

*Practicing Peace: The International Okinawan Martial Arts Community as a
Community of Practice*

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2014
Official Conference Proceedings
0152

Abstract

Economists to academics have noted the simultaneous tendency towards globalization and localization in recent decades. At times, the increasingly globalized economy and advances in communications technology seem to bring us together only closely enough to recognize our fundamental differences. Internal divides along cultural, linguistic, political and economic lines become as sharp and clear as geographic boundaries used to be. In such circumstances, “peace” is often thought of as merely the absence of conflict between divergent groups. At the same time, the emergence of worldwide media has fuelled a new ability to form globally connected communities of practice based on activities with local cultural roots. Using Wenger's (2000) community of practice theory, an examination of the domain, community, practice and lexicon of the international Okinawan martial arts community through participant observation, interview and survey data reveals the potential role of communities of practice in facilitating transnational cooperative structures. In this way, peace may be visualized not as a passive state of non-conflict achieved through compromise, but as an active and creative practice based on voluntary membership in a worldwide community.

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Introduction: Cleaving Together and Cleaving Apart

Those from the diverse fields of language maintenance to business have noted simultaneous tendencies towards both globalization and localization. Our use of computers and the internet has resulted in an extremely powerful mass communications ability, unprecedented in all of human history. However, this ability to connect to anyone, anywhere, often seems to bring us only close enough together to like each other less; geographical barriers have been supplanted by often deeper cultural, linguistic, economic and political divides. The expansion in the membership and influence of multinational political and apolitical bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also come with the recognition of such meaningful differences. The United Nations took the occasion of its' 50th anniversary to “[c]ontinue to reaffirm the right of self-determination of all peoples” (1995), which has led to subsequent political changes. The former Yugoslavia, for example, is now six separate countries, but it is uncertain whether we should say it has “expanded” or “split” along pre-existing self-determined divides.

This begs the question of where constructive divides begin and end. Culturally and linguistically, Okinawa is certainly different from Japan, but Miyako Island is different from the rest of Okinawa. However, even within Miyako, there is no guarantee that two people from opposite sides of the island will share a common culture or mutually intelligible language besides that of Japanese. Sharing a distinct culture, language, and ancestry may foster group identity, but also has the potential to strengthen already existing boundaries between Self and Other. The word “cleave”, meaning both “to cleave together” and “to cleave apart”, may best describe these current trends.

Self-Determination and the Definition of Peace

With regards to self-determination, minority language rights are a particularly sensitive issue. Rita Izsák, an independent expert for the UN on minority issues, argues that “[l]anguage is a central element and expression of identity and of key importance in the preservation of group identity” and that “[l]anguage is particularly important to linguistic minority communities seeking to maintain their distinct group and cultural identity, sometimes under conditions of marginalization, exclusion and discrimination” (United Nations, 2013). While she acknowledged that language rights are often construed as part of secessionist movements that threaten governmental authority and national unity, states have often in turn “aggressively promoted a single national language as a means of reinforcing sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity” (United Nations, 2013) Most critically, “Ms. Izsák...noted that protection of linguistic minority rights is a human rights obligation and an essential component of good governance, efforts to prevent tensions and conflict, and the construction of equal and politically and socially stable societies.” This leads to another important question: If the promotion of minority languages as an aspect of self-determination is essential to conflict prevention and the promotion of peace between groups, what is the definition of peace?

