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Aikido's spirituality and transplantation in the Nordic countries

Spirituality in the Asian Martial Arts

In this chapter we focus on the Japanese martial art of Aikido (合 気 道), which has a reputation of being more spiritual than most other arts (Little 2018, 92–93). Despite focusing on its reception in Nordic countries, we emphasize its connection to Japan. There Aikido is counted among the modernized martial arts that have been created after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, including the better-known Judo and Karate. Before focusing to Aikido, we will briefly discuss the wider context of Asian martial arts, especially as they are witnessed and imagined in the Western world.

Martial arts are armed or unarmed combat systems and traditions that have been developed for civilian, law enforcement and military purposes around the world. Technically they focus with varying emphasis on strikes, grappling and use of arms against one or more attackers. Many of these arts include ethical, moral, spiritual, or religious elements that are incorporated into their training methods, though most martial arts primarily focus on technical skill and physical exercise. Some East Asian martial arts are particularly associated with religion, including Daoism and Zen Buddhism. (Donohue 1994; Facal & Chircop-Reyes 2022.)

Some Asian martial arts, mostly variants of jiu jitsu, gained an early following in the West – by 'West' we particularly refer to Europe and USA, and realise the discursive and partly historically imaginary nature of this 'orientalist' dichotomy (see Said 2012, 14–16) – at the turn of the twentieth century due to international migration and other transnational connections with East Asia, but this remained a marginal phenomenon. Many Westerners, primarily US military personnel, learned martial arts in Asian countries during and in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Korean War, whereafter they started to teach these arts in their home countries. Starting from the 1950s, arts such as Judo, Karate and some varieties of Kung Fu became well known, to be followed by many other in the following decades. (Donohue 1994.)

Today, we can find dozens of different martials arts and hundreds of their styles and splinter groups around the world, as well as a great number of new styles, including the now popular 'mixed martial arts'. Popular culture, especially television and movies, popularized Asian martial arts for wider Western audiences. In this imaginary realm, the martial arts are epitomized by the figure of a

male, solitary and ascetic martial art master, who possesses self-discipline, (esoteric) wisdom, and almost non-human powers and martial skills. Well-known cultural figures associated with martial prowess and alleged spiritual leanings include the Chinese Shaolin monks and the Japanese samurai. (Donohue 1994; Bowman 2015)

Asian martial arts have been greatly transformed by their change of cultural habitat, including the emergence of mass instruction and competition related to modern sport culture as well as by their commodification to a leisure-time activity (Bowman 2015). Within this overall change, we find various strategies of adaptation, ranging from proactive transformation to efforts to conserve traditional practices (for example, Cynarski *et al*. 2015; Facal & Chircop-Reyes 2022). One noteworthy aspect of the cultural transmission of post-WW2 Asian martial arts to the West is that the initial transmitters, often relatively young military personnel, usually – with notable exceptions of Donn F. Draeger (1922–1982), and Robert W. Smith (1926–2011) – lacked linguistic skills to fully understand the more abstract teachings of their newly learned arts. As the popularity of these arts grew, numerous native 'martial missionaries' were sent overseas from Japan, Korea and other countries, who were regularly equally incompetent in more abstract linguistic transmission. Thereby, much of the religious and spiritual transmission was not possible in any complexity. With religious content, we refer to more organized forms, often taught separately, and spiritual refers to the content that is more closely associated with the martial arts' practices and philosophies. Moreover, the historical authority structures of transmission that were based in respective origin country's culture, were often strained in diaspora and in many instances totally broken, and the newly introduced arts became somewhat independent of their origins. (Donohue 1994.)

The cultural-linguistic transmission and translation bottleneck of the martial arts' spiritual and religious contents was replaced by a relatively small number of individuals, who provided information about different arts and their spiritual ideas and practices in Western languages. One of these key individuals was the Japanese-American Buddhist monk and scholar D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), who wrote several English language books on Zen Buddhism. It has been argued that part of Suzuki's success was based on his own interest in Western Esotericism, including Swedenborgianism and Theosophy, whereby his conceptualizations were easier to recognize and accept (Tweed 2005). Similarly, Taisen Deshumaru (1914–1982), the founder of the *Association Zen Internationale* cited European philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne, René Descartes, and Henri Bergson as people who understood Zen withour knowing it. The postwar counter-cultural era was also otherwise a time for spiritual experimentation with a great variety of spiritual and religious

movements in the Western countries (e.g., Roof 1999). For example, John J. Donohue (1994, 14) notes that one US martial arts instructor used Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan* as an example of Asian martial art philosophy, though the book supposedly deals with American Indian Shamanism.

Gradually some foundational manuals and other important original language commentaries of various arts were translated – such as *Budo* by Morihei Ueshiba (1938/1991) – and many senior Western practitioners wrote more sophisticated introductory manuals to their arts. Still, most of the early texts available to Western audiences circulated ideas that were based on a very limited number of original sources, many of which were mixed with hagiographic elements, and imaginaries from popular culture and movies. It took a long time, before the linguistic skills and growing scholarship allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the arts that had more spiritual leanings, such as Daito-ryu Aiki-jujutsu, and its descendant Aikido. Therefore, we claim that to fully appreciate the complexities of the spiritual and religious aspects of Asian martial arts in Western societies, they should be looked at equally as products of Western popular culture and spiritual movements as well as their original Asian sources (see also, Cynarski *et al*. 2015). For many interested in a spiritual and philosophical understanding of martial arts' roots, it was the publications of Donn F. Draeger, an American amateur researcher with military background and decades of dedicated training in a variety of martial arts, that provided a more nuanced view of the Asian martial heritage (e.g., Draeger 1973a, 1973b, 1974). The first academic journal dedicated to the topic was the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* (1999–2012) and it helped to create an academic community around the topic. Since then, a new active research community has emerged around *Martial Arts Studies* journal (Cardiff University Press, 2015–), and its editors Paul Bowman and Benjamin Judkins. Bowman is actively reflecting the developments of the field, and building a cross-disciplinary framework for it (2015, 1–18). Among the current new research leanings is a phenomenological interpretation on spirituality within martial arts (see, Telles 2022, in Aikido context Hurtig 2016). We also welcome the wider discussion on martial arts, religion, and spirituality (see, Facal & Chircop-Reyes 2022).

