

The Way of the (Imagined) Sword: martial heritage perceptions among kendo practitioners

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**ORIGINAL PAPER****Abstract**

Contemporary *kendo* (Japanese fencing) is a product of Imperial Japan and the post-WWII era. With its expansion to the West and democratic reformation, people from Europe and America engaged with its cultural heritage. However, there are few studies characterizing their kendo heritage notions. Hence, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted to *kendoka* (kendo practitioners) residing in Spain asking them about aspects constituting “correct kendo”. By employing a Grounded Theory approach and open coding, four sub-categories emerged: ritual demarcation, material identity, traditional past, and kendistic identity. The main findings on these were that following protocol is fundamental to maintaining harmony and respect among practitioners; that the full uniform projected an idea of the samurai past as traditional, Japanese and value-charged; that ceremonies and ritual situate *kendoka* in a non-mundane context of the practice; that training implements invite to think of them as fitting for kendo and developing a “kendistic habitus”; and that kendo aesthetics and morals made it distinct from “mere sports”. Thus, both historical and mythical aspects of kendo are thought and reproduced by *kendoka* through intellectual and corporal means, then deriving in an embodied heritage that has to be interpreted by practitioners to manifest kendo's legacy.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; *budo*; material culture; physical culture; sociology; sports; Japan.

El Camino de la Espada (Imaginada): percepciones sobre el patrimonio marcial entre practicantes de kendo

Resumen

El *kendo* (esgrima japonesa) contemporáneo es un producto del Japón imperial y de la era post Segunda Guerra Mundial. Tras su expansión a occidente y transformación democrática, las personas en Europa y América entraron en contacto con su patrimonio cultural. Sin embargo, pocos estudios han caracterizado en profundidad sus concepciones patrimoniales. Así, se decidió realizar 30 entrevistas semi-estructuradas a *kendoka* (practicantes de kendo) residentes en España sobre aspectos que constituirían el “kendo correcto”. Utilizando la Teoría Fundamentada y codificación abierta, se encontraron cuatro sub-categorías: demarcación ritual, identidad material, pasado tradicional, e identidad kendística. Los principales hallazgos sobre estas fueron que seguir el protocolo es fundamental para mantener la armonía y el respeto hacia otros practicantes; que el uniforme proyecta una idea del pasado samurái como tradicional, japonés y cargado de valores; que las ceremonias y rituales situarían a los *kendoka* en un contexto extra-mundano de práctica; que los implementos de entrenamiento invitarían a pensarse como adecuados para el kendo y promotores de un “habitus kendístico”; y que la estética y la moral del kendo son pensadas y reproducidas por los *kendoka* mediante medios intelectuales y corporales, derivando en un patrimonio

O Caminho da Espada (Imaginada): percepções da herança marcial entre praticantes de kendo

Resumo

O *kendo* (esgrima japonesa) contemporâneo é um produto do Japão Imperial e da era pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial. Após sua expansão para o Ocidente e sua transformação democrática, povos na Europa e na América entraram em contato com sua herança cultural. No entanto, poucos estudos caracterizaram profundamente suas concepções de herança. Assim, decidiu-se conduzir 30 entrevistas semiestruturadas com *kendoka* (praticantes de kendo) residentes na Espanha sobre aspectos que constituem o “kendo correto”. Utilizando a Teoria Fundamentada e codificação aberta, quatro subcategorias foram identificadas: demarcação ritual, identidade material, passado tradicional e identidade kendística. As principais conclusões sobre estas foram que seguir o protocolo é fundamental para manter a harmonia e o respeito pelos outros praticantes; que o uniforme projeta uma ideia do passado samurai como tradicional, japonês e carregado de valores; que cerimônias e rituais colocam o *kendoka* em um contexto de prática sobrenatural; que os instrumentos de treinamento convidam o indivíduo a se considerar apropriados para o kendo e promotores de um “habitus kendístico”; e que a estética e a moral do kendo são concebidas e reproduzidas pelos *kendokas* por meios intelectuais e físicos, resultando em uma herança

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Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; *budo*; cultura física; cultura material; deporte; sociología; Japón.

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Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; *budô*; cultura física; cultura material; esporte; sociologia; Japão.

1. Introduction

As for other instances of culture, the study of heritage can be applied to physical activity and physical culture (Park et al., 2018, Ramshaw 2023). “Cultural heritage” refers to the symbolism of a cultural corpus, which includes practices usually governed by ritual rules, which transmit values or conduct norms by repetition (Marsal, 2012). Cultural heritage includes both the material (tangible) and immaterial (intangible) (Díaz Cabeza, 2010). The former refers to objects physically existing in a particular space, of a certain material, form, and significance to a particular social context and time (Maroevic, 1998). Conversely, the latter alludes to anonymous creations of a people, which constitute cultural traditions originated communally, following distinct ways of saying and doing, transcending and becoming part of its original historical moment, crystallising as symbol of that culture rooted in their historical memory (Díaz Cabeza, 2010). This distinction, nevertheless, has been considered by some authors as arbitrary and artificial (Lo Iacono, 2019; Maroevic, 1998) since arguably there is no form of heritage that is not represented or displayed in some manner physically (even ideas themselves depend on a body that can interpret them; Skounti, 2008), hence all heritage being ultimately tangible to some extent (Naguib, 2013; Ramshaw, 2019). However, such a differentiation made and expanded by UNESCO in 2003 (2024) regarding the scope of intangible cultural heritage and the need for its protection following and complementing its previous convention on cultural and natural heritage (1972), can allow for a greater scope of the concept of “cultural heritage”, which is its intended connotation in this article.

