

GREET ANGÈLE DE BAETS

JE SUIS PAS TATAMISÉ: FIVE SPECTRUMS OF VARIATION IN THE NARRATIVES OF 20 AIKIDO EXPERTS WORLDWIDE IN 2020

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study delved into the multifaceted meaning of aikido through 20 expert interviews conducted worldwide in 2020. The interviewees were purposively selected and the analysis of the interview data identified five spectrum themes: 1) the spectrum of aikido practice ranges from soft to tough training style; 2) the aikido motivation spectrum moves from self-defence to self-transformation; 3) the spectrum of aikido in society shows the different social contexts in which aikido is practised from broader social applications to combating violence; 4) the spectrum of tangible values reveals the various material aspects of Japanese culture that experts adopt with degrees of japanization; finally, 5) the spectrum of intangible values shows how experts perceive the immaterial significance of aikido differently, ranging from linking it to religion to the absence of spirituality. The varied answers from the experts showed that aikido is a worldwide phenomenon with unique relationships between the expert and the martial art. The study concludes that the five spectrums of variation add to the discourse against simplifying aikido or other martial arts.

CONTRIBUTOR

Greet Angèle De Baets practises aikido, iaido, and iaijutsu. She is a linguist and a business communication teacher, lecturer, and researcher. She is doing doctoral research at Ghent University, Belgium, on aikido as an embodied training method for intercultural business communication training.

KEYWORDS

Aikido; expert interviewing; motivation; value development; japanization

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the heterogeneous meanings that aikido embodies for experts worldwide in 2020. Through in-depth interviews, twenty experts (n=20) revealed the interpretations and multifaceted roles that their relation to aikido plays in their practices, lives, and societies, enriching our understanding of the depth and fluidity of aikido in today's world.

Due to the tremendous growth of the martial arts industry, Eastern Asian martial arts have become an integral part of sports and physical activity culture that convey lifestyles and values in many Western countries (Y. J. Ko, 2007; Y. Ko & Kim, 2010). Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969) founded aikido in Japan and gave form to his martial art in the 1920s. Aikido (aikidō) is a non-competitive martial art that tends to be seen only as soft and non-violent. However, the reputation of aikido is an anomaly portrayed through romanticism and ignoring the reality that brutal and competitive styles also flourish in contemporary times (Friedman, 2005, p. 5). Aikido can 'be used in highly brutal ways and can be effective in competition against other martial art styles' (Friedman, 2005, p. 20).

EMERGENT MEANINGS

This article aims to avoid the illusion of a stable, normative meaning of aikido. Instead, it relies on the poststructuralist idea that meaning and identity emerge in interaction and relations (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, pp. 588, 598), emphasizing 'a fluid sense of their ongoing incompleteness and irreducible contextuality' (Bowman, 2017, p. 15).

When dealing with martial arts studies issues, Wetzler proposes five plausible dimensions of meaning that can be associated with martial arts: preparation for violent conflict, play and competitive sports, performance, transcendent goals, and health care (Wetzler, 2015, pp. 25–26). Wetzler and Bowman, each in their way, argue that theory is useful for martial arts studies analyses. In using an ethnographic approach, as described by Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts (2015) 'to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange', researchers do not typically deduce from existing theories. Although ethnographic researchers recognize that they inevitably operate within existing theoretical frameworks, they prioritize inductive analysis that allows themes, patterns, and meanings to emerge. Consequently, rather than directly building their analysis around existing theory, ethnographers are often guided by these principles as they attempt to construct new ideas from the ground up.

THE REPUTATION OF AIKIDO

Time, place, culture, identity, reputation, motivation, and tradition all play a role in the phenomenon of aikido. When martial techniques were no longer used for warfare, the 'Japanese created a romantic but also nationalistic martial arts narrative that

aligned with the ideals of the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912). This romanticized image was naively accepted in the West, often imported along with esoteric ideas of the East' (Moenig & Kim, 2018, p. 1). Practitioners in the West largely disposed of the nationalistic sentiments and popularized self-development through traditional arts with an emphasis on Zen ideas. The philosophical and historical discourse surrounding Asian martial arts, aikido included, is frequently flawed and a topic of discussion among practitioners, teachers, and scholars. On the one hand, romanticism, esotericism, and orientalism have inspired exaggerated or misinterpreted views (Moenig & Kim, 2018, p. 18). On the other hand, realism and scepticism have underplayed the values and image of aikido and similar Japanese traditional arts. Interestingly, Trensou (2022) unveiled the indebtedness of martial schools to Buddhist teachings. He found textual evidence pointing to the integration of elements from Shintoism and Esoteric Buddhism in various premodern martial art initiation documents (denshō). Scholars, notably Bowman (2021), have elucidated how traditional martial arts have since been reinvented and invented through pacification, sportification, orientalization, spiritualization, and romanticization. Even in an attempt to maintain fidelity to tradition, difference always enters. Sometimes it can be caught and policed with checks and balances. However, difference and change always appear (p.200).

Even though aikido can be tough, its most fundamental, well-known, and identifiable characteristic is 'its claim to be a unique set of self-defence techniques that blend or harmonize with an attacker's force while protecting oneself and one's attacker. Consequently, its martial techniques are allegedly a metaphorical embodiment of certain philosophical and pacifist principles that its practitioners are supposed to incorporate and express through exemplary social conduct' (Draeger, 1996, cited in Tan, 2014, p. 135). Carter (2008, p. 21–50) posits that aikido is neither aggressive nor a sport. The physical characteristics of aikido are about defence and defusing aggression. Furthermore, aikido fosters self-transformation because it connects the body with the mind and creates an environment where philosophy, spirituality, and ethics can grow and develop. And, as Tan (2014) showed in his ethnography, aikido can be a way for practitioners from different cultural and national backgrounds to understand and integrate certain aspects of Japanese culture and identity into their lives.

