

ANTHROPOLOGY & PHENOMENOLOGY

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Karate practices in Japan and Okinawa: Describing an immersion using a phenomenological and transcultural approach

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Abstract

Background. *Karate* has been understood as an Eastern martial art and is especially related to Japanese culture, where it was originally developed in Okinawa. Along with cultural changes in Japanese society and in international relations, karate practices have also undergone adjustments to their techniques and teaching methods.

Problem and aim. Drawing from existing phenomenological studies on karate, we understand this mode of combat not only in terms of technique, but also through the concept of intentionality. The objective of this paper is to describe an immersion in karate in Japan (mainland) and Okinawa undertaken by Western practitioners, the authors of this paper, and to discuss it through a phenomenological and transcultural perspective.

Material and methods. Technical visits to Tokyo and Okinawa occurred in 2017, including training sessions by both researchers. The results were analyzed and discussed using the phenomenological perspective.

Results. As a main result, we have learned not only through the masters' discourses but also through our bodies in such bodily activities. We have described the investigation based not only on narratives and reflexive data, but have also considered the important role of the body in its pre-reflexive aspect, to understand the bodily nuances of training.

Conclusions. It is hoped that this type of research can boost a growing trend of studies that encompasses the pre-reflexive character of the body, although there is still a scarcity of works which consider immersive training by the researcher. Phenomenology can be pointed out as a fertile ground for the development of investigations and methodological procedures in this field.

Introduction

Karate is usually understood as an Eastern martial art and it has been especially related to Japanese culture, although it was originally developed in Okinawa Island

when this region did not belong to Japan. Its roots are tied to traditional martial arts practices in the Ryukyu islands, near China and Taiwan [de la Fuente, Niehaus 2020]. It was an independent reign until 1879, when this region was attached to Japan's mainland as part of the Japanese

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territory. Since that period, cultural changes started to appear in this country as the main characteristic of the *Meiji* era (1868-1912), when Japan began its strong internationalization process. It is not wrong to say karate is a sport, as well as it is not wrong to say it is Japanese, nor to say karate is Okinawan, highly influenced by Chinese combat methods. However, it is partially correct to say karate is only one of these versions unless this unique one is specified as such. A global understanding of karate means to grasp its different layers as a complex and stratified phenomenon.

Along with the cultural changes in Japanese society and international relations, karate practices have also suffered adjustments in their techniques and teaching methods. The rise of modern karate began when Funakoshi Gichin *sensei* (1868-1957) went to Tokyo during the 1920s and started to give karate classes there. Through a close relationship with Kano Jigoro *sensei* (1860-1938), the founder of Judo, Funakoshi introduced the colored belts, progressions, and a system for karate training. Later on, this led to a sportization and popularization process of karate, being practiced in different countries and cultures.

The meaning of karate can be translated as “empty hands”, highlighting the absence of weapons during the fight [Barreira 2013; Reid, Croucher 1983], although agricultural artefacts have also been used in karate training (*kobudo*). The idea of emptiness is not only related to the body itself but also refers to a mental process, in which the *karateka* tries to achieve the state of “no-mind” to fight properly, not mentally anticipating the fight which means without feeling anger, sadness or happiness, for example [Barreira 2013; Funakoshi, Nakasone 2005; Reid, Croucher 1983]. The “no-mind”, or “empty mind” – if we consider it as a development of the “empty hands” concept –, helps the fighter be more accurate in their movements.

It is often considered that a good hit in a karate combat must be fast and strong (fatal), considering the possibility of life versus death issue, even if it does not correspond to the ethos of contemporary MA&CS (Martial Arts and Combat Sports), especially in urban contexts. The idea of a perfect hit could be further understood as a myth, which relates to the origins of karate, rather than a reality of combat practice [Barreira 2013]. This myth of fatal hit (*ikken hissatsu*) has important motor and psychological consequences since it triggers an attitude and intentionality that are decisive for the way karate is practiced. Then, it is not casual that in previous research [Telles 2018] Brazilian *karatekas* still reported to look for the “perfect hit” while fighting: that one which would end the combat. This aspect seems to be part of bodily knowledge in karate practices, despite the cultural differences of the practitioners.

