

Cultural Conundrum

Every group that gathers will over time form a culture. This is not always - or even usually by careful design so much as by personality, seniority, and inertia. It's the story of the "electric monkeys":

They put monkeys in a cage that was wired to shock them all viciously at the press of a button, and the button was pressed every time any one of them got close to a certain spot. The monkeys soon became violent toward anyone who approached that spot.

Then, the wires were disconnected (no more shocks), and over time, monkeys were removed, one-by-one, and replaced by individuals who had never been shocked. But, entering the culture, they copied faithfully the cultural norm of attacking violently anyone who got near the "electric" spot. Eventually, there were no monkeys in the cage who had ever been shocked. Yet, they all still attacked anyone who got near the "electric" spot, because "that's the way things are done 'round here"...

Aikido was created by an individual who was creatively genius and socially unconventional. Aikido was however created and built-up in the confines of the class-structured culture of compliance and conventionality and hierarchical rigidity of last century's Japan. Unfortunately for us, the culture of Aikido has since followed the cultural traditions of the country more than of the creative and unconventional proclivities of the man.

Cultural and linguistic inferences are orders of magnitude more powerful than words for creating a world-model. Any 5-year-old can point this out in the most elegant, if irreverent of ways, as children are wonderful detectors of discontinuity between actions and words (hypocrisies, in adult-speak).

Language creates - or at least discloses - culture - which is the consensual organization of thoughts, ideas, and mores. For instance, use of the word "attack" presupposes a violent or evil intent. It implies certain things, and creates certain expectations, even if the thing being described was just a nasty or ignorant comment by a radio shock-jock.

Culture, including conventions of hierarchy, class, loyalty, etc. - form as ideas become practices and as those practices become the norm. In their original context, these kinds of things generally served some function - like keeping the whole group from getting shocked. But, over time, "traditions" may lose their usefulness.

It has recently become acceptable in some Aikido circles to question the methods with which we train - perhaps even to question the goals of training. Many of my colleagues are talking about a "need for new methods" of training, and I certainly agree.

The challenge that I see with respect to this is that of cultural inertia. Like the electric monkeys, people harbor beliefs and habits and patterns of behavior. Creativity is stifled by invisible boundaries deep in the mind before new ideas can be expressed.

Belief systems (culture) drive results. While training methods can be changed in the pursuit of better results, as long as the new methods are spawned from the same culture, the results will be boringly-similar to what those same patterns have already created.

New results can only be achieved by changing the culture, including the language and the supporting rituals of our Budo.

Taking Turns:

When the roles of Uke and Nage are described in terms of “taking turns”, it implies (to westerners, at least) that Uke is not just passive, but, literally “waiting their turn” to be an active participant. In the west, what is the typical mental and physical state of someone who is “waiting their turn”?

Instructing a beginner about “taking turns”, infers to them that the role of Uke is like being at the bus stop or in the supermarket line. They can be told about “martial awareness” (unfamiliar crap), but they KNOW what “waiting your turn” means. And, most Aiki dojo culture presents (enforces, actually) Uke being a pretty “passive” and waiting role.

Just as “taking turns” and culturally enforcing passivity on the part of Uke creates certain assumptions, beliefs - and results, other linguistic and cultural features of the typical Aiki dojo infer (install) certain beliefs, thereby setting in motion the forces that will ultimately create certain results.

Bowing:

The habit of bowing habitually, reflexively, (neigh constantly) is another example. This is presented as a “showing of respect” - the word “respect” being the nearest polite translation of the concept, which would more accurately be translated as “fealty”. It’s as big a lie as claiming that “bowing to the tokonoma has no religious significance”. (Last time I looked Shinto was considered a religion.)

In any case, one may easily find a modern culture within which immediate and reflexive performance of a “sign of respect” (to one’s acknowledged superior) is compulsory: the Military. The purpose of military salute is pretty obvious - as is the feudal Japanese cultural equivalent.

You can talk it all you like, call it what you like, and rationalize it. Translate it into Swahili if you want. The culture of actions remains more powerful than words at creating a world-view on deep cognitive levels.

In bowing, we have a behavior based in a feudal military and social system that ritualizes gestures of fealty and submission. My question is about our goals, both for students and for ourselves:

1. Maximize human potential through fostering individual growth, leadership, and self-actualization; or
2. Insure compliance, submissiveness, deference, fealty. Or maybe, feel really superior because everyone around is constantly groveling in support of the delusion.

Which is it?

A person can try denial, or plead innocent by reason of rationalization. They can try a cover-up of words. They can even claim temporary Dungeons and Dragons (aka dress-up and play Japanese). But, no one can escape the consequences of systematically-imposed rituals of submission and status. And, consequences to the instructor's ego are even more insidious than those to the student...

Honorifics:

This issue is similar to bowing. There are the three S's: Shihan, Shidoin, and Sensei - followed by Uchi-Deshi, Sempai, Kohai, and others - all of which, because of their origin in a class-based culture, serve to perpetuate those same cultural divisions (and divisiveness), even now.

Again, I question the usefulness of this in our context and for our stated purposes. We are not soldiers and our culture is not feudal. We are an open society that is ostensibly free from class stricture and within which everyone is ostensibly free to rise to the level of the competence their tenacity will support. Even in the largest dojo, we do not need a fancy title to know who collects fees, pays the rent, leads the class, and locks the door.

Either it's just "cool" to have these titles - I'm flashing back to Dungeons and Dragons again - or, maybe it's "cool" to have people calling me "Sensei" (and expecting me to bestow the wisdom of the Buddah), or perhaps it is all part of the "electric monkey syndrome" and this silliness has long outlasted any objective utility...

This problem extends into every corner of our art, all the way from these questionable rituals, to the disorganization of techniques, to the use of vague and dated colloquial Japanese terms that aren't descriptive enough to be standardized across political bodies or to allow even very experienced veterans of the art communicate concisely about technical issues.

It's time to evaluate the changes our art needs, starting by designing our desired results. That includes defining who we want to teach; what we want to teach them; and whether they will happily pay to learn that in the context we offer it. Maybe we'll be a little curious about the student's goals?

The second step is to design, deliberately, and with careful thought, the culture that will support our outcome. We must also deliberately and purposefully design the rituals that will create and support that culture both in our context and over time. We should build-in protections against the kind of cultural stagnation and dogmatic behaviors and class stricture that has led us far from the founder's unique personal pattern of innovation and integration.

Culture drives results, regardless of the methods one chooses, because culture defines perception; sets criteria; and most significantly, it constrains creativity in generating new methods. Therefore, changing the underlying (limiting) culture is prerequisite to discovering and implementing changes of methods that can generate substantively different results.

Only after creating a new culture will we be prepared to design, test, and implement the specific training methodologies that will produce a truly new result.

I personally think people should get their religion at home; that in 21st Century America, we should speak English; that Bruce Lee was right when he said "Martial arts are the sincerest form of self-expression" - and that our culture should facilitate creativity and expression more than it should impose conformity - especially artificial, outdated, foreign, class-structure-based conformity.

Lastly, I believe that if you want to get my attention on the street or in the dojo, you should use the name my mother gave me for that purpose.