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COMMENTARY: THE CONTEMPORARY MUSHA TRAINING FOR BRITISH KENSHI PROJECT

ABSTRACT

This commentary paper explores the impact of international exchange through kendo using a case study, the *Contemporary Musha Training for British Kenshi* project. The *Contemporary Musha Training* project seeks to foster intercultural understanding among kendo practitioners from Japan and the United Kingdom as part of international martial arts education. The initiative was established in 2023, initially founded on personal connections, and was formally institutionalised in 2024 through a partnership agreement between the British Kendo Association (BKA) and the National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya (NIFS). This paper examines changes in participants' cultural awareness, drawing upon qualitative data gathered through joint training sessions and cultural exchange programmes between BKA and NIFS. By doing so, it aims to elucidate the academic significance of international cultural exchange through kendo.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEYWORDS

Academic exchange; intercultural understanding; kendo; martial arts tourism

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INTRODUCTION

The Japanese government has emphasised the importance of international cooperation in sports by creating a national policy and an implementation framework through the Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sports to foster international sports partnerships and improve competitive performance, as well as to promote cultural understanding and sustainable development of sports organisations (Japan Sports Agency, 2022). Such partnerships facilitate human resource and training methodologies exchange and contribute to cultural diplomacy and international cooperation. Martial arts tourism in Japan is a result of this national policy, however, its educational impact remains underexplored (Nakayama et al., 2023).

Kendo, a traditional Japanese martial art, combines physical skill, Bushido spirit, etiquette, and mental training. It is deeply embedded in educational institutions, including schools, police agencies, and corporate clubs in Japan, where it promotes both technical development and cultural values (Tanaka, 1981). However, outside Japan, kendo often lacks institutional support, limiting its competitive growth and contributing to significant disparities in participation and achievements in the World Kendo Championships (Oda & Kondo, 2012). In the absence of commercial sponsorship, formal organisations are crucial for international exchange and the global spread of kendo. Previous research on kendo exchange and internationalisation (Oda & Kondo, 2012; Honda, 2009) highlights the role of physical practice in fostering mutual understanding across cultures. Partnerships between Japanese universities and international kendo associations can contribute to technical development, expand kendo's global reach, and enhance cross-cultural understanding.

This commentary paper examines the role of institutional partnerships in promoting kendo internationally, focusing on the *Contemporary Musha Training* project, a collaboration between the British Kendo Association (BKA) and the National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya (NIFS) for technical and cultural exchange. While Japanese universities such as NIFS cultivate elite kendo practitioners achieving relevant results in domestic and international competitions, kendo in the United Kingdom is practised mainly in dojos and university clubs without formal integration into the educational curriculum, thus exchange partnerships help bridge the gap in training environments and skill development. Through the analysis of qualitative material, such as field notes and official reports, it became clear that participants in this exchange gained respect for cultural differences, with kendo as a medium for education. This commentary on the project aims to offer insights into the future of international martial arts cooperation.

International Budo Exchange Programmes

Previous literature and reports reveal no partnership agreements between universities and national federations specifically for athlete exchange in kendo. However, there are several broader initiatives in martial arts. For instance, the International Budo

University created an international office in Hungary for kendo (IBU, n.d.); the International Judo Federation established a partnership with the University of Sports of Hungary for coach development (IJF, 2019); and Tokai University collaborated with other universities in Russia for judo (FEFU, 2017). While these initiatives demonstrate the potential of international academic exchanges, they also highlight the challenges associated with creating a structured, sustainable programme of athlete exchange, particularly in martial arts, which may not have the same institutional support or visibility as more widely practised sports.

A related field is martial arts tourism, which examines the intersection between martial practices and travel for cultural or educational purposes. Previous literature in English (Figueiredo et al., 2020; Cynarski, 2023) shows a concentration of individual researchers and athletes travelling for training camps, championships, classes and self-improvement. These are events held by international federations of martial arts or personal connections between researchers around the world. In the case of Japanese literature about the theme, the main focus is on the national programme Budo Tourism (Nakayama et al., 2023; Takata et al., 2021), a policy developed by the Japan Sports Agency, an official agency under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to promote Japanese culture through hands-on experiences in martial arts, while also encouraging the development of commercially viable experiences for inbound tourists. For example, small companies (Samurai Trip, n.d.), university clubs (OUHS, n.d.) and local dojos (Saishinkai, n.d.) provide kendo lessons for international tourists. Therefore, in the case of literature in English, the main point is 'martial arts', and tourism is a way to improve technical skills, while studies in Japanese focus on 'tourism' by utilising martial arts as tools to increase visitors in Japan.