In this vein, heritage is also continuously and actively recreated and negotiated depending on political, cultural and present-day necessities, defining what is “heritagizable” or not (Park et al., 2018; Smith, 2011). This last idea means that the immaterial part of heritage is based on values and interpretations that can be ascribed to objects, traditions and rituals, hence further reifying and legitimating or not statements about past eras (Ramshaw, 2017; Subercaseaux, 2012), providing a sense of identity and continuity (Marsal, 2012; Park et al., 2018; Smith, 2011) through their “supports” (concept borrowed from common Latin American art parlance).

Thus, in the specific context of sports a “history” represents the official discourse, and “myth”, the stories regarding the past (Hill, 2012), which are not necessarily coincidental with institutional and non-institutional definitions of heritage (Marsal, 2012). Regardless, the notion of “myth” as one of the supports for heritage, represents stories that pass on cardinal ideas about the present in relation to the past, thus being “ideological” in the sense of representing “a particular vision of an individual or group and their place in an evolving historical process” (Hill, 2012, pp. 36-37). In this context, the idea of “myth” can be applied to the field of martial arts (Benesch, 2020; González de la Fuente & Niehaus, 2020; Moenig et al., 2023; Lachina, 2018), usually associated with East Asian fighting activities, and often related to self-cultivation and mediums for educational, spiritual, mystical, religious, ethical and philosophical development based on ideas and doctrines from East Asia (Cynarski et al., 2005; Figueiredo, 2009; Moenig et al. 2023).

“Budo” (“the way of the warrior”) corresponds to the contemporary martial disciplines (*gendai-budo*) that were developed after the Meiji period (1868 to 1912) from previous martial techniques and schools referred as *ko-budo* (meaning “old budo”) or *ko-ryu* (“old schools”) respectively (Bennett, 2018), which were gathered under the term of *bujutsu* (“the techniques of the warrior”) until its rebranding as “budo” pushed by Jigoro Kano, the founder of judo, to emphasise spirituality over applied combat techniques (Bennett, 2015; Lachina, 2018; Moenig & Kim, 2018), in the context of ever-growing Japanese militarism and nationalism (Benesch, 2020; Tuckett, 2016). During this period martial arts became a symbol of imperial ideology (Bennett, 2015; Benesch, 2020; Filipovic, A. & Jovanović, S., 2018), with a strict involvement of the Japanese state (Lachina, 2018). Elements such as saluting the national flag, swearing alliance to the country, militaristic training methods (i.e., forming in line and yelling when answering) were incorporated into martial arts



training (Moenig et al., 2023). Samurai culture was made part of Japanese culture, even though not more than 6% of Japan's population was samurai before the abolishment of class distinctions in 1869 (Bennett, 2018).

What is more, this “samurai” spirit was presented as distinctly Japanese, which was in line with the promoted nationalistic discourse of *nihonjinron* or, unique and un-translatable Japanese ideas, customs and concepts, i.e., Japanese exceptionalism (Córdoba Arroyo, 2019; Dale, 1986). Hence, this invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1984) would not be challenged until the defeat of Japan during World War II, and the subsequent occupation of its territory by Allied forces, which would the ban and then reformulate budo around democratic values (Bennett, 2015; Benesch, 2020). Thus, budo became more strongly associated with the development of spiritual and humanistic values, turning more ritualised and, to different degrees, adopting sportified methods of combat (Donohue, 1990; Lachina, 2018).

One of the most representative disciplines of this transition is *kendo* (“the way of the sword”), which was derived from the standardisation of *kenjutsu* (“skills of the sword”) during the late 19th to the early 20th century, but would not take its contemporary shape until after the ban on martial arts was lifted by Allied authorities, and the restoration of the All Japan Kendo Federation in 1952 (Bennett, 2015; Rafolt, 2014). In its present format, kendo aims at “forging” a strong-minded person through rigorous and intense training in the principles of use of the *katana* or Japanese sabre (Bennett, 2015; Lishka, 1978; Salmon, 2013). Hence, *kendoka* (kendo practitioners) are taught to apply such principles by using a *shinai* (bamboo sword) striking designated areas onto the opponents *bogu* (protective armour), while dressing a *keikogi* (combat jacket) and *hakama* (wide trousers/chaps), and additionally practising *kata* (pre-defined sequences) with a *bokuto* (wooden sword) (Salmon, 2013; Wallian & Bride, 2014).

In 2018 kendo was practised by around 7-8 million people around the world (1.5 million in Japan) (Lachina, 2018). Hence, consistently with seminal work by Gim (1998) and Molle (2010), where non-Eastern practitioners tend to look for self-development, quasi-religious experiences, enlightenment, and a general idea of understanding “Asian cultures” more closely, authors such as Iwamoto and collaborators (2018) have explored what notions are most associated with kendo by practitioners in the UK and U.S, noting that discipline, mental training and skill acquisition are most relevant, as well as suggesting that experiencing Japanese culture is also a motivation. Similarly, Roffredi (2017) found that it has been crucial for the development of kendo outside Japan to reify its identity as “authentically Japanese”, by adapting as minimally as possible to local contexts and culture in order attract international students, hence offering the practice of a very spiritual and uncommon activity. However, Maekawa (2013) indicates that while the Orientalist bias in kendo is certainly attractive and motivating among non-Japanese *kendoka*, some of them also manifest inspiration after following stories of Western fantasy and science fiction; where practitioners also reflect on their own identity as a self that commits a foreign discipline that generates mixed feelings of sameness and otherness at the same time. Finally, Chávez Hernández (2022; 2025) explores how kendo is taught and adapted to the context of Spain, finding that while the same concepts are communicated by corporeal and conceptual means, these are expected to be adapted depending on the current physical, developmental and intellectual situation of practitioners, and that the transculturation of this *do* is layered by linguistic, motivational, pedagogical and hierarchical adaptations in reference to its original Japanese counterpart, seemingly and partially depending on how closely guided by Japanese instructors kendo activities have been developed. This, nevertheless, leads to the question of how specifically *kendoka* abroad relate to a cultural heritage that has been brought from the opposite side of the world, that is, how *kendoka* describe and appropriate the kendo “myth” and symbols represented and enacted through their supports?

