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KENDŌ KATA IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

"An overview of the relationship between kata and the changes in the Japanese society where socio-political conditions significantly caused the development of kendo kata.

The article discusses how far the modern kendō kata, known as the 'Nihon Kendō Kata', transmitted kata traditions from the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) to the next generation."



Fukuro-shinai which originates from 1563

by George Twyford

KATA PRIOR TO 1868

Kata represent a training method wherein students study combinations of techniques and counter techniques, or sequences of such combinations involving the participation of two or more people. One partner is assigned the role of attacker, also known as uchidachi, who is to be taught by the other partner named shidachi.

Certificates of achievement and similar documents left by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century martial art masters claim that kata had become the principal means of transmission by their time. It was not, however, the only way in which warriors learned how to fight. Most bushi (warriors) built on insights gleaned from kata with experience in actual combat.^[1]

As the market system and economy in the mid-Tokugawa period grew and as agricultural production increased, the warriors' wealth, calculated on a fixed rice-stipend from an earlier period, began to seriously devalue. The increasing financial strains placed the samurai in debt to the merchants and corruption became commonplace.

As they lost real status and influence, the samurai class became deeply affected by rise of a flamboyant urban merchant culture.

The merchants' and rural gentry's growing influence and wealth allowed them to adopt status elite customs and values despite their frustration at their low legal status in the rigid class hierarchy.

The combative arts of the warriors were not immune to these socio-cultural trends. The eighteenth century reveals both a martial stagnation among the urbanized bushi, and a new vibrant participation in the combative arts by commoners. Among the higher samurai ranks, the Martial Arts had become aesthetic exercises in sterile formalism where the quality of the sword furnishings and clothing were more important than combat effectiveness. As a result of this development, the martial proficiency of the succeeding generations of warriors greatly deteriorated.^[2]

Lacking true combative experience or even open contest, which were banned in many domains due to the disruptive consequences of competition among the bushi who were easily provoked on questions of honour or shame, the Martial Ways and kata shifted to a more 'passive' and aesthetic style of performance. By the end of seventeenth century most of the warrior arts of ages past was degenerated into 'flowery swordplay' (kahō kenpō) and gamesmanship. Not all ryūha went into kahō kenpō during the middle Tokugawa period, they were able to keep their kendō kata alive and in touch with their roots.^[3]

Today kendō students who belong to a traditional kendō dōjō (kendō group) will be able to learn the kata of the period prior to 1868. The specific kata depend on which tradi-

tion the kendō dōjō is affiliated with from this period. The kata represent the essence of the technical combative knowledge of the ryū (classical school).^[4]

MODERN KENDO KATA AFTER 1868

After the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) the Japanese society made the striking transition from an isolated pre-modern society to an open society through almost a wholesale adoption and modification of Western models. In the Meiji era (1868-1912), the tendency of the social conditions were such that the Japanese citizens favoured Western culture over their own.^[5]

While many of the Meiji oligarchies were deeply committed to a personal cultivation of budō, particularly after having received training in their formative years, the political and social demands of rapidly establishing a new nation did not allow them to promote actively the Martial Ways, and therefore many instructors discontinued their arts causing most ryū ceasing to exist.

In 1878-1894 there was a growing acceptance even imperial approval, of the Martial Ways, within the national police force and among certain individuals in universities and institutions of higher education. The Japanese police was the first to develop a standard kata for use in modern kendō. With the influx of many skilful swordsman hired as instructors for policemen, it soon became evident that the many styles of swordsmanship that these swordsmen followed could not be accommodated in a single training program. Therefore, in 1886 a technical commission consisting of the foremost police swordsmen was formed and charged with the task of formulating a standard kata for the police.

The formation of the Dai Nippon Butokukai in 1895 significantly affected the budō. The Butokukai did not promote the Classical Martial Ways for the purpose of the national defence but instead one of its the main purposes were to prepare the nation's youth to be loyal and healthy citizens of the state. The Butokukai dealt in several years with administrative problems derived from the fact that

kendō was still composed of various ryū, each with its own training procedures and customs. In order to solve these 'problems' they began to develop standardized teaching. The kata of different ryū presented a problem to the unification so the Butokukai invited fifteen swordsmen to form a committee which would decide upon a national kata to be introduced into the school system. The resultant modern kata, involving *elements* from ten different ryū, was known as 'Dai Nippon Teikoku Kendō Kata' which was composed in 1912.^[6]

The development of the modern kendō kata continued within the modern era. This modern kendō kata has undergone revisions in 1912, 1917, 1933 and 1981. Also, in connection with the revision made in 1933 the standardized kata changed its name to 'Nihon Kendō Kata'.^[7]

Students within the modern kendō had to learn Nihon Kendō Kata if they want to be dan-examined because this kata is a part of the curriculum.

DISCUSSION OF THE MODERN KENDŌ KATA

Some writers claim that kata within the modern kendō is practised in order to remember the origin of the modern kendō kata. This is for example suggested by the author of the book 'Complete Kendō'.^[8]

"In addition, Kendo masters have attempted to incorporate a type of training that gives trainees some insight into the dynamics and use of the katana. The first steps in learning how to wield the sword of the samurai use the wooden practice sword in a series of paired kata. In this way, Kendo emphasizes training with the bokken as a way of developing basic skills and preserving a link with the past [...] Kendo's kata are a link for the kenshi of today with the generations of swordsmen who shaped the evolution of Japanese sword arts."

(Complete Kendo by J.J. Donohue, p. 110)

The kendō tradition is closely connected to the past. If a master or committee modifies or creates a kata it will no longer represent historical traditions, and thus, obviously, the connection with the past will be lost. For example in 1932 the Dai Nihon Kendo Kata committee voted on the sound of kiai.^[9] One can wonder that such decision is made through voting instead of basing this on historical research.