In this chapter, we use the following theoretical debates to discuss spiritual aspects of martial arts. Firstly, we welcome the contribution of studies of contemporary spirituality, whereby societal subgroups, such as martial art groups, as well as individuals increasingly are both capable and resourceful to craft their own religious and spiritual lifeworld. Typical features of contemporary spirituality include individualism, eclecticism, and aiming for spiritual growth. (e.g., Roof 1999; Heelas 2008.) As Asian martial arts or their instructors seldomly provide a comprehensive spiritual

worldview, as many Asian teachers tend to rather show than explain in detail, they are highly suitable for individualized, separated, original spiritual understandings (see, Cynarski *et al*. 2015). Second, postmodern theorists have looked cultural hybridization, whereby in globalized circumstances new cultural innovations are formed that cannot be deducted from their historical origins and can show great cultural creativity (e.g., Pieterse 1995). We claim the Asian martial arts in the West contain elements of hybrid cultural practices, and are examples of glocalized culture that include elements of country of origin, country of destination, and, at times, globally mediated culture (cf. Bowman 2015).

Our chapter's main focus, Aikido, has spread around the world since the 1950s and has had a following in the Nordic countries since the 1960s. Our chapter focusses on Aikido in the Nordic countries and the research questions are the following: What is history and contemporary situation of Aikido in the Nordic countries? What is role of spirituality and religion in Aikido? Has Aikido changed during its transplantation into the Nordic societies? For research material, we have interviewed four senior Aikido teachers in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, as well as used a variety of other original sources and research literature. The teachers provide an understanding on Aikido from a semi- or fully professional view, and their answers are informed by decades of practice, mostly as dedicated students of Japanese teachers. Thus, they provide a focused angle on the dissemination of the original Japanese teachings that regular students would struggle to have access to. The interviews were analyzed by thematic content analysis. For this chapter, we primarily use a simplified romanization of Japanese terms, for example Aikido instead of Aikidō, and capitalize honorific titles, such as *Sensei* ('teacher').

Aikido and its spread around the world

Aikido (合 気 道) is a Japanese modern martial art (*gendai budō*), and often translated as "the way of unifying (with) life energy" or as "the way of harmonious spirit". The *aikidoka* (practitioners of Aikido) train throwing, being thrown, and submission (wrist, elbow and arm locks, and chokes) techniques, and its principles include controlling the attackers' power without permanently harming them. The *ukemi*, safe fall/exit from techniques, are practiced from the very beginning. Slightly more advanced *aikidoka* also practice weapon techniques, bare handed defenses against an armed attacker, and techniques against multiple attackers. The weapons training has an important role in several Aikido styles. These are practiced with or against a *jo* (about 130 cm long wooden staff),

bokken (a wooden sword modeled after the curved Japanese sword, *katana*), as well as *tanto* (Japanese knife). We agree with the marketing materials of many clubs, that Aikido is suitable for everyone, regardless of fitness, height, weight, and gender. Training gradually develops flexibility, mind-body coordination, and muscle fitness. No Aikido competitions are held in the mainline, that is, Aikikai Aikido. (Ueshiba 1984.)

Aikido was founded by Japanese martial artist Morihei Ueshiba (1883–1969), also known as *O-Sensei*, 'the great teacher'. He gradually developed Aikido from the 1920s to the post-World War II era, only including the spiraling armed and unarmed techniques from the Daito-ryu Aiki-jujutsu of his main teacher, the "last samurai" Takeda Sokaku (1859–1943), to his art. An important spiritual foundation for Ueshiba himself was the Neo-Shinto movement of Ōmoto-kyō, esoteric Buddhism (*Shingon Mikkyō*, see Ikonen 2011) and, especially after World War II, the idea of protecting the opponent from injury. Ueshiba's own paranormal experiences also influenced his arts, as well as his studies in several other Japanese martial arts. Aikido is not only focused on martial techniques, but its philosophical core, as defined by Ueshiba, is in the demand of strengthening your mind, seek the victory over yourself instead of others, and make the world a better place to live. Thus, Aikido has its roots in the areas of martial arts, Neo-Shintoism, and post-war Japanese pacifism. (Ueshiba 1984; Stevens 1997.)

The religious and spiritual views of Morihei Ueshiba have been the focus of much debate and many publications (e.g., Shioda 2013; Ueshiba 1991; Stevens 1997; Aikiweb discussion forums; Aikido Sangenkai website). It seems evident that he was a person much invested in Shintoism and incorporated several ideas transmitted through Ōmoto-kyō. Ueshiba's own writings have a definitively religious tone. For example, in 1934 he wrote the following:

> I become completely transparent, the opponent is transformed into their ethereal body and I am possessed by my guardian spirit. The other person disappears and I am just attacked by their hands and form. The more that the other person's Shugyo has progressed the greater their ethereal body and the guardian spirit, so I must also become greater. In any case, the state of my heart when facing an opponent is as transparent as a mirror, so in this state the other person's spirit is perfectly reflected. (Miura 2015.)