In the process of internationalization of karate, it is also important to note that this modality has been recently included in the Olympic Games (2020, post-

poned to 2021), and therefore the consequences of a more sportive and Western fighting ethos are yet to be determined. Karate is also known for its variety of styles (*Shotokan*, *Goju-Ryu*, *Shito-Ryu*, *Shorin-Ryu*, *Wado-Ryu*, *Kyokushinkai*, among others); in addition, nowadays karate fights and training may vary, ranging from the traditional forms to more sportive ones.

Drawing from existing phenomenological studies on karate [Barreira 2006, 2013], it is possible to understand this modality of combat not only in terms of technique but also through the concept of intentionality. Then, karate can be understood by its elementary embodied characteristics of moving the body to fight in a specific way: empty hands and empty mind, with the intention to achieve a perfect hit through an accurate distance control [Telles, Vaitinen, Barreira 2018].

Considering “karate fight” as an object of study, several works that use different perspectives can originate from distinct disciplines, such as psychology, physical education, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology [Bar-On Cohen 2006; Barreira 2014; Figueiredo 2009]. In sports psychology and other sports sciences, there has been increasing research interest in MA&CS in general, but so far, this literature has paid limited attention to embodied cultural issues in karate from researcher experiences as practitioners, especially through a phenomenological approach, which is primed to understand the fighting phenomenon through the lived experience of the fighters [Barreira 2013, 2014; Telles 2018; Telles, Vaitinen, Barreira 2018].

This specific topic was chosen due to technical visits to Japan and findings in existing research [Telles 2018], which observed the similarities and differences among Western, Japanese (mainland) and Okinawan karate practices. As we examine these features through a phenomenological perspective, we are particularly interested in comprehending how these similarities and differences may appear in the practitioners’ experiences. In addition, we focus on embodied cultural issues, highlighting them as transcultural practices. Thus, the objective of this paper is to describe an immersion in karate practices in Japan (mainland) and Okinawa among Western practitioners who are authoring this paper, discussing it through a phenomenological and transcultural perspective.

Immersion as a methodological tool inspired by phenomenology

Despite the many challenges with rules which involved different modalities since the end of the 19th century (involving karate and mainly judo, whether in Japan or in other countries), it was the fighting throughout the 20th century and particularly with greater institutionalization in the early 1990s, which led to the development of the combat sport modality known today as MMA

(Mixed Martial Arts) [Awi 2012]. If there is a thesis that the most remarkable development of these disputes occurred in Brazil and later in the USA, we cannot forget the Japanese roots of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, whose fighters promoted no-holds-barred disputes to prove a supposed superiority to other modalities. Then, Japan has never lost its status of the birthplace of these martial arts, nor its important place in the imaginary of combatants from warrior figures such as the *samurai*. Therefore, our journey to Japan was an occasion for technical visits to places where the practical context of a martial art expresses the meanings of its existence in everyday life. Karate was specifically chosen for two main reasons: it is the martial art we have practical familiarity and it has been a systematic object of investigation for some years [Barreira 2006, 2013; Telles 2018; Telles, Vaitinen, Barreira 2018]. The researchers who are authoring this paper are both karate practitioners in Brazil.

The technical visits to Tokyo and Okinawa occurred in 2017. To this end, a training was carried out at the *Honbu Dojo* (main headquarters) of JKA (Japan Karate Association) in Tokyo, and also 03 training sessions with different masters in Okinawa were held during this period. Technical visits were also conducted to relevant places in karate history, indicated by the Okinawa Karate Information center in *Okinawa Karate Kaikan*. Each of the training sessions will be described here, emphasizing the importance of an understanding, in first person, of the manifestations concerning the body to body in combat, especially with regard to the practice of karate.