THE MOTIVATION OF PRACTITIONERS

Ko and Kim's (2010) study on motivation for martial arts gave nuanced insight into the identity of aikido practitioners. Firstly, they are motivated by self-defence, however less highly than taekwondo, judo, jiu jitsu, and karate practitioners. Secondly, together with kung fu and wushu practitioners, aikido practitioners are the least motivated by aggression as a martial arts characteristic. Moreover, aikido, hapkido, kung fu, and wushu practitioners are more motivated by social relations and affiliation (belonging to a special group) than other martial arts disciplines.

Remarkably and regardless of their discipline, martial arts practitioners are largely motivated by aesthetics. Through martial arts training, practitioners also expect to develop fundamental human values (e.g., work ethic and respect). Not surprisingly, the number of years of experience in martial arts influences motivation. The self-defence motive drops and the value development motive rises. To bring it all together, aikido is generally not practised for aggression but for self-defence, social needs, aesthetics, and value development.

50 YEARS AFTER THE FOUNDER'S PASSING

Traditional literature on aikido, in Japanese and English, is mainly written from within by disciples and family members of Ueshiba, the founder (Niehaus, 2019). Most other written sources are non-academic, come from one place, practitioner, school or style, and date from the twentieth century. The course of time, globalization, tradition, reputation, identity, and motivation have influenced the aikido schools. They adhere to a particular style of aikido and are led by masters who can mostly trace their lineage of aikido teachers back to Ueshiba. And so the question arises: what is the meaning of aikido more than fifty years after the passing of Ueshiba in 1969? In 2020, I conducted 20 semi-structured expert interviews with aikido experts from all over the world. The first objective of this qualitative study was to find similarities between different manifestations of aikido for the purpose of benchmarking aikido's core principles. However, this article reports on the second objective of exploring the differences between the 20 narratives. It had become clear that although the experts referred to the same art at heart, they had different perspectives and interests. It was as if each expert spoke the same language but a different dialect.

METHODS

Participants

The experts who participated were purposively selected for their qualities (Etikan, 2016): technical, process, contextual, and explanatory knowledge. The experts (n=20) were involved in teaching aikido, holding aikido examinations, and organizing aikido schools or associations. They all had black belts (dan grades) in aikido (1 eighth dan, 1 seventh dan, 6 sixth dans, 1 fifth dan, 6 fourth dans, 2 third dans, 1 second dan, and 2 first dans). Because aikido is a global phenomenon, the sample involved aikido experts from countries all over the world, both male (n=17) and female (n=3), from different aikido schools and aikido styles. The sample contained at least one expert from each inhabited continent, which was an effort to add to the Japanese view on aikido, avoid a Western-centric view, and decolonize the research method. Table 1 shows an overview of the countries of residence (in alphabetical order), nationalities, gender, and years of experience with aikido. In the case of the expert in Kenya, he was a young expert involved in a rather recent association of aikido schools in several neighbouring countries in East Africa. Sampling

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aikido experts all over the world was not simple. Access to the potential interviewees was mainly possible with the help of gatekeepers, intermediary people who open the proverbial gate to the expert. Sometimes access was found by attending the seminar of a visiting aikido master. Regardless of the sampling challenge, the respondent success rate was higher than expected: 83.33 %. Four experts did not agree to an interview; three of them passed the invitation on to another person, often a disciple.

Many of the experts in this study are second or third generation disciples of the founder. Aikido Journal published a chart with the major disciples of Ueshiba in 2018 (Gold, 2018). Figure 1 shows the Aikido Journal chart highlighting the 16 disciples to whom the experts interviewed can be traced.

Interview data

The Bioethics Institute at Ghent University approved the study. The interviewees agreed to informed consent and recording. They knew the interview data would be anonymized except for their aikido grade, lineage, nationality, current country of residence, and gender. The study used pseudonyms with a Japanese influence: a number and the Japanese *san* suffix. The list of interview topics included lineage, principles, philosophy, spirituality, demographics/society, and uniqueness. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, capturing each utterance with precision. Interviews ranged from 19 minutes to two hours and 22 minutes, with most interviews taking approximately one hour.

Analysis

Using MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021), a qualitative content analysis of the interview data was conducted. The data was coded into categories to derive the main inferences. Interviewing 20 experts from around the world was critical to obtain a balance of perspectives. To improve the reliability, two experienced researchers helped write and test the codebook (describing and structuring the codes for data analysis): one researcher experienced in qualitative content-coding and a second researcher experienced with the content, i.e. Japanese martial arts studies. We discussed any points of disagreement to achieve consensus.

RESULTS

Five themes emerged from the analysis for differences: (1) aikido practice, (2) aikido motivation, (3) aikido in society, (4) tangible values, and (5) intangible values. Each theme is a spectrum, with each expert taking a distinct position. The presentation of the findings below mainly consists of interpretations and explanations illustrated by interview quotations (Eldh et al., 2020). The interview transcriptions contain repetitions and language mistakes. Some of the hesitations, pauses, and interjections have been tidied up for ease of reading.

In line with the language pitfall identified by Wetzler, this article uses metalanguage to describe and explain the emergent meanings

of aikido, rather than adhering to the object language used by aikido practitioners (Wetzler, 2015, pp. 22–23). For instance, instead of describing how an expert brings communities together,

this article describes how an expert believes they bring communities together.

Pseudonym	Country/Region	Nationality	Gender	Years of experience
One-san	Belgium	Belgium	male	30
Two-san	Belgium	Belgium	male	40
Three-san	France	France/Japan	male	24
Four-san	Belgium	Germany	male	12
Five-san	Algeria	Algeria	male	43
Six-san	France	France	male	58
Seven-san	Netherlands	Netherlands	male	38
Eight-san	Germany	Netherlands	male	32
Nine-san	Israel	USA	male	34
Ten-san	USA	USA	female	45
Eleven-san	Thailand	USA	male	35
Twelve-san	Brazil	Brazil	female	41
Thirteen-san	UAE	Iraq	male	15
Fourteen-san	East-Africa	Kenya	male	7
Fifteen-san	Australia	Australia	male	21
Sixteen-san	Taiwan	Taiwan	female	17
Seventeen-san	Malaysia	Japan	male	12
Eighteen-san	South Africa	South Africa	male	34
Nineteen-san	Japan	Belgium	male	12
Twenty-san	Belgium	Belgium	male	37

Table 1 – Experts interviewed: anonymous baseline information

AIKIDO PRACTICE, FROM TOUGH TO SOFT

The participants shared their insights on various aspects of aikido training practice. Nine participants acknowledged the existence of rigorous training sessions, often comparing them to softer training sessions they experienced elsewhere. Fifteen-san called aikido ‘more of a restraining art’ that allows intense training without causing harm to oneself or others. He reported only minor injuries in his dojo (training place for martial arts), such as a broken finger and a black eye resulting from accidental contact.

