

The concept of Ki: some theoretical and practical considerations  
regarding to Japanese Spirit. An anthropology of Kendo in Japan and  
Brazil<sup>1</sup>

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*[...]The moment I was awoken to the idea that the source of Budo is the spirit of divine love and protection for everything, I couldn't stop the tears flowing down my cheeks. Since that awakening, I have come to consider the whole World to be my home. I feel the sun, the moon and the stars are all mine. My desire for status, honor and worldly possessions has completely disappeared. I realized that Budo is not about destroying other human beings with one's strength or weapons or annihilating the World, by force of arms. True Budo is channeling the universal energy to protect World Peace, to engender all things fittingly, nurture them and save them from harm. In other words, Budo training is to protect all things, and nurture the power of unconditional divine love within. **Morihei Sensei***

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## About here and there - or about Japan and Brazil

I began this research in 2006, when an event of Brazilian Kendo Federation in a Japanese Colony, inside of Santa Catarina State, South of Brazil. In those days, of course, would never dream visiting Japan and study a concept here. Nevertheless, I did my masters research about Kendo in Brazil, and publish the thesis in 2009, and after

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<sup>1</sup> This doctoral research in Social Anthropology is related to my research project in Japan through MEXT program, titled "The Japanese Spirit: updates, proximities and distances to an analytical relatedness", which was developed at Tsukuba University, from 2012 to April of 2014.

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meditating properly on the master's research and the possibilities, I decided to study the concept of Ki 「気」 in my doctoral studies in Social Anthropology by a trivial reason from anthropological point of view, i.e., people with whom I developed the work and people who has become my conviviality and training friends, assigned enough attention to this concept, reflecting and researching about senses and meanings. Now, the key question, I think, is what this concept can tell, first, about himself, and then about Japanese Culture in Japan and Brazil and, perhaps, beyond.

The Ki 「気」 can be defined as vital energy, will, spirit, energy in sum - and is a concept that can be found in everything, from the smallest living creature – and not living too – until what is culturally defined as human being. All that is alive have Ki, and, sometimes, what is not alive too. That, most often, was given to me as evidence in conversations.

I lived two years in Japan. These two years, obviously, are not sufficient for a satisfactory understanding of Japanese Culture by its overflows, complex and [im]planned connections with other Cultures; folds and multiplicities. Regardless, with a sense of humbleness resulting from difficulties along the way, these two years of research opened my eyes to a somewhat broader understanding of *Ki* and a series of socio-anthropological operations in practice, and problems and solutions that only native practices can offer and make themselves understood.

The purpose of this research, in sum, was to collect data about living and training experiences from practitioners of Kendo and the unit of analysis was the concept of Ki, because I think from this concept we can understand the differences and bridges between the Japanese Kendo practitioners from the other Kendo practitioners and, in a broad sense, maybe we can understand the Japanese Culture lived in Japan, and the differences [or not] from other kinds of Japanese Culture[s] lived abroad.

### **About the research – Methodology**

We used the following materials: bibliographic, structured forms, semi-structured interviews and conversations in training places, and the method were *ethnography*. Regarding the first, we have performed a bibliographical research about the Ki in Japan and we found material from the late XVII Century to the end of XX Century. The books

and articles had been worked out together with field research and events in Kendo and Iaido, following the advices of the Japanese professors and training advisors. The structured forms, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were collected in Japan, with Kendo practitioners of all possible nationalities and different cultures. The questionnaires were applied in events and trainings of Kendo or sending by Facebook and email<sup>3</sup>. We collected about 20 forms [more interviews] of Japanese Professors, Policemen and practitioners, 60 practitioners around the world and 50 Brazilians. In these places I came to collecting data and conversations with practitioners, and making contacts with police since identified a particularly intense development about the topic of this research, i.e., the notion of 'Ki'<sup>4</sup> with the Japanese Police, though he collected stories and field information from practitioners from another countries who have been living in Japan and abroad. The *ethnographic fieldwork* was conducted in Brazil [2007-2011] and Japan [2012-2014]. At Japan, we conducted ethnography in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Chiba Ken, Kanagawa Ken and Ibaraki Ken. About *ethnographic fieldwork*, we performed under the logic of *dense insertion* (Lourenção: 2010a, P. 46-64), assuming an ethnographic context to capture information in *Dojo* and other places where occur the training of Kendo in Japan and Brazil<sup>5</sup>, where I had conversations with practitioners through the method of appointment native contacts, effecting a stable network through known points along the development of the fieldwork. With means, in sum, we had Kendo training all the time in Japan, and had conversations about it.

At first, the field research was planned with the goal of capturing data with Japanese police in Tokyo but facing difficulties to access the headquarters of the Metropolitan police and, after that, the police members didn't answer, I got access to police in Kanagawa ken, a privileged contact with the ex-Police Chief of Hadano shi, who currently working at the Police General Headquarters in Yokohama [Kanagawa] who became my informant in the research, opening many opportunities for conversations and data collection, as well a retired Police Officer from Tokyo, 8th Dan of Kendo, who was the coach in that elite police division, which I had been talking and practicing. The

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<sup>3</sup> Grateful for the assistance of Michael Prime [Kendo World Team], George McCall [Kenshi247], and Brazilian Kendo Federation.

<sup>4</sup> For information and the relationship between Police Force and Kendo in Japan since the nineteenth century, from historiographic point of view, see Lourenção (2010a, p. 241-259).

<sup>5</sup> For further references on the development of field research into these spaces, see Lourenção (2010a, p. 16-104).

material of these processes and the main results will be published in my doctoral thesis in the next year I hope, because I just started the evaluation of these information.

