

Jonathan Riddle

2016

Sports Ethnocentrism and Social Criticism of American Kendo

What I had originally planned was to write a series of personal notes over the course of a year, comparing the sports of fencing and kendo, outlining their history, and examining their differences and similarities of both sports from a theoretical, conceptual and technical aspect with the intent of facilitating a better understanding of both sports. This particular paper, the first in the series, has been a challenge to write, it has required several re-examinations of the topic, as well as revisions.

For those that are unfamiliar with the sport of fencing, one might ask, what is fencing? Fencing is an Olympic sport, and it was exhibited in the first modern Olympics (1896). Within the modern sport of fencing there are three weapons: foil - based off the court sword; épée - which means 'sword' in French, and it is based off the dueling sword; and saber - based off of the modern cavalry saber. Each weapon has its own specific set of rules - foil and épée are both thrusting weapons with different target areas, while the saber is a cutting and thrusting weapon ("Weapons").

While as both as a student and as a teacher, I approached both systems of sport swordsmanship from an academic point of view. At one point, during the same time period, I was both a kendo student, and a fencing instructor, while at times both of our groups shared the same gym. And I had the pleasure of learning under both American and Japanese sensei.

While examining sword sports as a subject, it is critical to understand that in order to examine either sport, one must remove all bias from their mind. However, I openly admit that I have some bias towards Western sword sports as this has been the majority of my own experience, and writing about kendo is from my own perspective as a fencing instructor. And in my own defense, while learning kendo, I tried to free myself of any prejudices, while remaining as an "open vessel," and accepting the ways of the group.

Over the years, I have heard arguments about which system of swordsmanship is superior. Personally, I have never witnessed any superiority of either system, while trying to avoid any arguments about the superiority of either. Attitudes and feeling of superiority is by definition ethnocentric, the term ethnocentrism means the tendency of an individual to be 'ethically centered,' or more rigid in the culturally 'similar', while rejecting the cultural 'dissimilar,' while unfortunately, there is a universal predisposition to be ethnocentric, it is in all societies, and it is in constant play (Bizumic 3; Sumner; Kinder, and Kam 36).

Ethnocentrism as a behavior can lead to in-group favoritism, followed by outsider-group hostility (Hooghe), and as it pertains to sport, this can develop into a form of snobbery from which fencers and kendoists are not immune. Snobbery aside, in real combat, the fundamental purpose of fighting is to kill, as well as staying alive, and there is nothing romantic about being dead. Perhaps the most important argument is that both sports require skill. And the longer the amount of time one spends learning, the greater the skill gained.

While both European fencing and Japanese kendo communities have developed their sports upon the grounds of a historical basis, which cannot be ignored, while there is no disagreement that there are differences between those two systems. However, those differences are rather minor, and they are mostly culturally driven. To argue the superiority of those minor differences falls within the realm of ethnocentrism. While at the same time, it can also be argued that there are significant theoretical and technical similarities between both sword sports.

Fencing and kendo are separated by history and culture, but the sports share common theories and tactics based on kinesiology, and psychology. While some, especially within the American kendo community have argued that there are strong fundamental differences between the two sports, even though, for all practical purposes both sports historically performed the same task with similarly designed weapons, e.g. the saber and the katana, both of which are single edge, curved swords that are meant to cut and thrust. It is important to point out that over the course of European history there have been several types of swords developed, however some have argued that one that is closest to modern fencing is the rapier (which strongly combines both cut and thrust technique), while the sword that kendo is based off is the katana (“Kendo”).

And in addition, sport saber and kendo have relatively similar target areas. The target area of saber is from the waist up, even though the target area is greater, it would also include all of the target areas found in kendo which includes: the top of the head, neck, forearms, and the flanks of the upper torso.

Another example of a similarity, while contrasting a difference between each sport, each sport has uses kinesics, or non-verbal communications such as gestures, expressions, and postures (O’Neil) e.g. bowing before starting the bout, and saluting before putting the mask on to start a bout, but in both cases, each kinesic signals an appropriate etiquette to each participant, they are similar in that they both communicate respect, and that the fight is about to commence (“Kendo”; “Salute”).

It cannot be denied that there are some fundamental philosophical differences between the sports, largely in part because of cultural relativism (Carnegie Council) or moral relativism (Westacott). If we examine the etymology of the words kendo and fencing, they have very different derivations, kendo translates as the words, the sword and the way, or the way of the sword, while the word fencing is derived from the word defense. While it is noteworthy, regardless of their fundamental philosophical differences, that in both cases, fencing and kendo developed into educational sports (“Kendo”).