Another participant, Eleven-san, shared his experience of demanding training under a Japanese *sensei* (master), with injuries like ‘crochet elbow’ being common among his fellow practitioners. Eighteen-san lived in Japan for two years to train under Saito shihan, a direct disciple of Ueshiba. Saito did not teach every day; when he did, training was tough:

If you trained, you trained. If you bleed, you bleed. If you sit out for a day because of injuries, you sit it out. He told: ‘You never squeal, or you never go to other people and talk about how we got hurt today and stuff like that. No, when you get

hurt, you just excuse yourself or sort yourself out, come back'.
(Eighteen-san)

Eleven-san was the only expert who talked about having done aikido competitions in Japan. He discussed one participation where he inadvertently threw an opponent too forcefully,

resulting in disqualification. Furthermore, Fifteen-san shared his encounter with Anno sensei in Japan, an eighth dan practitioner. He described the experience as extraordinary and likened it to gripping a solid block of marble on the one hand and fighting smoke on the other.

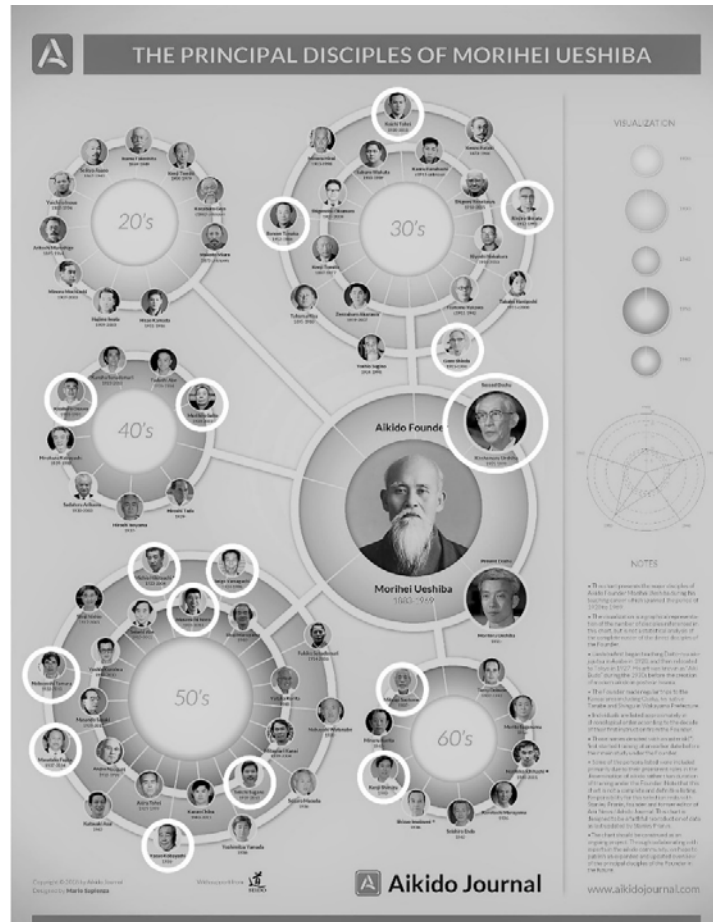


Figure 1 – The aikido lineage of the experts interviewed, based on Aikido Journal's overview (Gold, 2018)

Three-san, who teaches in dojos all over the world, noticed that cultures differ in how they bodily engage in practice, especially regarding touch and training intensity. Another aspect of intense training is endurance. Eleven-san, an American who lived in Japan for 30 years, proudly recounted defying all odds during his intense first three years of training, whereas foreign students generally leave after a few weeks or months. However, he did not mention that foreign students might leave for other reasons than the training regime, such as engagements in their home country or an expired visa.

Eighteen-san highlighted the prevalence of violence and knife attacks in his community in South Africa. Recognizing the disparity between aikido training and real-life situations, he incorporated training with real knives to expose students to the realistic nature of knife attacks, including specific target areas and

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the potential severity of injuries. However, he acknowledged that some misconceptions exist, as aikido techniques may not appear visually intense compared to strikes in karate, for instance. He also noted that as instructors become more skilled, their movements require less effort, leading to a perception that aikido is practised by overweight individuals casually throwing each other around.

Although brutal and realistic training exists, Six-san explained that training is not real: if we trained as if it were real, we could die. This is one of the reasons that aikido training is often soft. Sixteen-san compared it with other martial arts:

However, aikido seeks to resolve attacks, stop disputes, and place the other party under control but does not hurt them. This is not passive avoidance or inaction, but oppositely, it

secures the greatest victory and best result without harming anyone. (Sixteen-san, translated)

Many participants mentioned the importance of connecting with the opponent. Three-san referred to the typical blending with the form as in an *iriminage* (entering) throw and called it an example of harmony. Five-san, Twelve-san, and Fourteen-san declared how they appreciate the absence of brute force in aikido.

Thirteen-san even described how he trains with the least amount of touching people: 'So not to use strength, but to keep myself light and work with them'. Fifteen-san tries to feel the variations between 'sweaty blokey 100-kilo plus attacks' and 'a shihonage [throw] with just one fingertip contact'.

Two-san said that his training fluctuates between toughness and softness for practical reasons and because of the students' age. One-san revealed that switching from yoga to aikido when younger helped him channel his aggression and gain self-control. Yoga gave him too much energy that he could not handle.