The *Contemporary Musha* programme serves as a combination of the two types of martial arts tourism mentioned above. It is an institutionalised project focused on small groups of practitioners to provide high-level practices while incorporating historical and cultural aspects of martial arts to enhance cultural understanding. Therefore, it can provide institutional support that allows regular inbound and cultural experiences for higher-level practitioners. It represents a model for promoting international engagement through martial arts, bridging physical practice with intercultural learning.

Resource Constraints in Non-professional Sports

From the perspective of sports development theory, the Sport Development Pyramid Model (Eady, 1993) categorises sports growth into four levels: foundation, participation, performance, and excellence. While excellence and professional sports benefit from sponsorship and structured funding mechanisms, non-commercial martial arts like kendo primarily rely on foundation and participation in the form of voluntary networks. This structural distinction explains why kendo practitioners frequently encounter financial and logistical difficulties when engaging in international exchanges.

Similar challenges are observed in other martial arts and cultural programmes. For instance, judo and karate have secured international funding due to their inclusion in the Olympic Games, granting them access to governmental and corporate sponsorship. Conversely, traditional Japanese cultural arts such as tea ceremony and calligraphy largely depend on cultural grants or private donations. Kendo, positioned between these two categories, faces difficulties in obtaining systematic funding for international exchange opportunities.

One significant initiative addressing this issue is the JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) volunteer programme, which supports developing countries by dispatching volunteers to teach sports, arts, and culture. Within this framework, kendo is included as one of the supported disciplines. JICA acts as a mediator, with the other two key players being individual volunteers and local organisations. However, unlike structured sports exchange programmes, this initiative does not establish formal bilateral agreements between kendo federations but instead relies on the commitment of individual practitioners. As a result, sustainability remains a persistent challenge.

International kendo exchange faces challenges due to limited resources and reliance on personal networks. To ensure sustainability, partnerships with academic institutions, government initiatives, and long-term agreements with kendo federations are essential. To overcome these limitations, both further research and the practical establishment of sustainable funding strategies and institutional partnerships are essential. By applying theoretical insights from sports development and cultural exchange, kendo can establish a more stable foundation for its global expansion while preserving its traditional values.

PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

The subsequent section offers background information on the participating institutions and the partnership framework. The BKA was founded in 1964 as a non-profit organisation. It coordinates kendo, iaido, and jodo activities in England and is affiliated with the European Kendo Federation (EKF), part of the International Kendo Federation (FIK). NIFS is a Japanese national university with a focus on sports and the only one with a major in budo.

The official agreement between BKA and NIFS also started with an internship of NIFS' kendo club alumni in NIFS' graduate school in the United Kingdom with the support of a BKA official. Both parties were connected and developed a formal relationship from this personal connection. Maesaka, the professor responsible for the NIFS Kendo Club, developed the programme schedule, and the NIFS Kendo Club received two British students in August 2023 for 10 days.

The first participants selected were two young players similar in age to NIFS students, with Japanese language knowledge sufficient

for understanding the dynamics of the training, and were both members of the British Junior Kendo Team. As members of the junior national team, both had competed in the European Kendo Championships before. However, they were not selected for the senior national team to compete in the World Kendo Championships until the programme's launch.

From July 13 to 22, 2023, the participants joined 20 hours of practice during eight training days. In particular, they learned sandan-geiko, a unique NIFS Kendo Club exercise developed to improve energy, physical strength, and striking abilities. According to the participant's reports and observations logged by Maesaka, both improved their overall condition and individual points commented on by seniors or other professors. From a cultural exchange perspective, the participants visited Udo Jingu Shrine to deepen their understanding of the historical and cultural foundations of Japan, particularly those integrated into the practice of martial arts.

Cultural Background and Integration of Educational Elements

Religious concepts from Shinto, such as rituals and war techniques, though based on myths, are essential for understanding the cultural dimension of martial arts. Light and Kinnaird (2002) argue that in the search for Japanese roots that supported the arguments of a 'Japanese spirit' instead of Chinese Buddhism, these mythological elements of Shinto were combined to form nationalist ideologies that influenced education, cultural heritage, and national identity, and martial arts functioned as a means through which these values were transmitted.

Thus, as the Shinto religion is ingrained in the historical and cultural aspects of martial arts, a visit to Udo Jingu Shrine (Nichinan City, Miyazaki Prefecture) was included in the programme's schedule. Murayama (1992) discusses that the place was visited by samurai who, influenced by Shinto, believed and worshipped deities in Udo, such as being enlightened by divine entities that led them to develop their own swordsmanship styles, which were later denominated as schools.