The fact is that the modern kendō kata 'Dai Nihon Teikoku Kendō Kata' was only composed by elements from ten different ryū in the modern era (1912).^[10] Although the members of this committee were known, it is still virtually impossible to determine the influences and origins of kendō and kendō kata.^[11] Only making it more impractical as the committee made several revisions of the standardized 'Dai Nihon Teikoku Kendō Kata', later renamed 'Nihon Kendō Kata'.

These circumstances are in contrast to the period of the feudal samurai (prior to 1868) where kata were not analysed and then practiced. On the contrary, it was personal combat that was analysed, and elements were extracted that could be simulated and practised as kata.^[12]

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Even though the modern kendō kata were composed by swordsmen from different classical ryū the 'Dai Nihon Teikoku Kendō Kata' does not reflect the original kata from these different ryū because these kata were only composed by elements from the respective ryū.

Furthermore there are problems with the historical documentation because it is virtually impossible to determine the influences and origin of kendō and kendō kata from the individual forms of 'Dai Nihon Teikoku Kendō Kata'.

Finally, the modern kendō kata have undergone several revisions in the modern era, where the decision could be based on voting instead of research as started earlier. These conditions testify that it is very unlikely that the modern kendō kata (Dai Nihon Teikoku Kendō Kata and Nihon Kendō Kata) should have transmitted kata traditions from the Tokugawa period (1603-1868).

The teaching of modern kendō kata (Dai Nihon Teikoku Kendō Kata and Nihon Kendō Kata) cannot be a case of remembering kata traditions from the era of the feudal samurai (prior to 1868) because the historical substance from the Tokugawa period seems to be missing.

To conclude, the kendō students who belong to a traditional kendō dōjō will be able to learn the kata of the period prior to 1868. In modern kendō the students learn Nihon Kendō Kata in order to be exanimated in this. If the kendō students want to preserve traditions from the era of the feudal samurai the students have to practise kata from the period prior to 1868.

GLOSSARY

Budō Means 'the martial path', or 'the warrior's way'. Budō is synonymous with 'Martial Ways' as distinct from Bujutsu, the 'Martial Arts' (of the battlefield). The budō systems were mostly founded post-1600. The essence of budō is synonymous with the ethical code of the classical warrior. Thus the spiritual and ethical concepts of the classical warrior became an intrinsic part of classical budō (classical martial ways). Modern budō (modern martial ways) is created after 1868 in forms of social amusement or sport, or as methods for the display of pure aesthetic artistry.

Bōgu The armour used in kendō, including the men (covers the head, face, throat and shoulders), kote (covers the hands and forearms), dō (covers the chest and stomach areas) and tare (covers hip and genitals).

Bokken See bokutō.

Bokutō wooden sword.

Bujutsu Synonymous with 'Martial Arts'. The bujutsu are combative systems designed by and for warriors to promote self-protection and group solidarity. The budō are spiritual systems, not necessarily designed by warriors or for warriors, for self-perfection of the individual.

Bushi were considered members of 'warrior houses', or 'buke', which in principle were regulated by the shōgun or overseen on his behalf by a powerful provincial leader, later known as a daimyo. The term 'buke' came to refer generally to the warrior class and was used more or less interchangeably with the term 'bushi'.

Dōjō The 'place of the way'; in the martial traditions, a practice hall.

Classical Martial Ways See budō.

Kata Formalized techniques or sequences of action designed to teach various principles in both bujutsu and budō. Kata was the only means by which a student of the warrior arts could safely train in readiness for battle.

Katana The Japanese live sword. A single-edged sword.

Kenshi means swordsman.

Kiai Powerful shout which employed both attack and defence.

Kendō The 'Way of the Sword'. Practised as *Classical Martial Way* in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) and after the Meiji Restoration (post-1868) practise as *Modern Martial Way*.

Martial Arts Synonymous with bujutsu. See bujutsu.

Martial Ways Synonymous with budo. See budō.

Modern Martial Ways See budō.

Reigi Also called reihō can be defined as courtesy, decorum, etiquette, civility, propriety, amenities, manners, and good form.

Ryū There is no single word in English that can correctly and adequately describe the meaning of this term, but for convenience the ryū may be thought of as approximating a martial tradition from the feudal era. 'Ryū' founded after the feudal age ended (1868) are ignored because classical warriors no longer existed as an influential force.

Ryūha No ryūha is truly representative of its fellows, so one cannot universalize any one ryū's dogma or otherwise project it directly onto a synthesized, generic image of Japanese Martial Arts.

Samurai The term 'samurai' derives from a classical Japanese verb, *saburau* (to serve), and aptly describes how duty bound warriors to their provincial leaders.

Sensei The teacher whom is the crucial link between the tradition and the individual learner. The sensei repays the blessing of his master and the tradition by the preservation and transmission of the tradition through teaching.

Shidachi The 'defending-sword'; the junior partner in kata. Term usually used in kendō but also found in other bujutsu and some budō.

Shinai Bamboo sword.

Uchidachi The 'attacking-sword'; the senior, or 'attacker' in kendō kata and several classical weapon arts.

NOTES

- ¹ Friday, p. 108.
- ² Dorton, pp. 36-99.
- ³ Dann, p. 53; Friday, p. 118.
- ⁴ Dann, pp. 193-194.
- ⁵ Draeger, p. 100.
- ⁶ Dann, pp. 86-89.
- ⁷ Donohue, p. 110; Budden, p. 14.
- ⁸ Donohue, p. 110.
- ⁹ Budden, p. 33.
- ¹⁰ Dann, p. 89.
- ¹¹ Budden, p. 9.
- ¹² Armstrong, pp. 22-23.

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