That aikido is not about fighting was a recurring theme. In the narratives of many participants, the concepts of physical training without causing harm and with an emphasis on training calmness emerged. According to Nineteen-san, what matters is honesty in the attack, which does not aim to kill or injure, nor does it seek to just 'tickle'. Fifteen-san summarized the discussion: 'Everyone says hard and soft styles, but it's a hard style that's just been softened, and yeah, it can be a hard style instantly should you need it to be'.

AIKIDO MOTIVATION, FROM SELF-DEFENCE TO SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Many participants claimed that aikido is useful for self-defence, whether as a tough or a soft training practice. However, Three-san argued that aikido as self-defence is not possible because it is too efficient:

I think it [aikido] is, it's flawed if you use it as a self-defence, because its origins are barbaric. Do you send the guy to the hospital? Then you are going to prison. OK? So, so self-defence has to be with mi... watered-down efficacy. So it's not aikido. (Three-san)

Even though not every participant considered aikido as self-defence, it is a motivation for many other participants. Sixteen-san and Fifteen-san promoted aikido as such.

So if you were to choke me, my objective is to restrain you from doing that and to stop you from doing that, but without fundamentally, you know, smashing all your teeth in and smacking your head into the floor. (Fifteen-san)

Interestingly, some participants advise learning another martial art if you want to learn self-defence quickly. Nine-san recommended Brazilian jiu jitsu or MMA. One-san, who has

experience in several arts, prefers aikido as self-defence because it prepares you to deal with several attackers at once, teaches you to avoid injury, and is efficient. Three-san implicitly recommended the way aikido was taught a century ago.

Aikido as self-defence focuses on aikido as an external martial art, i.e. observable techniques. However, all participants referred to both external and internal principles.²

The forms themselves are actually meant for fighting. The principles can be used for combat, but once you start uncovering those principles, the desire to fight usually disappears. (Seven-san, translated)

Nine-san shared that focusing solely on the external aspects of aikido, such as physical prowess and self-defence, hinders personal growth while directing one's awareness inward fosters development. Two-san said that aikido, being a *do* or a path, requires constant refinement and polishing, emphasizing the importance of ongoing personal development. This is similar to Twenty-san, for whom aikido represents the ultimate path of lifelong learning, not merely accumulating experience or knowledge but a continuous process of self-discovery and unlearning, leading to a fuller understanding of oneself. Both Twenty-san and One-san declared that individuals must choose what aspects to focus on in their personal journey. Three-san and Eighteen-san talked extensively about efficiency and harmony while adding that deeper understanding is often gained through long-term commitment. Some, like Nine-san, explicitly mentioned that self-transformation is not unique to aikido and possibly present in any serious pursuit of personal development.

Some referred to recognizing and controlling the ego as part of self-transformation:

In aikido, it is essential to acknowledge and control the ego, avoiding excessive pride or defensiveness, whether by arrogantly displaying dominance or by shrinking in fear and self-doubt. (One-san)

What are the limits of self-transformation? One-san and Nine-san explained that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, e.g., what will you do if someone scratches your car or threatens your family? The internal aspects of aikido are often a hidden agenda and taught implicitly, assuming that years of diligent physical training will automatically serve inner growth and a balanced ego. The question then arises: does aikido make someone a better person? Four-san does not believe so. Twenty-san expressed his disappointment in that regard. Further down the interview, he claimed that aikido had brought about significant positive changes in his personality. He said that in line with the physical aspect, various aspects of our human existence gain strength and can further develop: 'In that sense, it may also be a natural consequence that we encounter strong egos on the mat' (Twenty-san, translated). Twelve-san made a similar claim: 'It's the research

2 Internal principles that guide practitioners in self-development, distinct from those in martial arts that focus on cultivating internal energy or ki.

that we need to do, and this is the beauty of aikido, how to do love, peace, and harmony together with the self-defence' (Twelve-san, translated).

Besides the motivation for self-defence and self-transformation, fourteen participants referred to the importance of belonging to an aikido community. Twelve-san, Fifteen-san, Eighteen-san, and Nineteen-san talked about the joy and fun of training with peers by engaging in rolls, throws, and laughter.

It is not all fun and joy in aikido communities. The challenges faced by aikido practitioners, such as changes in dojos and gender biases, can impact their development. Some, like Sixteen-san, chose to step out of their comfort zones to promote and practise aikido while maintaining fidelity to tradition.

Take me as an example. Because I changed several dojos in these years of learning aikido, people consider that my lineage is not pure anymore. Plus, the fact that I am a woman, the chance of being referred to as an aikido instructor is even lower. I am well aware that these challenges will adversely impact my aikido development. The above reasons have driven me to leave my comfort zone and return to my hometown to promote and practise aikido. (Sixteen-san, translated)

Twenty-san explained that aikido embodies the budo spirit, originating from the warrior class in Japan, combining loyalty to superiors with self-development, pushing oneself to the limits, and becoming a more complete human being. It involves living a straightforward, honest, and uncompromising life with the responsibility to uphold societal structures. It is in this regard that Sixteen-san respected harmony in one place and her self-development in another. Besides the motivation for self-transformation, interconnection with people is an integral aspect of personal growth in aikido: connecting with others on the *tatami* (training mat), in the aikido community, and in the real world.

AIKIDO IN SOCIETY, FROM BROADER SOCIAL APPLICATIONS TO COMBATING VIOLENCE

Numerous participants highlighted – in some way or another – a fundamental principle central to the proper execution and fluidity of aikido: recognizing that one's movements extend beyond mere individual actions and instead incorporate an inseparable connection with the surrounding environment. This encompasses the physical realm, including opponents and immediate surroundings, and the broader context of society, nature, and the cosmos. Twenty-san highlighted the importance of moving in harmony with others and acknowledged the societal responsibility of aikido practitioners to nourish society, whether through imparting their experience or actively participating in local

governance. Approximately half of the expert narratives testified to the demonstration of societal responsibility.

Seventeen-san ran an aikido therapy clinic in Indonesia for eight years, where he helped everyone, especially those in poor health. Not every society in the world would readily authorize aikido therapy clinics unless their practice is backed up by research.