Although peace may be defined as the absence of war, most current peace scholars and activists argue that this definition is inadequate. Höglund & Söderberg (2010) assert “merely looking at the frequency of peace agreements that lead to the ending of large-scale violence does not tell us much about the reality of peace beyond the

absence of war...[P]eace is a term that encompasses a whole range of meanings and has highly subjective connotations” (p. 367-368, 370). In a post on Share the World's Resources' website Shirin Ijadi (2007) of Open Democracy cites the number of deaths that occur in developing countries, particularly among children, due to malnutrition, inadequate health care, and poor sanitation. He writes “[p]eace means serenity. One can only feel serene if one's human rights are not violated and one's integrity is protected” (Share the World's Resources website). Goetze & Bliesemann de Guevara (2014) observe that “[c]osmopolitanism has been frequently put forward as the political ideology that should underpin peacebuilding missions... [because of] the connection that is made between the tolerance and universalism of cosmopolitanism on the one hand, and the idea of peace as reconciliation and justice in war-torn societies on the other” (p. 1-2). Given UNESCO's support of linguistic and cultural rights and freedoms, peace could be defined as the freedom of individuals and groups to have and maintain their own self-determined practices without threat of personal harm. Thus, instead of being a passive state describing the absence of negative conflict, we can arrive at a definition of peace as an active and dynamic practice.

Peace as a Practice

What does the practice of peace look like? The answer came to my attention before the question, and from an unlikely source. While searching for terrible music on youtube.com, I saw what looked to be a very promising video of a girl singing Ozzy Osbourne's “Crazy Train.” However, watching the video made plain that not only was the girl extremely talented, but the equally talented musicians who accompanied her were each from a different country, collectively representing USA, Japan, Mexico and Spain (Sabrina Carpenter, 6:24-6:40). We can imagine how these people overcame vast geographic, cultural, and linguistic distances in the production of this music video. Certainly, this accomplishment would not have been possible, or at least would have been much more difficult, without peace between these countries. Watching the music video produced by people working together across numerous distances, I had a sudden realization: this was what peace looked like. My question became: If many areas and peoples around the world have achieved relative peace, what can we now do together?

Communities of Practice

Of course, we may hope for Big Answers, such as ending poverty, disease and war (and we are working on them), but before we can get to those, let's first look at the smaller answers. In other words, what kinds of transnational, transcultural and translinguistic cooperative activities are already happening, and how do they function?

Working with others at a company, going to school, making a youtube video, or pursuing a favourite pass time are all activities where people engage with one another for a specific purpose in their daily lives. In his article “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems” (2000), Etienne Wenger outlines a “social definition of learning” in which “[l]earning...is an interplay between social competence and personal experience. It is a dynamic, two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate. It combines personal relationships with the evolution of social structures”(p. 227). Wenger focuses on “communities of practice” as “the basic building blocks of a social learning system because they are the social 'containers' of the competences that make up that system. By participating in

these communities, we define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context: being a reliable doctor, a gifted photographer, a popular student, or an astute poker player”(p. 229).

Communities of practice are composed of three elements: 1) mutuality or a community that encompasses the various interactions between community members, 2) a joint enterprise or practice that represents how a community strives to achieve its' goals, and 3) a shared repertoire or domain that defines the community's area of expertise, including “language, routines, sensibilities, artifacts, tools, stories, styles etc.” (p. 229) as well as access to these resources, and the ability to use them appropriately. “Communities of practice grow out of a convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement. They offer an opportunity to negotiate competence *through an experience of direct participation*. As a consequence, they remain important social units of learning even in the context of much larger systems” (p. 229, emphasis added).

Because communities of practice are social learning systems structured around social competence and personal experience resulting from direct participation, they do not define belonging according to geopolitical boundaries, but in terms of three modes of belonging to a community. “Engagement” is the ability to engage or accomplish things with others in the community. “Imagination” is the ability to abstractly envision the placement of oneself and others in the community as well as future possibilities. “Alignment” refers to bringing local or individual practice in line with those of the larger community to assist in the achievement of mutual aims. Thus, using these modes of belonging, people voluntarily form peaceful communities across geographical, social, cultural and linguistic boundaries in order to successfully improve joint practices. It is the potential of communities of practice to draw people together that has great relevance for peacemaking, and it is this which is the focus of this paper.