2. Methodology

The following is the result of the author's ongoing ethnographic doctoral work in the city of Madrid (Spain), as a Chilean student at one local dojo. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted to *kendoka* based in Spain from the 2nd of February to the 18th of June of 2023, five of them face-to-face and the remaining 25 via Zoom. The participants were classified in three equal groups: the first group was “novices”, who held no grade up to first *kyu* (beginner ranks), the second group

was “intermediate”, who held first dan to second *dan* (advanced ranks), and “advanced”, who were kendoka from third dan up. The interview guide was developed after initial findings of a previous phase of participant observation (Chávez Hernández, 2022, 2025), following a qualitative, exploratory, non-experimental, descriptive, and sequential research design.

Hence, the general topic of the interview was identifying the kendoka’s perceptions on the elements that appeared to be constituent of the idea of “correct kendo”. The first topic was socio-demographic questions and previous martial experience. Then participants were asked about the concepts of the adaptation of exercises in kendo, the role of classmates in training, cultural transmission, the role of repetition, the materialness of kendo, pedagogics through classmates, and corporal-mental monism. As for intermediate and advanced practitioners specifically, the category of the role of the body was added between the role of repetition and materialness. All of the questions, categories and interview guides themselves were reviewed by an expert in sociological martial arts research (PhD in Sport Science and university professor), and were pre-tested with participants who were not part of the eligible sample, but were Spanish-speaking kendoka nonetheless.

The participants were contacted by convenience and snow-ball sampling, and given an Informed Consent form to read and sign, explaining the purpose, scope and limitations of the research, and the protection of their personal identities with fictional names in order to comply with the Spanish Data Protection Act (*Ley 3/2018*). 22 participants were of Spanish nationality, two from Italy, and six from Latin America. The age average was 39.6 years old, being the youngest 17 years old and 61 the eldest. Since the youngest participant was a minor at the time of interview, he was given an assent form to sign, and a consent form authorising his participation was given to his legal guardian. Of the total of 30 participants, eight identified themselves as female, and 22 as male. On average, participants have been practising kendo for 11.8 years, being a little over 1 year in the case of the most novice, and 30 years as for the most veteran. As for rank, the lowest grade was fourth kyu and the highest, sixth dan. Additionally, 13 of the participants mentioned having practised another martial art or combat sport previously to practising kendo, while the other 17 did not. However, when asked if they currently practised another martial art or combat sport other than kendo, only 11 kendoka did parallel training with another discipline.

The data was transcribed manually by the researcher using the website *OTranscribe* and the Linux application *gtranscribe* v.0.11, and as a test five of the interviews were transcribed using the A.I. web tool of *Speechmatics*, which had to be manually corrected still since the transcriptions were mostly inaccurate. Subsequently, the transcription of the interviews was analysed using the open qualitative software Qualcoder v.3.5 and LibreOffice Calc v.24.2.7.2, using the operative system Kubuntu v.24.04. The Straussian Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) approach was used in order to analyse the data: the transcriptions of the interviews were divided into small hermeneutic units that were assigned a tag (open coding), then these tags were grouped into coherent and identifiable concepts (axial coding), and then these concepts were lastly combined into distinct and robust categories (theoretical integration), which were later contrasted to the author’s previous research, and literature (Holt, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Hence, six and eight categories were identified from females and males respectively, yet only the male category of “Heritage Attributions” will be described and contextualised in the following four topics that is composed of, since it is the one most distinctively and directly related to kendo as a form of heritage (females did not tend to explicitly mention aspects of kendo history nor heritage, but mostly focused on contemporary kendo culture and social bonding; yet these aspects go far beyond the scope of the present work).

3. Findings

3.1. Ritual demarcation

There are aspects considered as “ceremonial” that are deemed valuable to kendo. For one part, it is considered that ceremonial acts make kendoka act coordinately. This coordination is expressed, for instance, through clothing: the way of putting the uniform on a specific sequence that has to be followed as part of kendo practice, such as putting on the hakama in a specific order. Additionally, ceremonies are also considered to add an element of discipline and order, which, nevertheless, would not be transcendental to developing a technically correct kendo, notes one of the participants. By contrast, it is mentioned that apparently Japanese people belong to a society of



extended regulations and that, in such a context, they would have ceremonies “for pretty much everything”. In the same vein, it is stated that not following the ritual of putting on the uniform sequentially, for example, would not constitute practising kendo but another discipline, hence suggesting some degree of status or distinction from other arts when doing so as explained by Ramshaw (2019). Hence, one of the interviewees says:

(...) I don't know, I have heard many times that kendo starts and ends when you go out [the *dojo*]. And about practising these little rituals, even if you don't have them to a high esteem, or maybe you don't see the point in them, maybe it comes (the meaning). Maybe a third kyu doesn't... enters and bows, they don't see it as a 5th dan [would], but even then I think it helps to enter a certain kind of mental state (Mu, 47 y/o, 3rd dan).

