

Developments in Japanese Women's Kendō

by Kate Sylvester

An experience of *aiki* and a self questioning of why I felt an overwhelming admiration for the Japanese Women's Team at the 14th WKC in Brazil inspired me to undertake an honours paper researching the practices and culture of women's kendō in Japan.

Little is known about the practises and culture of Japanese women's kendō outside of Japan. This is probably due to the shorter history of women's participation in kendō, which is considered to have started from post-war period in Japan (Ozawa, 1989; Shinzato, 2010). Men's kendō has a much longer history with connections to Japans' feudal past (Ozawa, 1997). Due to the shorter history of women's kendō, the present 8th dan kendō model is a reflection of traditional Japanese masculinity in the image of the male samurai. As the model, it may explain the presence of male 8th dan sensei at international seminars and competitions. The overwhelming presence of men in kendō outside of Japan can erroneously give the impression that kendō is more suitable to men and that women's kendō of less importance.

During my research period in Japan from April – November 2010, I discovered that Japanese women's kendō is developing in a promising direction where participation and leadership opportunities are increasing for women. In addition, these developments are greatly supported by men and the All Japan Kendo Federation. It seems that Japanese kendō is negotiating the ongoing task of promoting women's kendō whilst preserving some traditional practises, practises which arguably can be perceived as patriarchal. Although the status of women is improving in Japan (Suzuki, 2007), the traditional structure of gender role which places men in in the public sphere in managerial and leadership roles still persists in Japanese society (Sekiguchi, 2010; Manzenreiter, 2008). As kendō is considered to be a traditional and indigenous activity connected to Japans' past, perhaps the positioning of women in kendō remains constrained by these traditional cultural values more so than other contemporary sports.

Due to the generosity and support of many Japanese male and female sensei in my research, I was able to physically experience the culture and practises of Japanese women's kendō on many levels. I trained with women who were 7th dan sensei, police, national team members, students from university, high school, elementary schools and neighbourhood dōjō. I attended and competed in women's seminars, gasshuku and competitions. Through these opportunities I was able to see some examples of how opportunities for women in kendō are developing. Other improvements may be occurring but the following observations are what I directly experienced whilst conducting research in Japan in 2010:

- There are Female University Kendō Coaches (Nippon Taiiku Daigaku and NIFS (Kanoya Taiiku Daigaku)
- There are Female Police Kendō Instructors (Osaka Police)
- There are Female Prefectural Team Coaches (Kyoto)
- The All Japan Housewife Competition has been replaced by the All Japan Interprefectural Team Competition
- There is a 65% increase of women achieving the highest rank of women, 7th dan (AJKF, 2010)
- Female national team members have featured in articles and on the covers of *Kendō Nippon* and *Kendō Jidai*

- Women's kendō seminars are occurring more often and are led by female 7th dan sensei
- There is a ratio of 2 female 7th dan sensei shimpan and 1 male 8th dan sensei shimpan umpiring at the All Japan Women's Competition
- Women are returning to kendō sooner after child birth (in some cases within 6 months)
- The All Japan Women's Championship competitor age range is 17 – 40 years of age.
- Many male 7th and 8th dan sensei are encouraging women at all levels to develop their kendō

As mentioned above, although there are many developments within Japanese women's kendō, kendō in Japan remains led by men. There are approximately 110,000 registered active female kenshi in Japan, (AJKF, 2008) however, very few women hold official teaching or leadership positions in Japanese kendō. Only 2% of executives within the main kendō organisations in Japan are women (JSSGS, 2010). Furthermore, although there are a few women attempting the 8th dan grading, none have yet successfully passed. The general consensus is that women do not embody the physical strength and technique to obtain 8th dan. The 8th dan model is fundamentally a ground in masculinity and due to the prior expectation of social role fulfillment of mother and wife, women have not continued kendō in order to maintain their strength and develop the technique required to pass 8th dan. There remains some aspects of the cultural belief that strength and power is a result of biological determinism. In addition, the idea of strength and power does not appeal to traditional notions of femininity.

Taking in to consideration the aforementioned developments in women's kendō, will we see a successful female candidate pass the 8th dan grading in the near future? Recently, it has been debated whether or not to provide a separate 8th dan grading for women. There has been a mixed response to this issue. Some Japanese kendō women do not think it is important to achieve 8th dan while others are not interested in attempting 8th dan at all if it is gender segregated. It is debatable whether women who achieve 8th dan in a gender segregated grading will achieve equality in status to their male counterparts. A segregated grading may actually perpetuate the marginalisation and gendered practises of female kenshi. The 8th dan grading must remain non – segregated especially taking into consideration the combination of the mentioned developments and the fact that the women approaching their 8th dan are younger and have experienced greater gender and social role fluidity more so than their predecessors.

Although gendered practices persist in Japanese kendō, significant developments are occurring as efforts are being made to preserve tradition and maintain participation numbers whilst negotiating women's occupancy of space within kendō. I would like to suggest that the qualities inherently 'natural' in Japanese women's kendō are taught by female sensei to male and female kenshi. Teachings that emphasise *aiki*, flexibility, softness and timing (typically feminine characteristics) may lead to improving the level of over use of physical power in 'foreign' kendō. Lastly and most importantly, an increase in access to Japanese female sensei as role models will also greatly improve the level, participation and experiences of women kenshi outside of Japan.

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