Representations of Morihei Ueshiba's life in publications authorized by Aikikai, especially (1984, 1991) by his son Kisshomaru Ueshiba (1921–1999), the second *Doshu* ('Master of the Way') of Aikikai, and others such as John Stevens (1997) bring forth *O-Sensei*'s alleged miraculous deeds

and great martial skills. Morihei Ueshiba is also generally portraited as a bearded, saint-like figure, whose photo can be found in Aikido dojos around the world. However, the vast majority of his direct, influential students seem to tell a story in which they barely understood *O-Sensei*'s religious speeches and were primarily interested of the physical part. A student of Morihei Ueshiba, Yasuo Kobayashi reflects on the topic:

> Well I didn't know about things such as the Kojiki, that was the problem. I was always eager for it to be over. There were some people who knew about those religious things but I didn't so I just focused on working out. I couldn't remember the names of all those gods. (Erard 2018.)

Hence, it seems as no surprise that as Aikido spread around the world it took on a variety of spiritual interpretations that could be condensed to the following: non-competition, ethics of non-violent solutions to conflict, and some more or less vague (from a philosophical perspective) ideas of harmony with others or the universe. It seems even the case that under the tutelage of Kisshomaru Ueshiba, explicit religious connotations of Aikido were toned down, perhaps to make the art more accessible and acceptable for international audiences. At the same time, it appears that a lot of ideals attached to Aikido practice in the West are somewhat exoticized and romanticized in their psychological nature. A lot of theories on life force *Ki,* for example, are less discussed in the Japanese texts. (Friedman 2005).

Organizationally, the world of Aikido is rather complex with several international organizations and numerous national federations. Globally, the largest Aikido branch is the Aikikai that relates to the Ueshiba family. The Aikikai Foundation (*Zaidan Hōjin Aikikai*) runs the Aikido World Headquarters (*Hombu Dojo*) in Tokyo, which is headed currently by the grandson of the founder, Moriteru Ueshiba (b. 1951). Its international arm is the International Aikido Federation, which has circa 250 affiliated federations around the world. There are also some other large Aikido organizations. The main ones are the Yoshinkan, founded by Gozo Shioda (1915–1994), Ki-Aikido, which emphasizes the strengthening of life energy, *Ki*, founded by Koichi Tohei (1920–2011) and Shodokan, partially inspired by Judo, founded by Kenji Tomiki (1900–1979). Shodokan is the only main Aikido style to include limited competition in its curriculum. What all styles have in common is a guided and collaborative training method that takes into account the level of the training partner. Much of the organizational complexity relates to master-student relationships, whereby followers of a particular Aikido *Sensei* ('teacher') or *Shihan* ('master instructor') tend to form their own organizations, so that there can be several Aikido federations in a single country – of the

Nordic countries, this is the case in Norway, where the dojos are split into two federations. For many, Aikido is also a business and the main source of personal income, which may create further tensions. The Nordic countries are exceptional to this federation-level splintering tendency, likely caused by state's sport subsidy policies as well as culture of volunteer work that will be discussed later in this chapter.

We see that Aikido and its ideas have spread around the world by five main mechanisms. First, the Aikikai and other Aikido organizations have sent numerous instructors – 'martial missionaries' – around the world to spread the art since the 1950s. Some of those individuals were remarkably successful, and founded their own dojos and federations. The Japanese headquarters kept control of the overseas teachers by demanding all higher grades to be kept under their license. For example, the Nordic Aikido federations still register and pay for all *dan* (black belt) grades to Japan. While this also created financial and other tensions between the Japanese headquarters and overseas teachers, it has been a significant unificatory mechanism. Second, many foreigners travelled to Japan to study Aikido, and returned to start dojos in their countries of origin. For example, the Frenchman Christian Tissier (b. 1951) trained for many years at the Aikikai *Hombu Dojo*, and is today one of the most prominent Aikido *Shihan's* in the world. The pioneering individuals then spread further the art in their own and neighboring countries.

Third, beside the sent instructors and Aikido pilgrims, several Japanese and other international migrants, often students and professionals, have played a key role in starting local clubs. For example, the NTNUI Aikido, Norway, got a boost by a visiting Japanese university professor (NTNUI Aikido n.d.), but likewise country internal migration has had a major role. Fourth, and more difficult to estimate, is the role of general public's interest towards Asian martial arts – where Aikido was one among many – that was fed by books, specialist magazines, media appearances, popular culture, and movies. For Aikido, a significant – though controversial – figure is that of movie actor star and Aikido teacher Steven Seagal (b. 1952), whose early movies, such as *Above the Law* (1988) and *Under Siege* (1992), helped to popularize Aikido. Based on numerous, but anecdotal, discussion with aikidokas, he is a person that everyone knowns, and has been a main motivator for many to start training in the first place.

Fifth, an even more difficult stream of influence to pin down, is the spread of Aikido-related ideas that have often been combined with other elements in different realms of life. Fox example, Aikido's non-violent 'philosophy is often seen to have a strong influence for the aikidokas' everyday life by therapeutic value (Tohei 1978; Dobson & Miller 1998; Foster 2015) and claimed

to enhance all kinds of skillsets, such as sports coaching (Antell 2014), and trumpet playing (Välimaa 2013). Aikido has also been utilized as an alternative education system (Chew 1995; Kroll 2008, 464–466; Depaus 2014; Bryant 2019; Gordon 2019; *Budo Accelerator* 2021), a creative leadership training method for corporations and the society (Clawson & Doner 1996; Pino 1998; Bradford 2011; *Aikido Extensions* 2021), a booster for entrepreneurship (Rudisill 2007), a way to rehabilitate war veterans (Lukoff & Strozzi-Heckler 2017), a tool for psychotherapists (Faggianelli & Lukoff 2006), and seen as a potential method to solve conflicts and crises for individuals and even in world politics (Martin 2004; Bryant 2019; Hagström & Bremberg 2022). These openings alone reveal something unique on the reception of this martial art: Aikido, for many practitioners, is a way of life, and a seemingly highly malleable yet potential way of life management. Even spiritual and religious practices have evolved around aikido, from an adaptation of Neo-Shintoism to other complex syncretic systems – including a mixture of Aikido and Kabbalah (Susman 2006). Most of these applications are in relatively stark contrast to typical Aikido training, which is a highly regulated and repetitive affair primarily focusing on physical exercise.