For Ten-san, aikido helped her forge a renewed connection with her late mother, who had Alzheimer's disease.

You know, we started doing aikido with her. Energetically, oh my god, it was amazing, really, like, it was incredible. She really started flourishing and, even in her Alzheimer's, because that's who she was and, I mean, that's who we all are. Boy, did that make a difference. (Ten-san)

According to Five-san, aikido in Algeria helps children find purpose, keeping them away from the streets and addressing issues like drug and alcohol addiction. Besides bringing communities into the aikido dojo, some bring aikido to communities. In an effort to promote aikido and its relevance to daily life, Sixteen-san delivers lectures in local colleges, actively engaging with people and witnessing initial success in promoting aikido as a means of self-protection, particularly in response to incidents of violence in the area. Although aikido plays a central role in these experiences, the actions and motivations of the experts are crucial to these broader social applications. They showed conviction and passion.

Aikido was argued to bring communities together. For Fourteen-san, aikido in East Africa unites practitioners from diverse countries, including Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Somalia, showcasing an impressive achievement given the cultural variations among these nations and the numerous tribes within them. Fourteen-san dreams of more continuous efforts: 'Even if we change some few young people, it will be my happiness'. Nine-san and Ten-san reported successful efforts to bring Palestinians and Israelis together on the mat. Ten-san was one of the first American senseis who ever went to Russia in the 1980s as part of the citizen's diplomacy movement.³

The international endeavours were and still are a challenge. So was finding training facilities for a dojo. Five participants reported obstacles related to budget, economic context, the COVID-19 pandemic, and identity in urban and rural societies. Interestingly, Sixteen-san linked the female-male ratio of advanced aikido practitioners with society:

[My country's] female aikido masters are excellent, but the number is very small. [...] Female aikido masters are the highlights on aikido cushions and indicate aikido development level as well as societal safety in [my country]. (Sixteen-san, translated)

According to the experts, aikido finds application in areas where one would not generally expect martial arts. It informs posture

3 New conflicts arose in Palestine, Israel, and Russia between the time of the interviews and this publication.
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when driving a car or preparing food in the kitchen (One-san). What aikido teaches about posture, breath, and calmness is used for stress reduction and self-control when giving presentations or interacting in professional or private settings (Two-san and Fifteen-san). It also supports finding the strength to face a situation: patience, timing, and impact (Three-san). Ten-san even teaches aikido principles to CEOs and golfers. Fifteen-san uses aikido analogies in sales:

And then I apply a verbal *kote gaeshi* [an aikido technique], and that turns it in my favour. I use that as a bit of a mental kind of pathway to try and understand people's objections and then turn them, turn that to my advantage. (Fifteen-san)

As far as physical use is concerned, sixteen participants used aikido in situations outside the dojo. Most of them only once or twice. Several reported how their *ukemi* (rolling and break-falling) skills guaranteed them an unscathed rescue when falling off a bicycle or on a slippery slope. Others admitted to having been young and foolish to test their skills on the street. They generally regretted it, especially the injuries they had suffered, and learnt from it, especially in their quest for efficiency in aikido. Many told stories of how they had protected others or themselves from harassment. In one story, they were threatened with a gun. In some cases, they used aikido against a knife or machete attack. Eighteen-san used the *tsukagashira* (the butt of the handle) of his samurai sword to ward off an attack with a butcher's knife.

Walking by the swimming pool on the left-hand side. Public swimming pool, and he came out of the (laughs) – what do you call that – out of the the grass with like a kni... (shows the size with his hands, looks like 40-50 cm), what do you call, a butcher's knife. A long butcher's knife. And I take the sword like this (shows how he takes an imaginary sword from his back), turn, and I hit him with the blunt part, here. And when I pull the sword away, you could see this. What do you call it? A tick, mark that it made and I put the sword back and I ask him: 'What do you want?' The guy was literally pissing in his pants, like in standing there, because he saw the blade close to him. Maybe I do not call it his third eye. He saw, he, he's like, was standing, and, but and I look at him and say: 'You're wet, bro. You must go now. You're wet; go home'. And he ran back where he came from. (Eighteen-san)

Participants frequently mentioned useful calmness in the real-life situations they described. It helped them act and decide not to fight even if they could: 'Let's get out of here' (Fifteen-san). Nineteen-san used the term *muteki* (no enemy) for this, meaning that you create a situation without an enemy. Four-san did not attribute calmness to aikido alone. Although calmness, posture, breathwork, and self-control are useful, they will not necessarily save lives. Aikido as the way to solve everything non-violently is a myth Three-san gladly busted:

For people who never had a true fight, the breathing just sinks. Which are total fantasies.
[...]

I I have students in SWAT teams or are prison guardian or

psychiatric nurses and, it's always the same story. You cannot, you have to be five or six [people to restrain one person] and and really, usually, you end up injuring the guy. (Three-san)

Although many of the experts interviewed aim to combat violence by remaining calm and performing aikido techniques without harming anyone, several admitted that aikido in the real world is no guarantee of remaining calm and avoiding harm.

TANGIBLE VALUES, FROM NOT JAPANIZED TO JAPANIZED

The Japanese way of teaching and running a dojo inspired many of the aikido experts. Some adopt the Japanese way rigorously; others blend it with local ways. Six-san, one of the European experts interviewed, talked about how his aikido life was restricted to his teaching practice. There was hardly anything Japanese in his house, and he claimed: '*Je suis pas tatamisé*', which means 'I am not japanized' and refers to the Japanese word for training mats, *tatami*. His claim was in contrast to many other participants who often embrace more than just the art of aikido and are interested in things related to the origins of aikido or Japan in general. For instance, some participants wore a T-shirt with Japanese motifs or had Japanese artwork hanging on the wall behind them during the video chat. One interview took place in the participant's dojo at home in Western Europe, decorated with Asian artefacts. Another interview concluded with a quick lunch at a sushi restaurant, which was not a convenient choice and gave us a walk through several streets and past other restaurants. Fifteen-san revealed that he had aikido tattooed on his body, showing dedication beyond the *tatami*.