The Okinawan Martial Arts Community as a Community of Practice

a. Community: Structure and Identity

The international Okinawan martial arts community is a fascinating community of practice made up of karate and kobudo practitioners. This group shares a community, domain, and practice. The Okinawan martial arts community includes approximately 50 million members in over 150 countries worldwide (Okinawa Prefecture, 2014). The Okinawan martial arts community can be said to be a “trans” community in that it is transcultural, transnational, and translinguistic, uniting its' members across many often problematic barriers. However, unlike other communities of practice, because Okinawan martial arts are deeply connected to Okinawan culture and the majority of the martial arts community is not Okinawan, frequent “border crossings” are necessary to the practice of the Okinawan martial arts community. This largely entails the alignment of non-Okinawan students with their Okinawan instructors and their Okinawan students. The Okinawan martial arts community is heavily dependent on positive interpersonal relations. Because it is a knowledge-based community, it relies on face-to-face communication for improvements in practice. Therefore, knowing and maintaining good relations, particularly with high-level instructors in the community, is essential, and this cannot be done if cultural, national, or linguistic barriers are allowed to stand in the way.

Marking the martial arts community as a quintessential community of practice (Wenger, 2000), the emphasis in martial arts practice is on learning, rather than achievement. Although there is an extremely strong hierarchy within the martial arts community, it is based on individual skill and length of membership in the community; it is inclusive rather than competitive. For example, the rank of nanadan, or seventh degree black belt, is very difficult to achieve, but there are no limits on the number of nanadans in the world and the rank is open to anyone who meets the criteria. Thus, traditional hierarchies are broken apart as martial arts membership supersedes the importance of sex, race, class, and general social standing outside the dojo. Although the highest status Okinawan karate and kobudo practitioners tend to be elder Okinawan males, it would be expected, for example, that a young African woman would give commands to an older Japanese male in the dojo if she were his senior student. It is furthermore significant that, unlike membership in a sex or race-based group, membership in the Okinawan martial arts community is voluntary. Therefore, if a martial artist does not like his or her position in the hierarchy, he or she may simply change schools or opt out of the community entirely, which is seldom an option for race, sex, or class-based discrimination.

b. Domain, Lexicon, and Symbols

The domain of Okinawan martial arts includes knowledge of Okinawan culture, language, and symbols in addition to knowledge of martial arts techniques. Because it is the birthplace of karate and kobudo, information about Okinawa is not only explicitly taught, but implicitly learned through the practice of Okinawan martial arts and highly valued. Movement forms do not spontaneously occur, but are culturally embedded. For example, many martial arts techniques bear a great physical resemblance to movements of Okinawan dance (Juster, 2011). However, the similarities between martial arts and other Okinawan art forms only become apparent after familiarity with both arts. The understanding of Okinawan martial arts, including forms of address, etiquette and so on in addition to the interpretation of movements, is therefore incomplete outside of an Okinawan cultural context. Thus, martial arts tourism to and from Okinawa is highly desirable by members of the community because it helps facilitate a more complete understanding of the cultural context in which karate and kobudo occur (May, 2012).

Like the members of other communities of practice, the martial arts community also has a shared lexicon comprised of Japanese terms for counting, techniques, and dojo etiquette, mixed with the local language of the practitioners, and often some Uchinaaguchi, or Okinawan language, terms. It is frequently the case that all the members of a multinational karate group have only martial arts-related Japanese or Uchinaaguchi words as their sole common language, but as this lexicon also includes some basic vocabulary such as “sensei”, “sumimasen”, “arigatougozaimasu” and the numbers one to ten, as well as some kanji, there is certainly enough language in common to conduct a class together. However, in order to further improve their technique, many foreign martial arts students wish to learn Japanese, and occasionally Uchinaaguchi, so they can receive detailed instruction directly from their Okinawan instructors.