In sum, Aikido has become a quite well-known Japanese-origin martial art that has a following around the world. Its Japanese roots are upheld via active relationship to its Japanese parent organizations, via other transnational collaboration and ties, and an increasing global online presence, for example on YouTube. Among the martial arts, Aikido is known for its spirituality that inspired numerous individuals to create further activities in different realms of life that are somehow based on Aikido. Aikido's presence in the Nordic countries started at the turn of the 1960s and has currently a presence of some 250 dojos and an estimated 6,000 active practitioners.

Data and method

The data for this chapter was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary material for this study stems from interviews. We aimed at having one senior aikidoka from each of the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Aikido activity is more limited and recent in Iceland, and hence we left it out of the study. In addition to interview data, we made inquiries to Nordic federations on club and membership statistics, as well as information about the history of Aikido in each country. Finally, we used various kinds of printed and online material, as well as diverse academic and other literature on the topic.

For the interviews, we approached preselected senior Nordic aikidoka by email and invited them to join our study. Some declined, for a variety of reasons, mostly time issues, but eventually we gathered a group of four individuals who have trained Aikido from the 1970s. We ended with four male respondents, Urban Aldenklint (Sweden), Mouliko Halén (Norway), Petteri Silenius (Finland), and Ethan Weisgaard (Denmark), even though we also enquired women. All respondents are well known in their own countries as well as to some extent internationally. As having their identity anonymous would be difficult, we asked them from the beginning to be presented under their own name. Everyone has also read the manuscript and agreed upon their name being known to the reader with the understanding that the interpretations based on their sayings are those of the authors, and not necessarily shared by the individual in question.

We started by individual interviews in August 2021 and summed it up with a collective discussion in October 2021, as we felt having the informant interacting with each other might offer additional insights. We conducted the online interviews via Zoom, recorded them, and later transcribed the interviews. As the material is manageable we decided to use basic thematic content analysis in our study. Interview quotes are stylized for the purpose of readability, by removing repetitions, and conventions and grammar issues of spoken language. Next, we shall present the respondents of the study in the order they started Aikido. In the Nordic sphere, three of the respondents are related to Toshikazu Ichimura's (b. 1941) and one to Takeji Tomita's (b. 1942) Aikido legacy. All of them are influential teachers, affiliated with the Aikikai, the Aikido "mainline" organization.

Mouliko Halén (b. 1955, Sweden) started practicing Aikido in Sweden in 1973. He is the founder and chief instructor of Sunyata Aikido Dojo in Oslo, Norway, which he established in 1984. His main teachers are Yasuo Kobayashi (b. 1936) and his son Hiroaki Kobayashi, but he is also strongly influenced by Seishiro Endo (b. 1942). Halén holds the rank of 7th dan in Aikido. He also has a 3rd dan in Daito-ryu Aiki Jutsu, Roppokai, and 1st dan in Katori shintō-ryū. Halén has professional background in the military and has worked as a bodyguard, which gives him an additional understanding on self-defence scenarios.

Urban Aldenklint (b. 1954, Sweden) started practicing Aikido in 1977 at the Nakaima Aikido club. He studied Aikido with Toshikazu Ichimura and Kazuo Igarashi, also staying in Japan for a while. After getting back to Sweden in 1981 he founded Iyasaka Aikido Club in Stockholm with Ulf Linde, that became along with Göteborgs aikidoklubb the largest Aikido club in Sweden. Aldenklint holds the title of Shihan and 7th dan in Aikido and has traveled as a visiting teacher in different countries. He is also the singer and songwriter of the rock group Suburban.

Ethan Weisgard (b. 1957) was born in the USA, but moved to Denmark in 1969. He began his Aikido career under Takeji Tomita in 1976, and was associated with Copenhagen Aikido Club until 2003, when he founded his own Aiki Shuren Club in Copenhagen. Weisgard became a student of Morihiro Saito (1928–2002) and was his representative in Denmark, holding the 6th dan rank, and has covered what he learned of his time in Iwama as Saito's live-in-student in an instructional book. He has spent much time in Japan, and because of this he has also been working as a Japanese culture specialist, offering Japan Bridge seminar series. He is also a professional musician (drums and percussion) and a music teacher.

Petteri Silenius (b. 1964) began Aikido, in Budokwai Club in Turku, Finland, in 1978, and founded the Turku Aikikai in 1991. By professional training he is an artist. Silenius has authored the most popular Aikido book in Finland (Silenius 1991). Between 2008 and 2011 he lived in Greece, and after returning to Finland he has continued as the main instructor of Turku Aikikai. His main Aikido teachers have been Yasuo Kobayashi and Kazuo Igarashi, but he has also studied with Tetsutaka Sugawara (b. 1941) and Christian Tissier. He holds the title of Shihan and 7th dan in Aikido. In addition to Aikido, he has *kyoshi menkyo* teacher license in Tenshin shōden Katori shintō-ryū, the oldest surviving Japanese kenjutsu school, where he follows his Tetsutaka Sugawara lineage (Sugawara Sogo Budo Kenkyosho). This gives him additional awareness for Aikido weapon training.