On the other hand, practitioners do explicitly allude to the concept of “ritual”, which is characterised as a series of actions where they display respect to the context of practice. Thus, when entering the *dojo*, bowing and using terms in Japanese, practitioners would be placing themselves in a context that constantly reminds them where they are (i.e., a kendo *dojo*):

When you enter the *dojo*, by bowing, you enter a different space. It is a space, well, from a point of view a little mystic, a sacred place, right? A space that is not the same outside as inside (Mo, 54 y/o, 1st dan).

Precisely, besides its symbolical implications (Bennett, 2016; Donohue, 1999), etiquette in kendo has been recognised as the respect of internal hierarchies in the specific scenario of kendo and how these structure the social relationships, behaviour and overall learning possibilities of practitioners, as being placed lower, equal or higher to other fellow kendoka conditions what is “correct” and “incorrect” regarding their relation to techniques, spatial positioning, and the responsibilities towards the rest of the class (Bennett, 2016; Chávez Hernández, 2025; Cho, 2022; Donohue, 1990; Sylvester, 2015).

In the context of the interviews, etiquette or *reiho* was considered a consubstantial part of kendo practice. It is established that etiquette is most evidently performed in different ways to show respect to instructors, fellow practitioners or the adversary. Recognising this social demarcation is considered to be transcendental to a kendoka's behaviour and outlook (Donohue, 1999; Sato, 2011). In this regard one of the participants mentioned that this was common to other disciplines, such as taekwondo, where courtesy was maintained despite engaging in constant contextualised physical confrontation. What is more, this reciprocal respect was even considered the “essence” or “soul” of kendo. As one senior practitioner puts it: *a samurai is courteous even to his worst enemy* (Tsu, 58 y/o, 2nd dan). Yet, some participants did expose relatively opposing views on the importance of etiquette. For some, since it was just an automatic custom, part of civic education of people. Precisely, Young (2014) has discussed how this etiquette can be also a synonym to courtesy (meaning considering the needs and necessities of others) and traceable back to samurai values of “respect, manners, discretion, modesty and reverence” (p. 204).

Complementarily, etiquette it is imagined as an element that practitioners should put a great deal of attention into, since excessive laxity could be detrimental for the sequence of actions that show respect to a partner (bowing, unsheathing the sword, and squatting to *sonkyo*, for instance), such as talking to other kendoka while drills are being explained, or doing random actions that do not follow thoughtful objectives. Additionally, it is expressed that respect is also part of its aesthetics and part of what is suggested as “sport values”. On this vein, Honda (2003) voices that such a kind of aesthetics is part of understanding kendo as budo; conversely, deviating from etiquette, self-control and clean techniques by emphasising tactics and strategies directly aimed at winning in competition (*sakusen* and *senjyutsu*) is mostly frowned-upon. Accordingly, the values transmitted by kendo become one of its fundamental aspects, which in turn is one of the most attractive characteristics of kendo for some practitioners:

When I am in front of a person, I see the etiquette, but not just the etiquette from a physical point of view: the attention to detail, the silence, the posture, when they look at you, when they bow; you come closer; the [performing of] *sonkyo*, *mmm*, how they connect with you, [how they express] the gratitude (Eru, 46 y/o, 3rd kyu).



Hence, following protocol would also be related to respecting the context of the lesson, the lesson itself and its unfolding. Now, it is also mentioned that the genuflection involved in bowing would not be a matter of imposing one's ego, which according to other practitioners, would also transmit a sensation of honour and respect. A common saying in kendo is that it begins with a bow and ends with a bow (Donohue, 1999; Sato, 2011), which should translate into a moral maturity through though training (Cho, 2022), thus implying the necessity of this achievement if one aims at becoming a "full kendoka" (Sato, 2011). In this manner, respect and appreciation is also considered a mindset to have towards all practitioners, developing significant humility precisely because of being respectful to everyone.

In the same vein, spirituality was also highlighted in the context of etiquette and rituals, being arguably one of the most typical associations practitioners in the West relate to East Asian martial arts (Gim, 1998; Johnson, 2012; Roffredi, 2017; Molle 2010). Indeed, kendo is no stranger to being associated with manifestations of the spiritual and religious (Iwamoto et al., 2018; Maekawa, 2013; Moenig et al., 2023; Roffredi, 2017). This, however, does not always mean that practitioners necessarily assume a nihonjinron-esque notion of kendo (Maekawa, 2013), as for themselves inform nuances into their perceptions on this form of religious/spiritual heritage, which manifest some degree of reflexivity and awareness regarding its history (Iwamoto et al., 2018; Roffredi, 2017).

In this context, the spirituality or religious perceptions that interviewees manifested is one alluding to a notion of spirituality and of mysticism. It is based around, on the one hand, ideas linked to self-control and ego-control, but in the context of facilitating greater leeway at the moment of setting an attack. On the other, there was explicit mention to Buddhism as part of this kind of spirituality, which in turn is set as a representation of the concept of *ki ken tai no ichi*, i.e., the spirit, sword and body acting at unison (ZNKR, 2020), and as the background of kendo practice itself:

(...) and then [consider] one thing: we are not in Japan and we are not a country (...) that is Buddhist. One thing that I have a hard time explaining is that this [kendo practice] has no, let's say, hardcore religious background for nobody, so people can also feel that is a safe space, specifically if anyone has a different religion (Po, 41 y/o, 4th dan).