In addition to verbal and written language, the Okinawan martial arts community has a shared set of symbols related to their practice. For example, there are several karate

and kobudo styles, and within each style there are several schools, which are each represented by a crest that is usually sewn or embroidered onto the karate uniform, over the heart. Dojo in different countries might be affiliated with a particular dojo or organization in Okinawa, with some Okinawan dojo having over 200 branch dojo abroad (International Okinawa Goju-Ryu Karate-Do Federation, 2014). In this case, there are often similarities between the crests, where the same image or kanji is used with different text representing a particular location. In this way, members affiliated with the same honbu, or main, dojo in Okinawa can instantly recognize one another, which is particularly useful for organizational or social purposes at large international events.

c. Practice

The practice of the martial arts community has physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural components. Most martial arts practice takes place within a private group class, but may also occur in public for a demonstration, seminar, or tournament. The physical practice of Okinawan karate and kobudo, which differ from dojo to dojo, may include kata, or forms, basic blocking and striking techniques, the use of weapons, kumite, or sparring, wrestling techniques, joint locks and so on, performed singularly or with one or more partners. Though the physical component may form the bulk of the class, it is usually framed within formal meditation practice at the beginning and end of each class, and is structured with the regular usage of Japanese terms that mark the different techniques practised in each phase of the class, such as “kon tiki tai”, “renzokumite” and so on. The use of formal Japanese, such as “arigatou gozaimashita” and “onegaishimasu”, as well as frequent bowing and standing at attention facilitate a sense of discipline and mental focus. Often cultural information about Okinawa or explanations of the meaning of particular techniques or dojo symbols is introduced throughout the class, or before the final formal “bow out” at class end. Because karate and kobudo techniques include meditation and learning about martial arts as well as the physical practice of techniques, martial arts may be practised individually at home as well as in a dojo.

Still, if martial arts techniques are designed to kill or disable an opponent, even if this is being done in a structured environment within the context of an international community of practice, one might wonder how the practice of martial arts can lead to peace. To answer this question, it is necessary to understand the intended goals of martial arts practice. Mastery of the physical techniques might first appear to be the most difficult goal to accomplish, but in order for this to happen, instructors from many different countries must first train together in Okinawa, and this is not always easy. In the words of one Okinawan instructor “[s]ometimes foreign instructors don't get along” (A. Yagi, personal communication, January 26, 2014), which leads to frequent situations where people with deadly combat skills, who may dislike each other intensely and cannot speak the same language, must physically interact with one another. Fortunately, the various karate and kobudo practitioners in the martial arts community ultimately *must* find a way to cooperate because it is the only way to improve their technique. Thus, the most important goal of martial arts practice, as stated by both Okinawan and overseas instructors, is not in fact mastery of the techniques, but self control. In other words, members of the martial arts community are not practising violence, but rather how to be peaceful in potentially volatile situations; this is the essence of serenity found in Ibadi's (2007) definition of peace.

How Do Martial Arts Promote Peace?

In addition to the international friendships that are formed through regular interactions between members of the martial arts community, several studies demonstrate that martial arts encourage peaceful behaviour. For example, Troyer (2011) correlated martial arts practice with the concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness is “positively related to an individual’s ability to sustain attention, focus, and regulate negative emotions...[and] is necessary for higher or more effective LOC [Level of Consciousness] or the degree of responsiveness to the stimuli in the environment” (p. 291). Troyer further notes that training in self-awareness and LOC would encourage students to “better solve difficult problems by revealing to them the part they play in the problem solving process” allowing them to “potentially catch mistakes quicker, change strategies for quicker and more accurate analysis, avoid using up valuable working memory space with unnecessary stress or worry, and overall process information more efficiently and accurately” (p. 293). The benefits of mindfulness and enhanced LOC would be extremely useful in the peace-building process.