As both authors are longtime aikidoka themselves, it is necessary to reflect on this issue too. Regarding substance, the benefit of the situation is obvious, as the authors have much emic knowledge of Aikido and martial arts culture more broadly, that makes it easier to understand the research context. Both have engaged to a lot of debates about budo culture, visited dojos and trained in several European countries, Australia, and USA. However, the issues debated were not generally those that would be discussed in the dojo settings that are known to us, which also strengthens our presupposition that explicitly religious and spiritual issues are not common topics of discussion among aikidokas. Emic position also provides some obstacles, including the ability to view from the outside. As both authors are also experienced researchers, we felt that there are potential benefits for the explanation and understanding of the Aikido culture. In terms of personal relations, Mr. Petteri Silenius is the Aikido teacher of both the authors, but we experienced no tensions or wishes to avoid some topics in this case, but were give free hands to proceed as we saw best. As Silenius authored the first full book on aikido and is one of the highest graded (7. dan Shihan) teachers in Finland, we felt his inclusion was important and easy to arrange.

A brief history and development of Aikido in the Nordic countries

Now we aim to illuminate about basic features of the history and spread of Aikido in the Nordic countries. The first appearance of Aikido in the Nordic countries was in in the 1960s. In 1961 a group of Swedes began Aikido based on knowledge from books and old videos, and soon developed contact with Japanese instructors in continental Europe (Stenudd 2010, 206–210). In 1964 an English student started Aikido at the Budokan Club in Copenhagen (Ichimura n.d.). A more organized activity began, when the Aikikai Hombu Dojo sent Toshikazu Ichimura to Sweden in 1966, and later Takeji Tomita (b. 1942) arrived via a private invitation to teach Aikido in Gothenburg in 1969. Both teachers were to play a central role in the spread of Aikido in the Nordics, and Ichimura was later Hombu Dojo's representative also for Denmark and Finland. Ichimura introduced even the Japanese martial art of sword drawing (Iaido) to the Nordic countries, so that in many places these two arts were taught in the same place. Tomita's influence was visible in Sweden and, especially, Denmark. Aikido began in Norway in the 1970s, and stayed mainly under influences from England at that time (Stenudd 2010, 212–232).

Swedish Aikido developed under Ichimura and Tomita, but there was dissatisfaction with the Japanese teachers due to their harsh training methods. Ichimura's senior student wrote him a letter in 1983 that eventually led to independence from his direct influence. Aldenklint reflects on the time:

> Ichimura left in 1986, but we broke our relations with him already in 1983. We could not accept his manners, he was treating people badly. In 1977 Kobayashi came to Finland, it was an eye-opener. He was then invited again. His and Igarashi's method of teaching was very different. It was a big thing.

In the 1980s Swedish Aikido divided into three camps, as Ki-Aikido arrived via the influence of Kenjiro Yoshigasaki (1951–2021), but they all remained under the same federation. Yoshigasaki influenced also Finland, so that Ki-Aikido started there as well. By the turn of the 2000s, Swedish aikidoka counted around 5,000, but it has now been reduced to some 3,000. There are about 100 Aikido clubs in Sweden, and several high-ranking Swedish Aikido Shihans. Swedish aikido is nationally organized via Swedish Budo & Martial Arts Confederation that is part of the Swedish Sports Confederation (Stenudd 2010, 206–234)

Danish Aikido began under the teaching a 3rd kyu Englishman, whose name is not available, in 1964, but became soon more connected to developments in Sweden via the influence of Ichimura (based in Stockholm/Uppsala) and Tomiki (based in Gothenburg). Gradually these influences become the two main branches of Aikido in Denmark and united as the Danish Aikido Federation first in 2005. (Fredriksberg Aiki Dojo n.d.). The first specialized Aikido club was the Copenhagen Aikikai founded in 1971 (Ichimura n.d.). Activities of Ki-Aikido started in 1987, also relating to Kenjiro Yoshigasaki. Even Tendoryu Aikido is practiced in Denmark with the first club founded in 2000. Altogether there are some 40 Aikido clubs in Denmark with more than 400 aikidoka.

Aikido came to Finland via Sweden, as a Finnish university student studied the art and helped to create the bond between the countries. In 1970, Aikido was Ichimura held demonstrations in Turku and Helsinki, and club activities began in 1971 in Helsinki and Pietarsaari, soon followed by other cities. The activity was immediately organized into a sports federation, Finland Aikikai, which has been a member of the International Aikido Federation (I.A.F.) since 1976. After Ichimura's return to Japan in 1986, the development of Finnish Aikido has been supported especially by Yasuo Kobayashi and Kazuo Igarashi. Ichimura's legacy continues even in Denmark and Sweden through those clubs that follow his main teacher's, Shoji Nishio's (1927–2005) Aikido style. Today, there are about 70 aikido clubs in Finland with under 1800 aikidoka. The vast majority of them belong to the Finland Aikikai, but there are a few Ki-Aikido clubs, and single Yoshinkan and Shodokan dojos. Finland Aikikai is a member of the Finnish Olympic Committee, the umbrella organization of Finnish sports (Levy 2006 & 2010; NN).

The key influence of Norwegian Aikido came initially from the UK, in particular via Minoru Kanetsuka (1939–2019). The first club was Tromsø Aikidoklubb founded in 1977. Norwegian Aikido is divided into two organizations, the larger Norwegian Aikido Federation (18 clubs) and smaller Aikikan Norway (3 clubs). In addition, there is a small, recent Ki-Aikido group. Altogether there a bit more than 400 aikidoka in Norway. Aikido clubs may individually join the Norges Kampsportforbund, which is part of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports.

