcher new, or relatively so, to this field would probably have led them to questions and approaches that I have not undertaken. Paul Janman's (2002) research, for example, during the year before mine pursued a Marxist analysis of social agency in aikido. We trained with, observed and interviewed some of the same people from very different theoretical standpoints. The differences between our projects speak less about accuracy and correctness than about the multi-valence of the things we all as

cultural agents do (in this case aikido), as well as the methods for interpreting practice through the lens of anthropological theory, the results achieved and our conclusions about them. In other words, different perspectives on shared disciplines, led to diverse productions. And indeed, results are not to be found. Rather they are achieved and produced. This highlights another of Ruby's (1980:154) points about challenging positivism and naive empiricism as if knowledge were an objective truth waiting to be discovered. He argues for the thick description approach to ethnography espoused by Geertz (1973) wherein data is both generated by, and interpreted according to, an interpretivist theoretical stance. Anthropology's older subject/object approach can thus be avoided in favor of a subject/subject orientation that more accurately locates the interpreter within the work (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982:24).

I am not calling for an insider perspective, because any ideas of inside/outside are only relative. For example, as an experienced *aikidoka* I might be considered inside compared to the inexperienced, but in other ways I am an outsider in a *dojo* of Kiwis or to the core of senior students. Abu-Lughod's (1991) thoughtful analysis of "halfies" addresses a related issue via her concern for partiality. Those studying their own culture, or, as in my case something they are personally invested in, are confronted with anthropology's dilemma over the term culture and its implications of self/other, because as invested researchers they are impartial seeing as how "the Other is in certain ways the self" (1991:137). The implications of anthropology's entanglement with culture are complex, but I will limit myself to the observation that not much seems to have changed since Myerhoff and Ruby called for a subject/subject reorientation in ethnography.

As an invested member of the *dojo* I faced unforeseen challenges. I wondered for example, whether to refer to Ueshiba as O-sensei 'great teacher' or to

Roberts as Sensei 'teacher' realizing that these terms represent a hierarchical relationship based on loyalty, authority and respect. With Roberts this relationship continued to manifest itself as he became an informant and in some ways a regulator of this research, given that without his permission and support the fieldwork would have been impossible. I can only wonder whether if I had pursued a topic that he found less agreeable, he might have imposed restrictions on the research and/or on my training in the *dojo*.

Similarly, with the other members I was motivated to maintain our relationship as friends, and fellow *aikidoka*. I sometimes felt my own position in the *dojo* was threatened during when I played the necessary game of asking very basic questions about training matters that should be obvious to an active and committed member. I had to pretend at times that I did not know about symbolic aspects of aikido, physical features of practice, or meanings of Japanese terminology, even though we had trained together and they knew that I speak Japanese. This meant that they had to pretend as well, knowing that I was not so naive as the questions sometimes sounded. This was hardly a complete fit though. I found that I sometimes agreed with or acknowledged certain statements that I felt I had a thorough understanding of on my own, only to wish I had asked for clarification of their interpretations and perceptions. And I have to wonder how complete the pretense went. Did some members not reveal their interpretations of Japanese cultural aspects of the *dojo* out of concern for being judged wrong by me? I do not know, but maybe. Finally, there is "the complex awareness of investment in reception" (Abu-Lughod, 1991:42). I gave a draft of this report to Roberts and was relieved by his encouragement. Knowing that he will have a final copy and keep it in the *dojo* where others can borrow it meant that I would have to deal with their impressions as I continued to practice there. My concerns about these issues demonstrate that I am not impartial or objective.

This is one of the compromises of being an invested member. Conversely, I believe that this study has benefited from the trust and respect between Roberts, the *dojo* members and myself. And knowing that they would confront me with gross misinterpretations has motivated me to work for excellence and accuracy.

Abu-Lughod responds to partiality criticisms by maintaining that those who think of themselves as impartially and objectively distanced from their research area should realize that they too are positioned “within a larger political-historical complex” that has very real ramifications for the relationship between researcher and interlocutors (1991:141). It is clear then, that ideas of impartiality and objectivity are problematic. In place of objectivity, Scheper-Hughes (2000:127-32) maintains that what ethnographers need is “highly disciplined subjectivity” to remain aware of the potential for, and minimization of, symbolic violence and interpretive violence” to those we work with. This means remaining conscious and reflexive about the fact that ethnographies are both “partial truths” as Clifford (1986:6) noted and “positioned truths” (Abu-Lughod, 1991:142).