Perhaps the most fundamental physical difference between the two sword sports is that the weapons used in fencing are single handed, and the weapon used in kendo is double handed. Single handed weapons have a greater range of motion, while the second hand used in a two-handed weapon limits how much that weapon can move within any direction.

Regarding the Japanese hegemony over the sport of Kendo, the Japanese kendo community I have interacted with, in my opinion have a more liberal view of their own traditions, and a less ethnocentric perspective pertaining to their own sport. Conversely some members of the American kendo community are much more rigid both in learning and in practice. And their efforts to mimic the Japanese kendoist are exaggerated, trying to be as ‘alike’

as possible, while rejecting any ‘unlike.’ While some American kendoist have argued that the reason that the Japanese are superior kendoist is because they are Japanese, while ignoring the fact that Kendo is more ubiquitous in Japan, and that learning kendo in Japan starts at much young age, as well as it is a required physical activity in high school. One could argue as a result of that, the Japanese have a higher-level of skill and better understanding of the sport. The same results could happen, if Americans had a greater exposure at a much younger age. Some might argue that abilities comes from natural talent (although this is highly debatable), ethnicity does not determine athletic ability, kendo and fencing are both learned skills, which require practice, lots of practice.

I would have to say that both sports have experienced cultural appropriation, which involves using another’s cultures symbols, artifacts, rituals, or technologies (Rogers), and at some point both sports will have to deal with some level of assimilation, and transculturation.

Then there is this debate over what is authentic. While neither the sports of kendo or fencing have their origins in the United States, the American kendo participants have culturally adapted to the sport, while some might argue that their performance is inauthentic, it was interesting to note that some in the American kendo community have rejected any cross-cultural association in order to feel more authentic. In other words, if an outsider presents a different model than the Japanese model, accepting any new ideas would make them less authentic, while Theodossopoulos goes on to argue that there is a “co-existence of different simultaneous understandings of the authentic” (339), which he then argues that authenticity conceals the assumptions that are true representations, which involves the identity of the group, or persons, and knowing who is the author or producers of the cultural products and practices.

It must be understood though, that when a tradition starts, it starts out as “new” or “inauthentic” (Blackrose7). While Morgan argues that for ethnocentrist, “justification is simply a matter of endorsing whatever our cultural peers happen to believe at the moment irrespective of whether they have good grounds for believing what they do.”

Frequently the group elevates itself above those who are different (Nixon 62). As an ideal, I would have to argue for a stronger democratization of both sports. And as a social practice, ethnocentrism that is found within each of these sports is a barrier to democratization. As a kendo participant, I have tried to suspend my own ethnocentric judgements about Japanese kendo, and I have try to understand the sport from within the context of cultural relativism, while reflecting back to those similarities between the two sword sports and applying my knowledge in a practical way. With that, I am hoping that I bring an open discourse between the two sports in future my articles.

Works Cited

- Bizumic, Boris. "Who coined the concept of ethnocentrism? A brief report." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 2.1 (2014): 3-10.
- Blackrose7. "On Authenticity." *Anthropology & the Human Condition*. 9 Nov. 2011. Web. 23 May 2016.

- “Bowling.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 13 May 2016. Web. 20 May 2016.
- “Cultural relativism.” *CarnegieCouncil*. Carnegie Council. 1 Dec. 2006. Web. 20 May 2016.
- Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying claim to authenticity: Five anthropological dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86.2 (2013): 337-360.
- “Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism.” *Boundless Sociology*. Boundless. 20 May 2016. Web. 21 May 2016
- Hooghe, Marc. “Ethnocentrism.” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Philadelphia: MacMillan Reference, 2008. Web. 20 May 2016.
- “Kendo.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 9 May 2016. Web. 20 May 2016.
- Kinder, Donald R., and Cindy D. Kam. *Us against them: Ethnocentric foundations of American opinion*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Morgan, William J. "Ethnocentrism and the social criticism of sports: A response to Roberts." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 25.1 (1998): 81-102.
- Nixon, Howard L. *Sport in a changing world*. Routledge, 2015.
- O’Neil, Dennis. *Cultural Anthropology Terms*. Anthropology Department Palomar College. 2012. Web. 20 May 2016.
- Rogers, Richard A. "From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation." *Communication Theory* 16.4 (2006): 474-503.
- “Salute.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 4 May 2016. Web. 20 May 2016.
- Sumner, William Graham.. *Folkways: A study of the sociological importance of usages, manners, customs, mores, and morals*. Boston, MA: Ginn and Company, 1906.
- Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying claim to authenticity: Five anthropological dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86.2 (2013): 337-360.
- “Weapons”. *USAFencing*. United State Fencing Association. Web. 21 May 2016.
- Westacott, Emrys. “Moral relativism”. *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. Web. 20 May 2016.