This idea of being as religiously-neutral to all practitioners despite their own personal religious beliefs is notable since most participants arguably came from a cultural Catholic background, since in Spain and Latin America Catholicism gave shape to a substantial part of customs, institutions and symbols until well entered the 20th century (España, 2024; Morales Sánchez, 2019). However, the spirituality posited by the participants was rather functional than transcendental, closer to self-improvement and martial efficiency than to God (Iwamoto et al., 2018; Sato, 2011; Young, 2014).

3.2. Material identity

Another element of relevance is the suitability of implements used in the practice of kendo, from clothing to sword simulacrum that are used to instruct, which can also be considered "vessels" as they are imagined as representing and containing a certain degree of kendistic identity. In the case of *bogu* (armour), it is voiced that the materials used in the crafting of *bogu* have changed with time; present-day materials being more resistant and lighter, however, the use of non-traditional materials such as plastic is a rare occurrence. While it is also noted that some materials are not the most ergonomic, *bogu* is mostly considered in a utilitarian manner: a barrier between one's body and the opponent's sabre, which allows practising techniques during drills and *keiko* (combat practice). Correspondingly, recent available medical research in kendo tends to agree on its safety as a contact discipline, however, rare incidents of intracranial accumulative damage may occur if the armour is not worn, maintained or fitted properly (Sakai et al., 2022; Uchida et al., 2021). In such a scenario being able to train without injuring a partner nor being damaged oneself allows for the *bogu* to become part of the uniform since, except for minor cosmetic and padding variations, this gear is the same to all practitioners. This in turn facilitates a sense of uniformity, continuity and safety.

Accordingly, this later sense fits into the conceptualisation of "habitus" by Pierre Bourdieu, which can be characterised as practical, cognitive and motivational structures which articulate individual and collective experiences and actions through the concatenation of different kinds of



conditions of existence (historical, social, economical, cultural, etc.), creating a practical sense that orders and regulates ideas, customs and creations by a certain social group (Bourdieu, 2007). Hence, the material context of instruments used for practice demands the development of a specific and fitting habitus (Domaneschi, 2018).

Coherently, the clothes of kendo, namely hakama and keikogi, these would also fulfil a function of uniforming practitioners, by giving them a sense of aesthetic continuity. However, there were dissimilar notions regarding the motivations for their use. For one of the kendoka, the uniform is informed by the necessity for “fitting” with the use of armour, while for another one, not having a uniform was not a limitation for practice itself, as reportedly seen in some South American countries. Now, as for each piece specifically, the hakama would provide a tactical advantage since it hides the movement of the feet, helping the duellist to restrict information to their partner about their overall strategy. Similarly, the shortened sleeves of the keikogi would not only make it easier to manipulate the *shinai* (bamboo sword), but also would fit better above the *futon* (padding) of the *kote* (gauntlet). Precisely, one of the most evident meanings attributed to clothing is that it is fundamentally instrumental. It is stated that the uniform of kendo is originally clothing to perform regular work. Still, some other participants counter that the specific aspect of kendo uniform is unique, unlike arts like judo, karate-do and aikido where the gi is white, while in kendo is usually indigo blue, which would transmit a sense of seriousness. Correspondingly, kendo uniform is imagined as different from mere clothing. The respondents do converge regarding their outfit brings “something else”, a certain warrior mysticism and religious aesthetic:

If I could synthesise the craftsmanship of Shintoist Japanese temples, it could be synthesised in a bogu, in the crafting, the drawing, the needlework; the knitting of textiles, the dyeing of fabric (Ro, 40 y/o, 4th kyu).

Thusly, using non-specific kendo clothing would remove some of its symbolism and decorum. Complementary, another participant mentioned that dressing for kendo is dressing explicitly into the Way of the Sword, hence making use of an identitarian marker in textile form. What is more, as a vessel of Japanese culture, the kendistic outfit would reflect the etiquette of the uniform itself (formally known as *chakuso*; ZNKR, 2020) which would be reinforced by the absence of external rank markers like belts, as for karate-do and bujinkan. Indeed, the manufacturing of equipment in sports can be considered means for the transmission of heritage, in this case also with artisan tones (Ramshaw, 2019).

Now, another aspect that is mostly valued by kendoka is the evaluation that they do of practice swords in the kendistic context. Hence, the bokuto is characterised as an effective representation that can not harm in principle, but if used in combat could actually present serious injury risk, which in turn limits the quantity of techniques that can be applied with it. By contrast, the shinai is perceived as not-harmful. Indeed, one of the practitioners indicated that it is a “modern” invention to avoid serious injury, thanks to its balance, capacity to absorb energy and being able to simulate “real strikes” without causing damage. Also, there is the idea that the shinai would invite a concrete action within its trajectory. Precisely, Domaneschi reports that the “body conditioning” resulting from the interaction and habituation to training instruments generates an “addiction to the instrument” resulting in inscribing “tacit instructions” for their use (2018, p. 9). In the case of shinai, this kind of invitation to attack sets preferences of some techniques and tactics over others. Precisely, one of the participants expands on this “invitational” trait:

Why is it longer? (than a katana) (...) to protect the other person, since it is crafted with slats it absorbs the strike protecting the other person, but at the same time, the fact that it is longer (than a katana) (...) because if it was as short as a katana we would fight from outside [range], as trying to hit the other person [directly] as is common in kenjutsu... uh, we have talked about the size of the *shinai* and how that forces you to fight from closer [distance] (Co, 27 y/o, 1st dan).