Even though Aikido has stayed comparatively uniform in organizational terms in the Nordic countries, the practitioners overtime became divided into followers of certain Aikido instructors, but most of them have stayed under Aikikai. The main organizational separation took place in the early 1980s, as Ki-Aikido's European representative Keniro Yoshigasaki gained a following in Sweden and Finland. Ki-Aikido's birth was related to Aikikai Hombu Dojo's chief instructor Koichi Tohei's

resignation in 1974, whereafter he founded Ki-Aikido. Yoshigasaki was sent to Europe in 1977. The other main global Aikido organizations, Yoshinkan and Shodokan both have one dojo each in Finland. The Finnish Yoshinkan dojo was founded by a Russian immigrant and the Shodokan dojo by a native Finn with a Judo background. The early influences of Ichimura and Tomiki are still visible, but today's variety of influences is quite broad in all of the countries. Sweden and Finland stand out as the largest Aikido countries in the Nordics.

For most aikidoka their own Aikido club, dojo and community are centres of their practice. Additionally, it is customary that people participate in weekend seminars of visiting domestic or international instructors. The aikidoka who treat it as a hobby visit the dojo a couple times per week. The most dedicated usually seek to train several times a week, even daily if possible, and actively participate in seminars of at least the key master instructor the dojo follows. Those most deeply engaged may even visit and stay at the master instructor's home dojo, if that is possible. Based on our own experience, it is quite common that many aikidoka have at least some interests to Aikido literature, Japanese culture and martial arts films. Many have also trained other martial arts at some point of their lives or still do. While the great majority focus to their home dojo and the occasional weekend seminars, it is also possible to visit other Aikido dojos.

Discussing the spiritual and religious aspects of Aikido

Let us now move to the question about role of spirituality and religion in Aikido. To approach this issue, it is telling to look at how the interviewed senior teachers see the dojo – the main site of Aikido training. Most Aikido practice takes place in a local training hall. The training takes ideally place in a purpose-built *dojo* ('place of the Way') designed for safe practice with Japanese elements, including tatami mats, training accessories and decorations. The *dojo* has elements of a Shinto shrine structure: a *shomen* (front) with *kamiza* (place of honour) and *kamidana* (small Shinto shrine), and some associated behavioural rules. For example, the *shomen* is bowed to in the beginning and at the end of training. (Lowry 2006.) However, in many cases people train in public sport facilities, schools and martial arts gyms, where they share the space with other sports, but the imagined dojo structure still affects spatial usage of the room, including the direction of bowing. The clubs and dojos are usually run either privately or by an association. In the Nordic countries the Aikido clubs are almost entirely organized as voluntary associations.

For a standard Aikido class of 60 or 90 minutes, the aikidoka dress up in white training costume (*gi*) and, additionally for the more experienced, black or dark blue *hakama* trousers. After bowing and warm up exercises, the instructor (*sensei*) shows a technique, which the aikidoka do usually in pairs for some time while the instructor is circulating the class and giving advice whereafter they are shown a new technique. Bowing is a key feature of transition done as a class, between training partners and to the classes' instructor. Instructions are given in the vernacular with extensive usage of Aikido specific Japanese vocabulary. Men and women train together, but children may have their own classes. Based on our experience in different countries and dojos, women constitute usually up to a third of aikidoka.

All respondents have their own dojos, at times shared with other arts, but nevertheless custom made for martial art training. As Petteri Silenius points out, having primarily taught Aikido in Lutheran (Finland) and Greek Catholic (Greece) country, "the dojo is a very deep concept. I could think that is resembles a church for a Christian. It is a place where you decide to go, sort of get silent, serious and start working to develop yourself." Ethan Weisgard also emphasizes the resemblance to a sacral place:

> Dojo is the place to train in the Way. Both physical and spiritual. Almost like a temple. You leave the world behind, enter another world. Traditional dojo enables to sweep and clean, before and after. You clean sweat but also symbolically. You have the etiquette that belongs to what you train.

Similarly, Halén gives a deep significance for the dojo: "It means a lot. You create a place where you practice the Way. - - It's a serious thing." Aldenklint sees a difference in context:

> It's the place where you do Aikido. Japanese old style is like *misogi* [ritual purification], a place for mental and physical health. In Sweden in 2021, I don't do that stuff much. Most dojos are public, and there's no chance to have the dojo feeling. Keep it clean, nice and safe. Both mind and body.

During our interviews, discussion clearly pointed out the dojo to be a place of special meaning and distinct behaviour. Even as it was noted by several that many times it is not possible to have a purpose-built training hall, it is seen as important that some basic features of dojo behaviour are kept, including bowing. This idea seems to be shared internationally (see Reguli et al. 2016.)

For an outsider who views Aikido and is unfamiliar view Japanese etiquette, two issues usually stand out, based on the discussions the authors have had throughout the years: the fluidity of technical movements, and a great deal of bowing, including utterances of Japanese words. As Weisgard notes, the details of dojo behaviour vary somewhat between dojos, also in Japan: "Rituals are done slightly differently everywhere. Small variations. Iwama has a Shinto shrine. The claps, Iwama tradition two claps, bow, clap. Hombu has *kamiza* but not *kamidana*." We authors can also confirm differences in dojo ritual behaviour with our experience of visiting nearly one hundred dojos in Finland and abroad. The basic custom is to bow at entry, to the teacher, to shomen and to your training partner. The main variety comes from bowing standing or seated (the so called seiza posture, where one sits on one's knees) and on what occasions you bow to your training partner.