4 Conclusion “You Will Never Be Great, But...”

Over the past 37 years I have practiced a variety of martial arts with varying degrees of dedication. I started as a teenager with *tang soo do* (a Korean style similar in many ways to karate) followed by Japanese karate in the U.S. My kicking days ended with a severe back injury, so, during a summer in Tokyo, I tried kendo (Japanese fencing). After returning to the U.S., I regularly trained in *aikijujutsu*, (a Japanese art using strikes, locks and throws similar to aikido) for three years as I finished university. I pursued this training during a second long-term trip to Japan in 1995, before re-injuring my back while playing softball!

Once again, though, the injury gave me a chance to explore something new, so I tried *kyudo* (Japanese archery) briefly. Later, I joined a so-called Honbu Style aikido *dojo* (the style most commonly associated with the Aikikai, the largest international aikido organization and founded by Morihei Ueshiba). I left Japan after five years and soon met Dave's forearms at Aikido of Auckland. I relate this list as a demonstration of my sometimes quite frustrating relationship with these arts over the years. It is meant to show a broad range of experiences in a variety of *dojo*, styles, and in three countries. I am not a fervent believer in the stories of supernatural skill that veil martial arts in the mass media, although I did love "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (Kong et al., 2001). Neither do New Age interpretations of martial arts as spiritual practices abounding in love and harmony appeal to me. Admittedly, at age thirteen I held fantasies of control and personal power that influenced my initial foray into martial arts training, and I am not unusual in this regard. Similar motives are subtly persistent among many practitioners (Columbus and Rice, 1998; Donohue, 1988, 1991b; Maliszewski, 1992; Twemlow et al., 1996) and appeared in the stories of students at Aikido of Auckland. But, I found that for the most part the conformity and regimen required to acquire skill in martial arts was a thorough, even shocking, reality check. With the stripping away of the layers of fantasy, the time and money requirements, and the disappointments that come with perceptions of achingly slow progress and injury, my own overall persistence has been a puzzle to me. Following my return to karate training after my first extended lay-off due to injury, my teacher Suzuki Sensei idled up to me in the training hall on his trick knee and told me quite bluntly, "You will never be great." Perhaps he saw me wince, as 19-year-olds often do when their egos are threatened, because he leaned close and continued in a kinder voice, "But like me, you got *budo* (martial ways) in your life. And that is enough."

What does it mean to have a 'martial way' in your life? I think it means challenging oneself, respect for hard-won skill, a desire to grow as an individual and as a member of a network of others who share similar values and a sense of a shared outlook. The suffix *do* (way) implies more than a collection of skills. It implies a life-long pursuit. Thus, to have *budo* in one's life means that these values permeate one's worldview. Their expressions are not limited to *dojo* interactions, but are incorporated into one's lifestyle. Therefore, *budo* training can be quite influential on, and formative of, trainees' lives, inflecting them in ways that move beyond perceptions of fitness and self-defense, and inscribing bodies and minds in particular ways. In fact, rather than just fighting skills, body-mind developments are encouraged and systematized through *budo* practices. This progression is clothed and molded along the lines of values promulgated by a specific system, which reinforces and incorporates them through embodied membership, and affects practitioners' worldviews.

The actions of students at a variety of levels in the *dojo* hierarchy demonstrate the processes outlined above. As a practice, it is the immanently physical experience of doing aikido that interconnects their variety of motivations and experiences: embodied membership. Thus, the body is the nodal point through which individuals relate in meaningful and meaning-building ways in the social space of a *dojo* and through the reciprocal interactions of practice. You throw me, I throw you. And we communicate thereby in terms of culturally embodied practice.

While the detailed inclusion of interviewees' stories are beyond the scope of this brief essay, I have provided evidence as to why cultural anthropology and its body of theoretical perspectives and research methodologies are particularly suited to a study of aikido. As a historically rich product of ancient traditions originating far off in terms of both time and space it presents a researcher with

linguistic challenges, cultural and historical context complexities and a potent symbolic field. As a complex physical practice, literary analysis, observation and interviews alone would leave out critical insights which are only to be found through imitation and interactive training; true participant observation, thinking with the body. I believe that martial arts have been somewhat overlooked as a field of cultural study. In this essay I have presented aspects of membership, embodiment, performance and habitus along with potential pitfalls of social research. Obviously there is great potential for further explorations of each of these subjects.

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