Three participants have a master's degree in Japanology, and fourteen participants spent at least a few months in Japan. Many of them were an *uchi-deshi*, a live-in student, in either the Hombu Dojo in Tokyo or another dojo. They reported that the experience influenced – or even changed – their lives.

I was weak and always sick when I was young and prone to asthma. I was not active as a young boy. Until the time I was at Hombu, everything transformed physically, mentally, and spiritually. At Hombu, the training was tough and consistent. By far as I know, Hombu is the only place that stands one of a kind. Especially being trained as *uchi-deshi* and live-in students at Hombu. At Hombu Dojo, life is about training and serve masters and the organisation. The training could be as tough as those in the military. Beside aikido training, one must carry out duty such as cleaning, administrating, serving, and dedication to masters and Hombu as part of tradition and culture, especially in the world of budo [martial arts]. (Seventeen-san)

Some participants relocated to Japan and at least five of the participants have or had a Japanese spouse. Most of the experts interviewed mastered the Japanese language at survival level, and some even at proficiency level. Eleven-san, an American who lived in Japan for 30 years, kept mentioning Japanese words as he struggled to find the appropriate words in his native English. The

story of Eighteen-san is the most striking illustration of bringing concrete Japanese things into a non-Japanese life. He used to walk the streets of his community in South Africa with a samurai sword. He wore it under a long coat and it looked like a walking stick.

INTANGIBLE VALUES, FROM RELIGION TO THE ABSENCE OF SPIRITUALITY

Most participants talked about mental, philosophical, psychological, ethical, or spiritual values in aikido. They perceive the immaterial meaning of aikido differently, from religious significance through to the absence of immaterial aspects. Since spirituality is sensitive for some people, it was handled carefully in the interview question using a neutral term: intangible values.

Seventeen-san shares Ueshiba's spiritual and philosophical teachings with his students to keep the tradition and culture alive. Although Ueshiba's teachings hold significance for some practitioners, they can be perceived as inaccessible by many due to their esoteric nature. Twenty-san admitted the difficulty even though he had studied Japanology. Besides Ueshiba, other sources are attributed to spirituality in aikido, such as the budo or warrior spirit. Nineteen-san said that when we practise aikido, 'we inherit the old spirit of Japan'. He and other participants acknowledged that Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, and esoteric Buddhism had influenced aikido. Some link it to Zen Buddhism, probably because of its popularity in the last century. One-san was the most adamant about the importance of Buddhist meditation, even though he was reluctant to explain it.

Something in between, and this is truly my personal belief, but a belief that I do like to express: at a certain point, I think people who practise martial arts should take the step towards meditation. And the right kind of meditation. Otherwise, the ego becomes too inflated.

Interviewer: And what is the right meditation?

I'm not going to say. (We laugh.) In any case, the central point of meditation should be Buddha. There is no other meditation. If there's a meditation where Buddha is not mentioned, then it's not the right one. It's not actually meditation. It can be relaxation, it can be very healing, whatever you want, but you can't say this is meditation. So, for the purpose for which I say meditation is necessary, to find the right meditation for that purpose, it will be Buddhist meditation. That takes courage, you know. (One-san, translated)

Whether the participant was Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, they referred to meditation techniques and Eastern spirituality without seeing any conflict. Thirteen-san uses breathing techniques he learnt in aikido to 'focus on what I want to say in my prayer'.

Before, I used to think meditation (shakes his head as if it is not good), because the fact that the church thinks that meditation is really evil or such things. But when I came to deeper in martial arts or deeper in aikido, I learned that

meditation is very important because you learn yourself. You are able to rely on 'my how do I get to control my temper? How do I get to control my tempers?' Such things. Because before, I used to say when I get into martial arts, I'll be fighting, fighting, fighting, but since I started martial arts, I've never fight. (Fourteen-san)

Eighteen-san and Eleven-san reported about when they went up the mountains and did exercises in cold water streams or under waterfalls. This is inspired by purification rituals in Shintoism, often referred to as *misogi*. For Nineteen-san, aikido represents a Buddhist concept of interconnectedness with people and the world. Indeed, many referred to how we are all interconnected beings. For Five-san, this results in love. He used *amour* (love) 6 times and *aimer* (to love) 23 times in his 37-minute interview:

Because it is a discipline of the soul, that's it, right? But what it deeply conveys is this: Those who love aikido, I love them because they embrace a proper discipline. A discipline of love, a discipline of respect. So, for me, that's it. If all the presidents of the world practised aikido, there would be less war. (Five-san, translated)

Aikido is love and peace for some, not for others. Six-san and Fifteen-san explicitly did not promote that aikido can heal the world. Seven-san sees the claim as a moral responsibility to at least bring peace within and between aikido associations.

Many narratives about the aikido 'mindset and heartset' (Ten-san) were reminiscent of the *shu-ha-ri* principle, the three steps from physical over mental towards spiritual growth, highlighting that spiritual consciousness in aikido is possible only by diligent physical practice. Ten-san elaborately posited that breathwork and balance are crucial, linking them with quantum physics, Buddhism, and Judaism. Not everyone sees the need to philosophize, only to feel through the body. For some, spirituality is physical training and an individual path. Fifteen-san called it 'a bit of a Zen path' and Eleven-san 'a journey to not take things personally and to take full responsibility'. For others, it is a magical experience.