Trulson (1986) and Twemlow and Sacco (1998) observed that martial arts practice was connected with a decrease in bullying and delinquent behaviour among adolescents with a history of violence. In “The application of traditional martial arts practice and theory to the treatment of violent adolescents”, Twemlow and Sacco illustrated how violent adolescents, often with a history of criminal activity and gang involvement, greatly benefited from a therapeutic martial arts program, writing that “[t]he training strongly supports synthetic ego functions, particularly control of aggressive impulses. It may be especially helpful in assisting verbally limited students in mastering leadership skills” (Conclusion section, para. 1), which may assist with non-violent problem solving. They concluded that “martial arts taught in a traditional way also offer an organizing framework for understanding the world and a sense of historical connectedness, helping violent adolescents overcome their dysfunctional circumstances” (Conclusion section, para. 2). Lakes and Hoyt (2004) also demonstrated a connection between martial arts participation and increased self-regulation, and Nosanchuk’s (1981) study on traditional martial arts practice and aggressiveness showed an overall decrease in aggression among long-term martial arts practitioners.

Supporting the idea of social acceptance being broadly found within the martial arts community, Rao (2008) conducted a study of a karate dojo that included children with physical and mental disabilities in regular classes. He writes, “[w]hile the literature on inclusive strategies has continued to burgeon and inform our focused efforts in creating inclusive schools and communities, we are also learning more about how some communities as well as settings come to so naturally ‘accept’ or ‘include’ people who are different” (p. 294). Ultimately, Rao attributes the inclusiveness of the students in the dojo to the main instructor, who questioned “the existence of the dual categories of ability and disability [and saw] his students as more complex human beings. The ways, in which such a perspective shapes his pedagogy, his interaction with students as well as the community that he creates within his school is profound” (p. 295). Though it was not the focus of his study, Rao acknowledged the possibility that the instructor's practices “may have also been fostered by his interpretation of the martial arts tradition of karate” (p. 296).

The literature shows a correlation between martial arts practice and increases in mindfulness and self-regulation, with decreases in aggression and violent behaviour, as well as the ability to foster inclusive communities. It is likely that these benefits result from the current practices of the international Okinawan martial arts community as well, and certainly they contribute to the practice of peace.

Boundaries and Borderlands in Okinawan Martial Arts

The Okinawan martial arts community is a large international group practising control of violence. As karate and kobudo are designated as intangible cultural properties of Okinawa and Japan, this community is Okinawa-centred even though the majority of its members are not Okinawan themselves. Therefore, not only must practitioners of Okinawan martial arts frequently cooperate across cultural, linguistic, and personal borders, but also they must accept and respect the Okinawan Other as the pre-eminent authority within their community. However, rather than viewing the Other's culture from an abstract distance, members of this community are, albeit to a limited extent, involved in the Other's cultural practices.

Wenger (2000) wrote that a social learning situation “combines personal relationships with the evolution of social structures” (p. 227). The Okinawan martial arts community is a prime example of a social structure that evolved out of personal relationships, but it is the ongoing process of cross-cultural alignment, whereby martial artists around the world strive to make their practice as close as possible to that of their Okinawan counterparts, that makes this community particularly worthy of study as a model of peaceful international relations. As a small kingdom which relied on international trade for hundreds of years, Okinawa itself has a long history as a peaceful “bankoku no kuni” or “bridge to all nations”, and several scholars have agreed that this peaceful image reaches beyond the realm of myth to shape a possible future for Japanese international relations. Hein (2001) writes that Okinawans may “spearhead a national policy that translates the strong pacifist sentiments of the Japanese population into an active principle for international engagement” (p. 35, as quoted in Govreen, 2014). Whether or not the Okinawan martial arts community derives its' capacity for peace from its' Okinawan cultural roots, the same desire for non-violence and peaceful engagement with the international community underpins the martial arts community, blurring the boundaries between Okinawan and Other within community practice.

Problems in the Martial Arts Community

Despite its' potential to greatly contribute to peace, the Okinawan martial arts community is not without problems. Firstly, it is a very diverse community, incorporating many different styles of karate and kobudo. Consequently, participants' different nationalities are often less of an issue than the lack of cooperation and disunity between styles, or even within the same style. Though part of martial arts practice is self-improvement, martial arts skill may not always be equated with personal merit. Thus, the interpersonal politics between teachers, even those within the same school who operate different individual dojo, can be extremely complicated and problematic. Furthermore, although some individual karate or kobudo classes may have 50% or more female participants, the very few female Okinawan instructors who exist are rarely publicly recognized. This may contribute to sexism within the community. Some foreign female practitioners have reported foreign male students'

refusal to interact with them; interestingly, Okinawan male instructors were not reported to be sexist.