Bowing also implies differences that can be understood in religious terms, as some dojos – including Weisgard's – have a small Shinto shrine (*kamidana*) attached to the front wall (*shomen*) of the training hall. The beginning and end bows of the training include sequences or bowing and clapping hands that originates from appreciating the *kami-sama* of a Shinto shrine. Based on the discussions we have had with Aikidoka throughout the years, bowing for most aikidoka is simply part of the art and a way to focus to physical training, we are also aware that for some Aikido shihans and their students the connection to Morihei Ueshiba's religious legacy is real. For example, students of Michio Hikitsuchi (1923–2004) have kept these Shinto traditions close to Aikido practice. Mouliko Halén, who has also experience of international teaching and a variety of religious contexts and conflicts in dojo settings, notes that this can be a problem in some cases: "Clapping is about spirits, Shamanism. It could be a problem for Christian or Muslim trainers. The O-Sensei photo could be a problem too." While most custom-made dojos include a picture of Morihei Ueshiba – at times also some other main Aikido instructor next to the founder – as part of the *shomen* arrangements, one the authors visited a dojo in Istanbul that was lacking both *shomen* bows and the photo of the founder. Halén sees such issues as natural, and Aikido "should be adapted to the country where you are."

The picture of Morihei Ueshiba represents a symbolic relationship to Aikido's origins. Weisgard notes that "The symbolic… O-Sensei is the symbol of our aikido. Also the senior are bowing forward, to something that is higher than you. What came before. It is an important symbolic ritual." The symbolism of *shomen* and the image is also reflected by Halén: "I am all for a center in the room. The respect point, that is ok for me. I am not so much open for shrines. In Japan I do as they do." Cultural adaptation also relates to the way one talks about the roots of ritualistic

arrangement. Aldenklint states that “I try to avoid explaining. Swedish people are not that much into religion, so the more we talk about that, the more people take distance.” Another form of adaptation relates to practical issues, and perhaps also restates the specificity of custom-made dojos. Petteri Silenius tells that

> I do not have a problem if O-Sensei’s picture is somewhere else in the dojo. A calligraphy or flower arrangement are also fine. - - If I teach my classes in a school gym, I do not necessarily drag O-Sensei’s image with me. Then we don’t need the *shomen* bow, we do not need to bow to the basketball rack.

Despite the obvious historical linkages to Morihei Ueshiba’s personal religiosity in the form of Omoto-kyo neo-Shintoism and *kotodama* (recited ‘soul words’) practice, as well as the dojo’s environment based on a Shinto shrine structure, all of the respondents have great reservations for linking Aikido with organized religion in and of itself. Halén describes his relationship as follows: “I see some people try to follow that kind of path. I see O-Sensei as a soldier, a fighter. And then he changed, through training and the lost war. They capitulated, after being ready to fight to the end. Some people do peace and love. I am more a warrior way.” Silenius takes up the potential controversiality that bringing religion into training can create:

> I am of the opinion that religion should not be taken up in today’s Aikido. - - We could talk about spirituality. Aikido is that kind of activity to which you can put any religion into. We had some problems in the 1980s, as Ichimura Sensei converted to sectarian Christianity and talked about the Bible in training. - - I think it is everyone’s personal issue what people follow, there is freedom of religion.

Likewise, Weisgard adds that “Aikido is not a religion, but something you can put to any religion”. In a way, all respondents are following their own Aikido teachers’ approach – with the exception of Ichumura, that is – as none of them have provided explicit religion as part of basic Aikido teaching. Rather, they all take distance from ‘religion’, though they all have much more approval for ‘spirituality’, as is customary in today’s West in general (Heelas 2008). However, whatever the content of this ‘spirituality’ is, remains largely unstated in the context of these interviews, and thereby based on individual interests and interpretation. In querying their own religious or spiritual leanings, all of them proclaimed to be spiritual, both individually and during the collective interview session, but nor seemingly interested to talk about it, especially together. Part of the hesitancy may also be related to personal encounters with numerous students. As Silenius tells, “I

can see [some] people are looking for some kind of prophet." Obviously, with these kind of expectations, experienced teachers can feel that explicit religious elements may create problems for them, so they are better to be avoided.

Views on Aikido's transplantation to the Nordic countries

As cultural practices move place, they are prone to change and adapt to a new cultural setting. We asked our respondents whether Aikido has changed in its transplantation into the Nordic societies. To understand the background for this discussion, it is necessary to know that in the Nordic countries Aikido has organizationally often situated among combat sports, and in Finland and Sweden the national Aikido federations are part of national sport federations. In Norway, individual clubs may join national sport federations to receive various benefits. Much sporting activity in the Nordic countries is based on voluntary work and organized as voluntary associations. These associations are subject to general sport regulations, including anti-doping actions and different qualification systems, some of which may seem out of place for a physical activity that does not include a competitive element. Local Aikido associations may in many places also apply for municipal and other funding that ties them to local regulations on various issues. While the culture of voluntary work has a number of benefits, mainly in terms of relatively small training fees in many places, voluntarism provides a challenge for professionalizing Aikido. Sometimes participants may not wish to pay properly for their Aikido, and thus professional teachers can hardly make their living. In the joint discussion Aldenklint and Silenius made similar observations on the topic.