And then, there is the intangible concept of *ki*, which is probably tangible for some. The term *ki* is often translated as energy and refers to an inner force with external effects. From a phenomenological perspective, *ki* is a construct rather than a phenomenon, representing an attempt to name the inexplicable as experienced and observed (Kuhn, 2019, p. 10). Five-san explained that *ki* is a spiritual force related to breath. Eight-san described his experience with *ki*:

I remember well the moment when I felt my own *ki* point for the first time. I was sitting in *seiza* [sitting on the knees], and suddenly, boom, there it was, like, wow, you're grounded now. And then you start searching for it, right? You can forget about it. You can just forget about it, even though you know you felt it, and then that moment when you consciously try to find it, you can't. Until the next moment when it just happens again, and you keep it open and let it happen, accepting it as it

is. Yes, that also allows you to, allows you to grow. Being expectant but not having an end goal. (Eight-san, translated)

It is not considered individual; ki is part of connectedness, 'when you unify with your partner, you intensify the floods of ki' (Twelve-san). However diverse the spectrum of intangible values, it is linked to the self-transformation motivation of aikido practitioners. Nonetheless, some practitioners are interested in the physical dimension only.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the contemporary meaning of aikido by conducting interviews with experts in the field. While discussing the meaning of aikido, the participants revealed details about their practice, motivation, society, and values. The findings from this study show that aikido is a manifestation of many phenomena. Distinguishable patterns, forming five spectrums, were derived from the interview data. This analysis of the interview data started as a search for differences in the aikido narratives. All participants spoke about aikido as if it were one language with different dialects. Following the linguistic analogy, there is no sharp cleavage between dialects but a linguistic continuum, a continuous spectrum of speech varieties ranging from bush talk to educated standard and showing an extreme degree of variability (De Camp, 1971, p. 350). Similarly, the five spectrums here show variations rather than differences (Figure 2).

Firstly, the spectrum of aikido practice extends across a continuum from rigorous and demanding approaches to gentle, fluid training styles. Secondly, the progression along the aikido motivation spectrum spans from an emphasis on self-defence and martial efficacy to a profound journey of self-transformation. Thirdly, the spectrum associated with aikido's role in society illuminates the implications aikido has on its societal context and vice versa. Fourthly, the spectrum concerning tangible values uncovers an array of material aspects within Japanese culture that experts adopt and incorporate. Lastly, the spectrum relating to intangible values offers insight into the varied ways in which experts perceive and attribute immaterial significance to aikido.

The narratives of each participating expert can be, however, not necessarily, linked to aikido styles, schools, and senseis. Tomiki aikido, for instance, is known for being the only style with competition. Yoshinkai school is known for being a tough style, whereas the school of Tohei sensei is known for non-violent conflict solving and self-development. Although this was not directly tested for, there did not seem to be a correlation between practice and values. For instance, two participants meet and practise together regularly as each other's sensei and disciple, although they live in different countries. Interestingly, they showed quite different views on both tangible and intangible values. Indeed, the five spectrums of variation illustrate multiple facets of aikido that result from the experts' relationships to aikido.

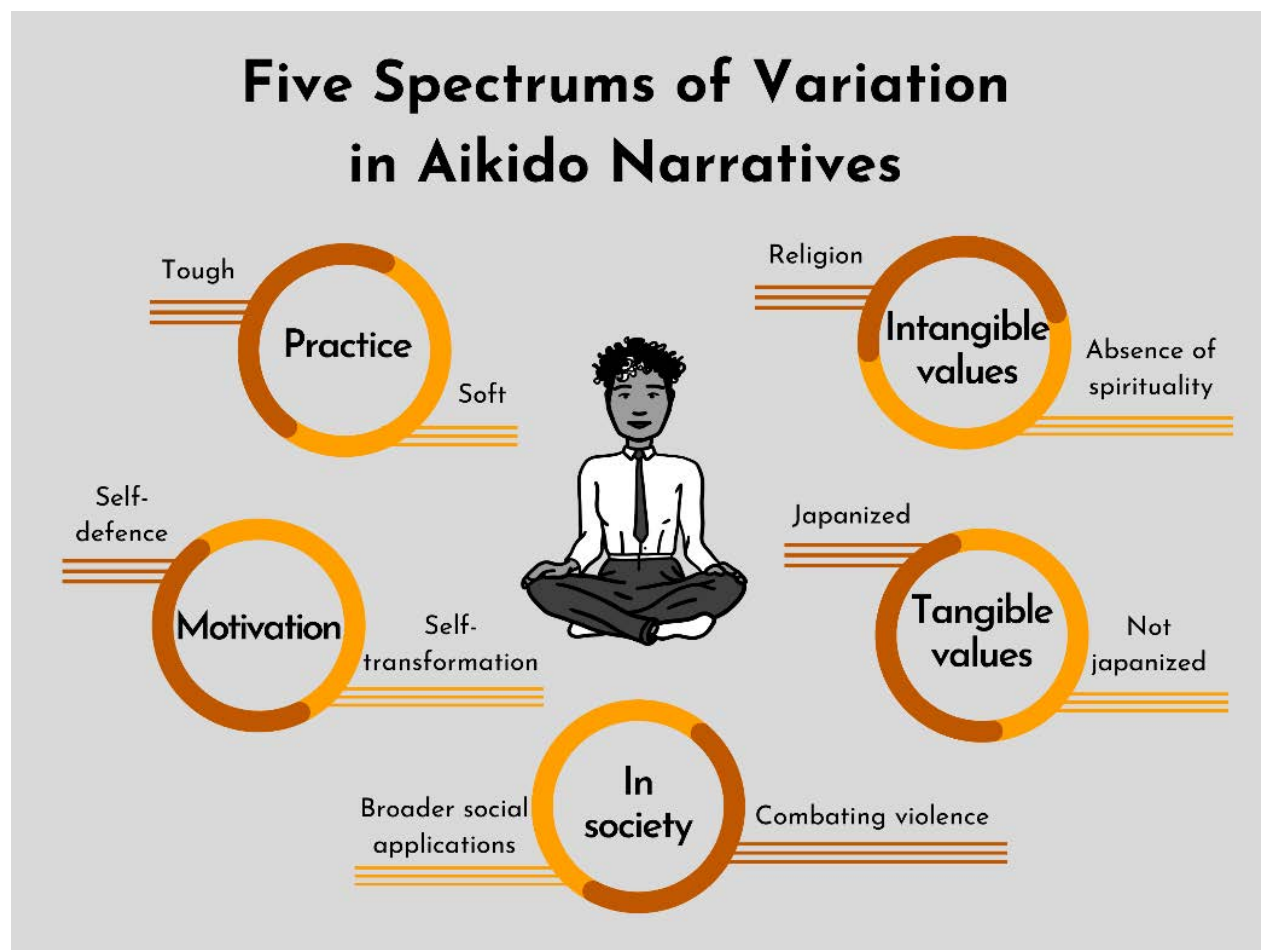
The exercises in cold water streams or beneath cascading waterfalls Eighteen-san and Eleven-san reported constitute a tough training practice motivated by the pursuit of self-transformation. The exercises incorporate tangible elements of traditional Japanese rituals and are deeply influenced by the intangible values of Shintoist purification, known as misogi. When referring to Saotome, one of Ueshiba's disciples, Little (2018, p. 94) explains that the do in aikido is a way of misogi, of a freeing relation to violence. Saotome 'argues that the truth of aikido lies in its essentially ethical dimension, that is, in its practice of self-cultivation' (p. 91). In practising the skills of violence, a practitioner actually learns to prevent a situation of violence from emerging. Little calls this the irony of martial arts like aikido (p. 95), and it is the hub of multiple perspectives. These multiple perspectives coalesce into varied relationships with aikido, as exemplified by the experts in this study, ranging from the external appearance of violence to the internal pursuit of peace and self-transformation.