3.3. Traditional past

The aspects of tradition are considered in different manners by the kendoka. As mentioned earlier, kendo is no stranger to invented traditions and idealised pasts, a supposed strong and direct link to samurai culture (Bennett, 2015; 2020; Moenig et al., 2023). For instance, clothing and armour



is associated by some kendoka to a sense uniformity, national identity and sometimes “ancient” history, most notably by its crafting using stiffer and heavier materials that currently technologically possible, as for hakama and bogu particularly, hence being less “sportive” than possible and preserving some samurai aesthetics, plus adding to the idea of being different from “just a sport”. This custom with “traditional” garments is also noted for karategi, as one of the practitioners points that dressing in kendo has not been a dissimilar experience from dressing for karate-do and kobudo. Precisely, such a compliance to tradition is part of the collective identity of budo in general, and of kendo in specific (Donohue, 1990; 1999). What is more, another practitioner mentioned that the way clothes are wrapped around the body and its materials is a reflection of a time gone, as seen in Figure 1, were a practitioner is fitting the bogu over his body by knots and ties while sitting in seiza:

(...) and say, there are no Velcro, no buttons, no zippers while there might as well be; there are no super-modern materials except in small details, and to me this is part of this aura of something traditional that you are performing (Je, 53 y/o, 1st kyu).

This strong association to samurai culture is distinctive of national and ethnic identities which, according to Golubović, are rather removed from reconceptualizations (2011). However, it is indicated that the uniform has evolved from the middle ages to the present day, as for both the keikogi and the hakama would have their own history, even though one of the interviewees highlights that samurai did not use keikogi as such. Yet, there is also the mention that clothing would carry “the culture of the sword”, despite being arguably interrupted by the Allied Forces during post-WWII occupation:

Then being kendo... a modernised version of the old combat schools, and also, those that could carry weapons where the samurai, which were feudal lords; well, in this case I think that it is important the aesthetic of hakama and keikogi, because it is part of the history of the martial art (Ha, 33 y/o, 2nd dan)

Another aspect of tradition described by the participants is the notion of “tradition” itself. There is a repeated and explicit mentioning of the link between “the millennial” and Japanese culture, in a context where kendo is considered an art that has accumulated a centuries-old legacy. It is mentioned as well that maintaining customs such as those related to reiho, is a fundamental part of kendo. However, some one of the participants add nuance by stating that following strictly some aspects of tradition would be detrimental to practices such as not resting the day before a competition as Japanese competitors do; nor it would translate into a significant improvement of practice, nor that is always relevant:

If this was an “actual” dojo, that is to say, with a *shomen* (altar) and all that stuff, well, would practice be better or worse? I don’t think so, probably even worse because you would have less room [to practice], right? (Re, 45 y/o, 5th dan).

Mentioned though with less frequency, are the references to kenjutsu as fundamental in the history of kendo. It is stated that in the “old schools” (meaning kenjutsu schools or *ryuha*) bokken was used, and kenjutsu is explicitly part of kendo’s history, for which the shinai would represent the transition from the old ways to the new ways. As seen in Figure 2, the shinai is used for combat

Figure 1. Putting on the bogu the traditional way.



Courtesy of Ana López



practice, meaning that it can be used to attack, block, parry, put pressure on the partner or create an opening; usually by threatening the other's throat with the *kensaki* (tip; Salmon, 2013).

This idea of re-imagining duelling although the instruments to perform it changing, coincides with what Ramshaw quotes as a “sense of historical continuity”, which in this scenario would make kendoka take part in a tradition that existed before them, and will continue to exist long after them, perpetuating the dynamism of heritage (2019, p. 109). However, one of the practitioners points out substantial differences between the kenjutsu and kendo that challenge the idea of an uninterrupted and evident flow of transformations from the former to the latter:

Kenjutsu is more brutal, kenjutsu is for killing another [person]. Yes, now we are doing budo, we are doing kendo that is something different. It is much more of a sport, a path, personal development (Po, 41 y/o, 4th dan).

Plus, it is also mentioned that the movements performed in present-day kendo would be martially ideal since they have been “tested” over hundreds of years, regardless of being anti-natural, as for fighting without changing sides of the guard (as it would be performing *chudan no kamae* with the left foot forward). Interestingly, it is added that the movements that are set in kendo have to be performed in the most efficient way possible since, says one participant, the samurai armour weighted “a fair amount of kilos” and if worn under the sun, doing unnecessary or excessive movements would exhaust the combatant:

Because, uh, an armour of that time (middle ages) weighed a fair amount of kilos despite how light they were, compared to the European ones. And if on top of that you are in a field under direct sunlight, you would cook alive (Tsu, 58 y/o, 2nd dan).

Additionally, one of the participants compared medieval Hispanic values and their Japanese counterparts: it is affirmed that knightly values such as loyalty, sacrifice, and humility coincide with samurai values like loyalty, fidelity and honour, which, says this interviewee, would be registered in the “bushido code” after a period of raging wars. Hence, that medieval spirit would find its way to contemporary Japanese culture, despite bushido being relatively recent as resulting from the Imperial era, nor widely known before the 20th century, as noted by Moenig and collaborators (2023). Most notably, the misperception of bushido in the West would be a result from a seminal equivalence with European chivalry by Nitobe Inazo, and further misconceptualizations by researchers such as Eugen Herrieger and Donald Draeger (Moenig et al., 2023; Suzuki, 2016).