> We have sport federations and associations. We get money from governments. But in other areas they turn to pro, money. Even in a small city here you get good support, you can do it for fun. Elsewhere they think about money - - We are quite unique! I have travelled, including Eastern Europe. Everywhere it's commercial. Here we have sport clubs. We have some of the highest grades in Europe, but only a few professional teachers. Here it's free, but difficult to do professionally. (Aldenklint)

> I agree about money. When I lived in Athens almost four years, I realized the difference. After people got their 1st or 2nd dan, they started their dojos, and didn't have a federation. (Silenius)

Close co-operation with other sport organisations supports the spread of educational, organizational and other elements that are alien to the historical roots of Aikido. For example, the relationship between a teacher and a student creates a personal bond with mutual obligations in Japan, whereas sport instructors are increasingly seen as service providers in the Nordic countries. Similarly, as the Japanese teaching methods in martial arts have been focused on repetition and learning through copying without questioning, the Nordic educational ideal approaches focus more on verbalization, communication and more varied methods of learning skills. Our respondents have noted these differences and see advantages in both:

> The Japanese way is stealing the technique. Some elements in that are good, you need to be sharp and observe carefully. It takes time, you fail, then rebuild. The Western elements combined, first explain then do. You could end up spoon-feeding, and that not good either. (Weisgard)

> It's important to keep the Japanese culture in. - - We think what they bring, and somehow adjust this to our culture. I have tested this, sometimes it works, sometimes you throw things away. The pedagogical side is very important for Western people, sometimes it goes too far. People say they understand, but when you see them doing… (Silenius)

The teachers were uniform in their vision of Aikido that the cultural and teaching connection to Japan is important, but they also praised certain elements of Nordic educational practices. One is not as tightly connected a specific teacher, but may also visit other dojos and learn from other instructors. As Halén notes: "One of the better things in Scandinavia is the openness for communications. You can visit others without making a problem. - - Scandinavia has added good things, such as pedagogics, and explanations." Aldenklint adds that "Swedish or Nordic people are mixing the Japanese way with our tradition, and that's good." The respondents have all had the opportunity to follow Aikido's change and its adaptation to the Nordic countries over four decades. For them one needs to adapt Japanese practices to local and national circumstances, while trying to keep the connection to Japan alive. However, for Silenius change is also a fundamental feature in itself:

> Aikido has changed very much. You cannot just take something from one culture to another and live like that. Otherwise you end up in a sectarian situation. Some people do that and it becomes very secretive. The art needs to change with times and cultures, if it wants stay alive.

The respondents considered cultural, pedagogical and other adaptations of Aikido as natural consequences of the art's establishment in the Nordic countries. In that sense it seems evident that Aikido has elements of a hybrid cultural formation (Pieterse 1995) based on cultural and state's sport policy coercive and normative isomorphic pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, even though our respondents discussed to some extent about the impact globally mediated cultural flows, our material leaves that part of our initial interest unanswered. We presume, though, that a closer scrutiny and a larger sample would highlight the ways in which several spiritual movements have further developed the spiritual dimension found in Aikido, because based on interviews it remains largely as an individual interest to craft one's ideas on that.

Conclusion and discussion

In this chapter we focused on the experiences of four senior aikidoka from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, inquiring about the role of religion/spirituality in Aikido as well as about the history and cultural transplantation of Aikido into the Nordic sphere. Aikido is a Japanese martial art that has gained popularity around the world and is practiced in all the Nordic countries. Aikido is a mid-size martial art in terms of its following with an estimated 250 Aikido clubs and 6,000 contemporary (2022) practitioners in the Nordic countries, though current figures are still low due to the long-term effects of COVID-19 pandemic that hit hard on many sports requiring physical contact indoors. The early legacy of Toshikazu Ichimura and Takeji Tomita still play a role on what Aikido teachers are today popular, but the field has grown increasingly diverse since the 1990s. Norway's Aikido history is more closely related to England. Sweden and Finland have the largest Aikido following.

While the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, was a highly religious person with deep immersion into various Shinto and esoteric Buddhism practices, current Aikido has only vaguely kept to this part of its heritage. Any Aikidoka interested in the history of Aikido know about this heritage, as it's discussed in most literature found on the art, but according to our respondents, as well as our own experience of Aikido, there is only small part of Aikido practice that directly relates Shintoism. The most obvious one is the role the dojo, the training hall for Japanese martial arts that has many similarities to Shinto shrine structure still affecting the behaviour of contemporary, non-Shinto aikidoka. While the general bowing and other ritual behaviour – common to Japanese culture in

general – is seen as integral to Aikido practice, we found among our respondents different attitudes as well as practices in relation to it.

The respondents view on Aikido as a ‘religion’ was critical, and not seen as necessary, but regarding ‘spirituality’, the relationship was much positive. All respondents agree that Aikido can have a spiritual dimension. Even though the content of Aikido’s spirituality was not discussed in deeper detail, it also became clear it is not a central issue of actual Aikido instruction, but rather something that aikidoka may pursue on their own. Spirituality seemed to refer to commonly known Aikido principles, including non-competitiveness, non-violence, unification of body and mind, and a vague notion of harmony with the others and the universe. Respondents seemed to agree, however, on the issue that Aikido is primarily a martial art, and that any spiritual aspects should be seen in relation to that.

The Japanese origins of Aikido were appreciated by the respondents, but their application in the Nordic countries was seen both in practice and principle to include adaptation into a new environment. Educational changes were pointed out by all respondents, including verbal instruction, as well as a changed role in student-teacher relationships. Japanese models in these were not negatively judged, but rather seen as often only partially functional in the Nordic context. For our respondents, Japan’s role as the centre of Aikido was not contested. A major feature of Nordic Aikido is that it is primarily conducted through volunteers that receive public funding to keep the costs of practice low. Also volunteering in administrative work as well as instruction is common. This makes it difficult to have a professional career as an Aikido instructor, in contrast many other Western countries, where Aikido clubs are run as private enterprises. The future of Aikido in the Nordic countries seems organizationally secured, but it has an aging participant-base, so it remains to be seen how that develops in the future.

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