## About the Ki

気を入れて下さい。

Firstly, there is no real equivalent for *Ki* in Portuguese, neither in English. The Japanese word for this is 気, which *a priori* can be translated as 'vital energy'. Often uses this word in Japan about many things, including relation to natural phenomena, the condition of human relationships, and even about the state of body and mind. Varied experiences have the general designation of 'Ki', depending on each context. For example, T. Sensei, in one training, told me while I performed an exercise: 「気を入れて下さい」 which means, 'put 'Ki' into exercise'. In short, do with energy or concentration that he was meant.

From a broad sense, the *Ki* can be described as follows: 1-Source of all things; 2-Vital force, Spirit, Vitality, 3-Element to describe the movement and state of mind; 4 - Even if you can not be seen, can be sensed or detected. 5 - Have a special relationship with the breathing, as the graphic sign of the Japanese word itself indicates, an out of steam from a pot of rice - 気. Thus the meaning of the word *Ki*, depending upon its contextual usage, can vary from 'energy' (objective, statically perceived) to 'the feeling for the state of energetic arousal' (subjective, statically perceived) and to 'the feeling of energy thrusting forward towards, and sustaining action' (subjective, dynamically perceived).

From the point of view of Kendo speeches in Brazil that indicates for practicing Kendo is necessary to discipline the 'Spirit' before the body, and in this sense they use the word *Ki* for designate it. For the other side, in Japan the term in reference is the 気, and sometimes it is defined as 'Spirit', sometimes taken as 'vital energy' and sometimes we can feel it in the natural phenomena or ambience or humans and no humans in general. Taking the 'vital energy' as a definition, all living beings possess this 'vital energy' and the uniqueness of Kendo presents in the attention to make it bigger, both in training and in the discussions of Kendo theories.

The concept of *Ki* operates in terms of strength or weakness of the body taking into account the Kendo theories. It is also seen as a power that animates the body and allows the action, carrying in its development intentionality or 'vitality' [Kumagai, 1988].

In short, this term - *Ki* - is used in instances where there is a relationship. Crossing swords, cleaning the dojo's floor, in conversations, in keeping your word and inside of every action even if not practiced in relation to Kendo. In Japan, when performs an action that can be classified as carrying 'energy', people refer to this as using 'Ki'. In a ritual of tea 「茶道」, in a section of calligraphy 「書道」, in a bodily movement greetings a newcomer when it makes a move that have itself 'feeling', people say this is full of 'Ki'. And besides, this becomes a qualifying operator from which all practitioners of Japanese arts – and not practitioners also - are to a greater or lesser way, classified. During the field research, I realized that component as a determinant to talk about how to recognize a person can be granted as 'Japaneseness' (Lourenção: 2010, 2011).

Ki is difficult to understand precisely, but can be basically be perceived as: *'The purpose of Kendo is to forge the body and mind, which essentially means cultivating Ki. The refinement of energy leads to growth as a human being' [...]* " [Ki] is an *invisible and without shape of vital energy that is widely revealed in the state and movement of the mind*" [Ooya: 2007]. In this sense, I think this hypothesis seems to me the main core. The issue of vital energy has a pronounced body and moral dimension. And more. The concept of *Ki* has an important connotation in this case, since this is a metaphor for the notion of corporeality to the Japanese, whereby correlated to *Ki* concepts have concrete existence, and, it seems, the concept of *Ki* as a way to understand the Japanese Spirit can be used as a mode of *substance* [Carsten: 1995, 2004] or a way to define the Individuality of Japanese people – that have training to understanding and practice the ways to improve the *Ki*, naturally -. In this way, the *Ki* as a substance can be think as a way to see and touch each individuality, understand each other and connect people. But for the other side, non-Japanese can be defined as *Japanese* by means of *Ki* also. In this case, we argue that some kind of Kinship-relatedness [Lourenção: 2011, Machado, 2011, 2014] can be found about practitioners of Japanese Martial Ways. This kind of Kinship-relatedness is founded and made inside the Dojo, which is a way to develop the relationship between the practitioners. From this point of view, I developed a paper comparing the Dojo to the Japanese House [Lourenção: 2010b] showing how the relations can be made and showing this kind of 'Kinship'. From this sense, we think, the concept of *Ki* shows great potentialities for understand the Japanese culture itself, and helps to understand this

kinship made possible between practicing and living together, by means of Dojo and martial ways.

## Conclusion

In sum, the *Ki* articulates impulse as the fluidness of the apprehending self-moving visibly towards affirmation through the social acts. The important thing to keep is, the exchange of *Ki*, or the 「気が合う」 necessarily involves a form of conduit that allows for a direct sensory mode of exchange of affects. This is different of feelings mediating by through the mind, in the westerns thoughts. Significantly, there is no word for 'mind' in the Japanese language in common usage. There is, however, a concept that is larger than (and includes) the mind called *kokoro* 「心」. Since the referential sphere of *kokoro* subsumes the micro-sphere of the mind, this means that the Japanese model of sociability explicitly accounts for the exchange of certain elementary affects. A process that can by pass the mind while at the same time pass through *Kokoro*. In other words, a balance between Heart and Mind, Energy and Love, Nature and Culture can be found.

So, just for conclude, the concept of *Ki* is presented as an important way of understanding the Japanese Culture in practice, in closest relationship with a culturally Japanese notion of love. In another side, the balance between *Ki* and Love helps to understand the emergence of individuality in Japan and for this concept we can compare the individualism in japan and the differences and similarities between the other individualisms. For the other side, the concept of *Ki* seems to fit about the concept of **substance**, since it is taken as a plastic thing, which fits the most varied situations, and is linked to the body of living beings, particularly humans. So, *the notion of Ki can be understood as substance*, and help to think the ways about how kinship can be made between Japanese and non-Japanese, by an anthropological point of view, mainly inside of martial ways. And, from this point of view, the difference doesn't seems so big than people think.

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