3.4. Kendistic identity

Lastly, a final aspect of kendistic heritage that is noted by practitioners is the identity of kendo itself, i.e., kendo as a discipline. In this context is that kendoka imagine a dual and sometimes mutually excluding conception of kendo as a martial art and as a sport. Hence, it is stated that kendo is “codified” (structures) practice, a type of fencing, and a team sport where there is no team, meaning there is no improvement without help from the other practitioners, nor it can be considered an individual sport. However, another group of practitioners points that kendo cannot be “merely” a sport, for kendo has a background that extends beyond a standard or more popular sport, and whose beauty separates it from a street fight with sticks. This, in turn, seems to suggest an aesthetic idea of

Figure 2. Fencing in *chudan no kamae* (middle guard) using a *shinai*.



Courtesy of Ana López

kendo that differentiate its techniques by virtue of grace (Groff, 2018), which may reflect the refinement of kendo as a byproduct of the elevation of sword techniques into an art, as well as the introduction of modern fencing-esque rules after its fusing with short-lived *shinai kyogi* (shinai sport) (Bennett, 2015).

Certainly, it is indicated that kendo has this excess or “something else” that moves it beyond a sport, mere self-defence or physical exercise. Moreover, another participant says that kendo without customs (bowing, etiquette, respect, etc.) would actually be a mere sport, since kendo is not limited to winning. This idea is on the same tone as the statement by Oda and Krein that movements and attacks in kendo cannot be just physical, but have to also embody their underlying philosophy, culture and spirit, which, referencing Korean kendoka Park Dong-Chull, would translate to “sport as art” and *gyo* (philosophical education of action) (2024). Thusly, one of the interviewees explains that the principle of *ki-ken-tai-no-ichi* (spirit, sword and body as one; ZNKR, 2020) transcends competition and guides kendo as a whole:

Sports (...) are activities that are codified from the point of view of a set of rules that govern competition (...) to me, *ki-ken-tai-no-ichi* (...) it is not something that codifies competition and, hence, tells you the rules you have to abide by to win (...) a sport does not occupy [too much] with (...) you doing [something] a certain way or another (...) kendo emphasises something that is not really quantifiable (...) It is not something you can codify, but knowing it through your own experience (Eru, 46 y/o, 3rd kyu).

Moreover, it is stated that kendo can also be conceived as a lifestyle, even a philosophy of life, that is sometimes mentioned as “long termed”, in which people develop technically and personally, as for practitioners that have grown in kendo and have made it to the national team. Additionally, it is noted that kendo without unification of parts, cannot win tournaments nor earn ranks. Precisely, there is a general notion of kendo as unity, where different aspects are integrated in a coherent fashion. This unity, says one of the participants, depends on the personal situation of each practitioner, and that progressively knowing concepts give order and profoundness to kendo. Still, another participants adds nuance by saying that while kendo it is just one, and that there are circumstantial adaptations such as counting repetitions in Japanese or another language, drifting away from the Japanese idiomatic root can be both an element of making kendo more comprehensible or incomprehensible, which can be seen as a result of its expansion to the West and modernisation (Hua et al., 2020; Lachina, 2018).

Moreover, the idea of unity is also manifested regarding the concept of *ki-ken-tai-no-ichi* as its own totality and vice versa, and that the unification of the parts of *ki-ken-tai-no-ichi* is something basic in martial arts. These latter aspects, conversely, would represent the integration of diverse elements, which adds a degree of harmony and beauty (consistent with Groff 2018 and Keene 1969). Lastly, there is mention of unity as being the core kendo, but also as orienting of life itself and conduct to other practitioners, which would characterise practising kendo as participating in an activity that is larger than kendo itself, making each kendoka part of a greater reality (Molle, 2010). Thus, one interviewee notes:

(...) just unite on that, that sensation I have about kendo; I am not saying that it is a way of life because I have many other interests (...) kendo is not my only one interest and, therefore, I can't say it's a way of life, but I think it unites many qualities that are transferable to your conduct in everyday life towards the rest of people (Jo, 53 y/o, 1st kyu).

Finally, the last form of conceptualising the identity of kendo as a discipline, is the perception of kendo as a source of applied moral or of values applicable to everyday life. Alongside helping some overcoming conflicts during the Covid pandemic, and providing of values such as respect, etiquette-following and improving as a person, it is also a terrain for significant experiences, without becoming a dogma either. In the same vein, some practitioners highlight that kendo is a discipline of doing rather than talking: while explicit explanations do have a moment and purpose, teaching is done at the same time that adjustments are being made simultaneously. In such a terms, there is coincidence with the idea of kendo having to be executed in only certain ways, since following values it is what distinguishes it from other disciplines: having to perform the drills correctly, respect all training partners regardless of their rank; yet, there is also the recognition of other physical activities also being able to transmit values on their own. Precisely, the formation of “kendistic habitus” (concept



inspired by the “pugilistic habitus” by Loïc Wacquant, 2022; Chávez Hernández, 2025) can be considered as the integration of body techniques, intellectual understandings and cultural imported traditions, forming a single unit (Chávez Hernández, 2022; 2025).

4. Discussion

As seen in the previous section, the kendoka that took part in the interviews while having somewhat consistent or complementary views regarding the aspects that can be identified with the category of “cultural heritage”, not all aligned perfectly, and some of them were even contrarian. This phenomenon is noted by Hill, who notes conflicts of significations around heritage arise precisely because of the accessibility to tell this kind of stories (2012). For instance, we may ask “Is kendo a sport or not?”. While for some kendo could be considered a team sport that is played individually, for others its value-centric teachings and aesthetics were distinctive traits that pushed it beyond that classification.