The martial arts community abroad is largely a young community that grew significantly during the 1980s. It may not sustain itself forever, especially given the fact that there are a limited number of Okinawan teachers to go around for a very large community of 50,000,000 students. It is possible that the Okinawan instructors will not be able to keep up with their worldwide following, and all the personal travel this necessitates. Furthermore, although Okinawan martial arts are one of many cultural arts in Okinawa that all have connections to Okinawan history, language, and lifeways, the overseas martial arts community may hyperfocus on their practice. Without a complete picture of the Okinawan cultural context of the martial arts, foreign martial arts practitioners may be prone to misinterpretation of cultural cues, leading to over-politeness and miscommunication.

Finally, in some cases martial arts participation may arise out not out of genuine interest and a desire for self-improvement, but from the fetishization of Japanese and Okinawan culture (Said, 1978). This has led to the commodification of Okinawan martial arts as some instructors seek to take advantage of students' desires to "buy in" to their image of this community (Brown & Leledaki, 2010).

Applications of the Martial Arts Community as a Community of Practice

Peace is often associated with cosmopolitanism, including the preservation of local cultural diversity. The hierarchical structure of the Okinawan martial arts community, and its' alignment with Okinawan culture make it an ideal community in which to promote Okinawan cultural interests. Since Uchinaaguchi, an indigenous Okinawan language, is endangered within Okinawa and many karate and kobudo instructors wish to revive it, the Okinawan martial arts community may be highly receptive to using it in their practice. As predicted by Wenger's concept of alignment within communities of practice, interviews with both overseas and Okinawan members of the Okinawan martial arts community revealed strikingly similar attitudes towards Okinawan language preservation:

"I really want to keep the Okinawan connection alive and...as the art of Okinawa is Goju Ryu, then the language goes with that..[It] brings us a little closer to keeping this art alive and helping to promote the Okinawan culture as well, [to] promote this language." (L. Marchant, personal communication, October 16, 2013)

"If Uchinaguchi is lost, Okinawan culture will also be lost...So let's use Okinawan dialect...let's start teaching Okinawan dialect to children...'If you don't understand your country's language, you will forget your country.'"
(Okinawan martial artist, personal communication, February 20, 2013)

Preliminary results from a survey of the international martial arts community triangulate these findings. The average ratings on a ten-point Lichert scale for "learning about Okinawan culture is beneficial for martial arts practice" were 9.48, and for "learning about Okinawan language is beneficial for martial arts practice", the average was 7.48. Thus, it appears that the martial arts community as a whole has a stake in the promotion and maintenance of Okinawan culture and language, especially as it is connected to their practice.

Conclusion

Paralleling the trends among international political and non-governmental agencies, the tendency in communities of practice is also towards greater transnational cooperation, as already exists within the international Okinawan martial arts community. That a transnational community so skilled in inflicting damage on others can so successfully cooperate and mobilize on such a massive scale should give hope for other activity-based collaborations.

The conception of peace as a practice in which something is produced or learned may directly assist the international peace building process using indirect or oblique methods. Much like an immersion approach to second language acquisition, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula & Smit, 2010) involves using the target language to learn another subject, rather than studying the language directly. If this idea is applied to peace building through communities of practice, peaceful relations are not the stated goal, but a by-product of other forms of border-crossing, co-constructive learning practices. Thus, peace is not the absence of war, but the learned successful negotiation of interpersonal conflict in potentially volatile circumstances. As in the Okinawan martial arts community, peace may be found in the palpable presence of joint creative activities that enrich human existence and our shared environment.

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