It is not clear where self-transformation ends and spirituality begins. Telles (2022, p. 24) describes spirituality in martial arts as an experience of which practitioners may not be consciously aware.

Considered as a rich and meaningful connection between practitioners and their environment, spirituality can be experienced, lived and sometimes even described. Yet it cannot be taught as a mere technique. It is an aspect of the fighting experience that should not be neglected in training and can be experienced daily. It may even be a vital key to consistency and perseverance in the hard path of martial art practices. (Telles, 2022, p. 24)

Whether the participants referred to the intangible values of aikido as spirituality, religion, or philosophy, their interpretations were reminiscent of an anthropocosmic view counterbalancing an anthropocentric worldview and binary thinking in terms of otherness and difference. They see humanity as being one with self, society, nature, and heaven, not being the centre of the universe (Carter, 2008, p. 21; Jia & Jia, 2016, pp. 34–35). Many participants believe this is why aikido is called the martial art of harmony. Harmony comes in different shapes and sizes. For Three-san, harmony refers to the typical blending with the form in a technique. For others, harmony is interconnecting with people and pursuing noble outcomes inside and outside the dojo. The story of Sixteen-san, who moved to the countryside to keep the harmony in the capital city's aikido community and to pursue her aikido dream, brings about the question of whose harmony to uphold. She lives in Asia, and, indeed, the Western concept of harmony differs from the Eastern, Confucian usage that 'emphasizes family or social duties and more generally political duties, rather than belonging to a natural totality' (Gens, 2022, p. 132). The divide between the idea and the practice of harmony was also a challenge for some Western participants. It disappointed Twenty-san whereas it motivated Seven-san to bring aikido associations together.

Figure 2 – Five spectrums of variation in aikido narratives



That intangible values in aikido have a tangible dimension is obvious. Many see aikido as an embodied philosophy that is tied to the traditions of Japan and the East. All participants were clear about being not far away from or at least linked to the source, and many boasted a pilgrimage to Japan. The material adoption or sustenance of traditional Japanese things and lifestyles is informed by ancient Japanese culture and romanticism (Friedman, 2005, p. 12). Amidst all the facets of aikido and its expert practitioners, Twenty-san said that aikido is not that remarkable.

But the individuals who attain a certain level and live aikido and pass it on to others, they are the ones who make aikido unique. In that sense, aikido is indeed a very modern manifestation of the traditional martial spirit, and it's a legacy that might still be worth carrying into the future. (Twenty-san, translated)

The participants were all long-time practitioners and, therefore, 'highly motivated by growth-related motivation' (Y. Ko & Kim, 2010, p. 118). This sets in motion transformative effects within

them and their societal connections, ranging from physical and mental resilience to bringing aikido to communities, uniting communities, and integrating the community within the aikido dojos. Change is of all times and places. The inception of aikido was diachronically, geographically, and demographically influenced by the founder's identity, era, location, history, tradition, culture, reputation, and motivation. Ever since, aikido has been constantly undergoing a process of challenges and changes even though most aikido teachers and practitioners want to stay true to what the founder created.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Twenty aikido experts were selected based on their expertise and geographic distribution. Although the sample was diverse and the interviews were in-depth, this study had three limitations. First, not all manifestations of aikido were represented. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable. Second, the study included only experienced aikido practitioners who taught, held examinations,

and organized aikido schools or associations, which may limit the transferability of the findings to less experienced practitioners. Third, the study relied on self-reported data, which is subject to response bias. Although efforts were made to minimize this bias, it is still possible that some participants provided socially desirable responses, leading to an overestimation or underestimation of certain perspectives. Future research could address these limitations using larger samples and employing different research methods to validate the findings.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the multiplicity of what aikido means to aikido experts worldwide in the early 2020s. Five spectrums of variation emerged: aikido practice, aikido motivation, aikido in society, tangible values, and intangible values. These spectrums do not denote black-or-white options that exclude one another. They are more like a play of yin and yang, representing the dynamic interplay of elements on a spectrum.

Each position on the spectrum is diachronically, geographically, and demographically influenced, specifically by time, location, tradition, reputation, identity, and motivation. Therefore, the point is not to judge which position on the spectrum is right but how the relationship between aikido and the expert or practitioner encompasses a rich tapestry of variations that underscore its multifaceted and unstable nature.

In fact, analysis of interview data has uncovered commonalities as well as differences, proving that aikido is a worldwide phenomenon with unique experiences. Building on Bowman's (2021, pp. 240–243) conclusions regarding the invention and reinvention of martial arts, it is likely that the practices, meanings, values, and imageries of aikido, although undoubtedly subject to change, will endure rather than vanish. In the discourse against simplifying aikido or other martial arts, the five spectrums of variation presented in this study contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the art form.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Data Accessibility Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

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