One of these schools, the Kageryu, was created by Aisu Hisatada and further developed by Aisu Ikosai, who trained and meditated in a cave where Udo Jingu Shrine is now located at (Okada, 1978). The Kageryu school is one of the primary sources of kenjutsu, which was later developed into kendo. Murayama (1992) further adds that given the mythical dimension attached to these events and because each school kept their techniques in secret from others, written material is relatively scarce.

The two *Contemporary Musha Training* project participants voluntarily wrote about their impressions of their experiences. They stated that by interacting and exchanging experiences with the Budo Programme students at the NIFS' Kendo Club, experiencing Japanese culture, and visiting Udo Jingu Shrine, they could better understand the history and connect it to what they learned.

Early Results and Impact

The *Contemporary Musha Training* project provided participants with an opportunity to enhance their technical skills and cultural understanding. The participants reflected upon their experiences through field notes, which show how the experience influenced their current training and future aspirations. For example, one participant mentioned that, in the future, he aspires to become a researcher in the field of kendo and highlighted an episode of cultural exchange that occurred outside of the dojo, such as “I was happy to talk to the Kendo Club's seniors about other things besides Kendo. I introduced them to British culture, history, and British Kendo” (personal communication, July 23, 2023).

Another participant decided to make his objective during his stay to improve on the university's Kendo Club's training method, the sandan-geiko. He also pinpointed the visit to Udo Jingu Shrine and that he learned about history and its connection to kendo. The following is extracted from his written impressions: “By trying to do it myself, I could understand the training's effectiveness as the sandan-geiko is connected to everything in Kendo, such as the techniques' fundamentals and the nervousness you feel during a match” (personal communication, July 23, 2023).

The participants reported that they improved their kendo skills and also gained a deeper understanding of Japanese culture. Through interactions with the students of the NIFS Kendo Club, they learned about the etiquette and spiritual aspects of kendo, enhancing their cultural awareness. The visit to Udo Jingu Shrine further transformed their perception of the spiritual values embedded in kendo and its historical roots. These experiences not only contributed to technical growth but also broadened the participants' international perspectives and fostered intercultural understanding. These findings align with existing literature that underscores the role of kendo in cultural contexts outside of Japan (Honda, 2009).

Institutionally, the *Contemporary Musha Training* project was received positively from the perspective of NIFS, as it was the first time the university's Kendo Club received international kenshi for training. The project was further developed and formalised as a partnership between NIFS and BKA in 2024. Moreover, BKA will receive Japanese students through host families to immerse them in the culture. In 2024, one year after their *Contemporary Musha Training* participation, both participants further developed their skills through NIFS's education in the United Kingdom. As a result, they were chosen to be part of the British National Squad to represent the country in the World Kendo Championships in Italy (July 2024) in individual and team competitions.

Challenges and Future Directions

The programme's outcomes included improvements in both technical proficiency and cultural understanding. However, several challenges also emerged, such as limited funding for the BKA and resource constraints at NIFS, with participants bearing initial costs. Previously mentioned long-term partnerships and government initiatives could be a solution. Training

environments differ, with NIFS offering daily practice, while United Kingdom dojos do not, but a similar schedule can be achieved by attending multiple dojos. Enhancing cultural exchange through site visits and local events could strengthen the programme. Another challenge is the promotion and recruiting of participants both ways. However, the statements and results of the first two participants before the formal partnership agreement can be used as successful examples of the benefits of this kendo and cultural exchange.

A structured evaluation, combining quantitative and qualitative data, is needed to assess the full impact on participants and the British Kendo Team. Future research could explore the long-term effects on participants' careers and the broader impact of international sports exchanges.

CONCLUSION

The *Contemporary Musha Training* project aimed to enhance young British kenshi's understanding of Japanese kendo culture and prepare them for selection to the British National Squad for the World Kendo Championships, which was achieved in 10 days of stay in this university through the participation in specialised classes, club activities and the participants' efforts. While the programme contributed to their technical development and cultural immersion, it was after they participated in this project that they were selected for the national squad. Thus, the programme played a role in their growth, but it cannot be definitively stated that their selection was solely a direct result of their involvement.

Through classes and cultural site visits, participants deepened their knowledge of kendo and Japanese traditions. The exchange also benefited NIFS students by broadening their international perspectives on kendo. Expanding such exchanges could help develop communication skills and contribute to the global promotion of kendo.

Therefore, this programme indicates that Budo exchanges can be effective for universities in contributing to society from a global development perspective. The initiative combines aspects of academic exchange with martial arts tourism focused on high-level practitioners, providing an institutionalised experience by combining high-level practices and cultural activities. While it is early to assess its full success, further research into long-term impacts and resource management will be vital for the sustainability of international kendo exchange programmes.

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