Additionally, as seen repeatedly throughout the responses, the idea of kendo having a history that dated centuries ago and a strong link to the samurai, despite not being historically accurate, was very persistent among practitioners. The use of memory is central to the construction of heritage (Ramshaw, 2019). But as seen previously, this memory as one of the supports of heritage is also crossed by attribution, imagination and, consequently, reconstruction. And in such a reconstruction, the act of forgetting results as important for the constitution of what is passed on into the future (Ramshaw, 2019). In this case, while samurai history is certainly part of kendo’s history, the participants were most likely not aware that contemporary kendo was invented only in the second half of the 20th century. Yet, this is not to say that kendoka engage with the practice of the way of the sword irreflexively; far from it. As attested, practitioners do ponder regarding how the kendo uniform and protections are crafted in a manner that may not be absolutely faithful to how they were made in samurai times, and what their purpose may be. Correspondingly, they also reflect about what enables and the use of a wooden sword compared to a bamboo alternative (most notably the transition from kenjutsu to kendo), what the impact of kendo has been in their life, among other considerations. These instances can be considered as fitting with the idea of kendo being a path to cultural and symbolic identification through self-improvement (Donohue, 1999).

Hence, it is possible to propose that this kind of support in kendo has to be interpreted by the kendoka in order for them to become part of their personal and collective identity. Precisely, it seems that the act of interpretation and the ongoing (re)construction of memory is what allows for participating into a larger sense of identity as kendoka, that is, an ideologically constructed sense of personal and communal identity, following Gulobovic (2011). Despite contemporary martial arts having actual short traditions (Moenig et al., 2023), their “myths” permeate both the official and unofficial discourses: some of the kendoka interviewed held important teaching positions in the Spanish kendo context, thus making their interpretation binding for a large number of people, while others had at most a few years of practice and hence less influence, yet their interpretations were mostly compatible to each other.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the spurious relation between budo and teleological cultivation that was part of the guiding sense of the identity of kendistic heritage according to the participants. It has been largely discussed how Japanese contemporary martial arts and teleological cultivation is not as much a matter of following an ancient tradition, but rather complying with the remains of Japanese expansionism (Benesch, 2020; Bennett, 2015). This was seen to extend of the idea of what can be conceptualised as “kendistic exceptionalism”, that is, the notion of kendo adding “something more” as described by the interviewees, which in some cases meant kendo having a quality (for instance, *ki-ken-tai-no-ichi*) that separates it from a “mere sport”, a certain material aesthetic that provides identitarian and visual commonality to all students of the sword, and a behavioural aesthetic that makes it different from a street fight with sticks. Now, this is arguably not necessarily distinctive of kendo, since other martial arts and sports (such as trail running) do present similar experiences to their practitioners, as shown by Ávila de Costa and Lacerda (2016) and Lacerda (2011). However, it seems to be at least more relevant in the specific case of kendo than in other contemporary martial arts the respect, appreciation and engagement with a tradition that manifest materially, interactionally and conceptually.



Accordingly, the material, interactional and conceptual engagement with tradition in kendo implies that tradition has to be interpreted by the kendoka, which leads us to consider that this interpretation is done not only by intellectual means, but also by the body itself. This is to say, elements such as clothing, training swords, clothing, the physical venue in which the class takes place, the conduct of practitioners, the decorum, and their ideas have to be exercised by corporeal means so they can reach the idea of unity mentioned by practitioners. All of the supports of kendo have to be coherent to each other in order to reflect what “correct” kendo would be. These diverse elements or “multimodality” (Hua et al., 2020) would have to be articulated at unison so the tangible and intangible aspects (Ramshaw, 2023) of kendo’s heritage can manifest through the corporal support of practitioners. This means that since the body is the main vessel of re-presentation of kendo’s historical and imagined legacy, drawing inspiration from the conceptualization of the knowing body by Trevor Marchand (2008), the concept of “embodied heritage” can be proposed to identify the form of heritage that is the manifestation of a tradition (whether historically accurate and/or mythical) that is *interpreted* by intellectual and specific corporeal movements, which is ultimately transmitted and maintained by bodily expressions. In this manner, the way of the sword would be embodied heritage as body, mind, history, myth and culture are interpreted in an ongoing moment connecting with kendoka of the past, and of that of times to come.

5. Conclusion

This work presented a contemporary understanding of the appropriation of kendo’s heritage by Spain-based kendoka, in a context of martial arts globalisation and transculturation. Most notably, the participants were usually aware that kendo as a discipline has evolved from its deeply-rooted past as kenjutsu, while in some cases drawing ideas from perspectives that can be categorised as “Orientalist”, e.g., kendo being a distinctively Japanese cultural device. However, their current representation was also related to tensions within the overall sport-system, aesthetics, and the preservation of traditional materialities vs modern martial technologies. All in all, it would be of interest that future research would characterise and analyse how kendo has been transculturated back to Japan precisely because of its internationalisation, and how the interaction with kendokas from abroad has affected the teaching and understanding of this discipline in its country of origin, especially in a moment where not only Japan competes with other countries of the world in the World Kendo Championship (FIK, 2018), but also being that Western countries do autonomously interact and compete to each other as in the recently held European Kendo Championship in the city of Leiden, Netherlands (EKC, 2025).

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