The above procedures, as well as the analytical process, were inspired by philosophical phenomenology [Merleau-Ponty 1945, 1953/2011] and also by contemporary phenomenological methods, such as esthesiology [Nobrega, Torres 2018], emersiology [Andrieu 2018] and suspensive listening [Barreira, Coelho Junior 2023]. In addition, the phenomenological approach which underpins this study considers current discussions on embodied cognition, which pertains that perception is already an action [Leder 1990; Noe 2004, 2009]. These recent perspectives have in common an important consideration on the theme of body and movement in terms of agency [Gallagher 2005] and situatedness.

Thus, immersion was chosen as the main methodological procedure in this study once it allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon the way it happens in real life. Such procedures are guided by an attentive perception of our senses and feelings [Legendre, Dietrich 2020] in specific movements and environments [Andrieu *et al.* 2018] related to an embodied practice. During a specific activity, the living body is aware of its movements and the situation through an embodied perception. However, it is only possible to think and reflect about what happened afterwards. In movement practices, we consider both immersion and the emersion process (after the immersion, when we go back to

our daily reality), in order to describe the activity and our impressions towards it.

Once motor interactions are intertwined with a lived sensitivity which includes not only individual cognitive processes but also cultural aspects, the narratives surrounding the visits and the training do not consist only of reports of what was reflexively apprehended and outlined. This immersion process is a way of allowing the body to be in contact with the object of study (in this case, karate) also in a pre-reflexive way. Since we have carried out the training in a modality to which we were already used to practice, we could communicate through our bodies in this movement practice. Therefore, we have learned not only through the masters' discourses but also through our bodies in such embodied activities.

When considering immersion processes, we highlight that there is a kind of corporal familiarity and "the body is in permanent interaction with the environment through sensitive perception. This sensitive perception is not necessarily conscious. [...] The body is in action before the consciousness is aware of it" [Andrieu 2017: 23]. Thus, we are aware of such a phenomenon through what the body does, through action, in which there is a bodily confidence. Then, sometimes we do not know what we do, but we perform an action through the incorporation of techniques that we keep in memory. Initially, we have allowed ourselves to be taken in by this sensitive perception so that, afterward, the practices could be described and also be the subject of reflection.

Moreover, when it comes to research in which the body is part of the process, especially in a notably pre-reflexive aspect [Barbaras 2008], not only actions take place without the need for prior reflection, but also the assimilation of new data from the environment are incorporated through practice as an embedded experience. This point comes closer to studies in anthropology of experience mainly from the notion of embodiment, which is defined by Csordas [1993] as "a field of indeterminate methodology, defined by the perceptual experience and by the modes of presence of engagement in the world" (p. 135). He proposes a methodology that puts the body in evidence, in which bodily experiences would offer a starting point of analysis, through human participation in a cultural world. Thus, the body is considered as a field of a potential relation with the world and the other. This attention to the body occurs even when we try to put ourselves in motion, as a sensorial engagement permeated by a cultural elaboration, in which the body is intertwined with the world.

Immersion processes as methodological procedures can be considered an important tool to investigate embodied practices, especially regarding Martial Arts & Combat Sports as found in existing research [Telles, Barreira 2020; Telles, Andrieu, Barreira 2022; Wacquant 1989]. Suspensive listening, as a methodological resource that connects what is apprehended by a per-

sonal body and the reflexive resonances of researchers [Barreira, Coelho Junior 2023], is also determinant to the comprehension resulting in this analysis. Following such patterns, a pure description of the visits will be first made and then considerations on these findings will be made through a phenomenological and trans-cultural perspective.

Honbu Dojo, JKA (Japan Karate Association) – Tokyo

The JKA (Japan Karate Association) is known for being an institution linked to the Japanese government. It was founded in 1948 (originally known by the name of *Nihon Karate Kyokai*), with Funakoshi Gichin *sensei* as its greatest master, and, in 1957, it received approval from the Japanese Ministry of Education to be recognized as an “incorporated general association”. This institution maintains the objective of rescuing the heritage and developing the culture of this martial art.

In 2012, JKA was approved as an “Incorporated Public Interest Association” by the Japanese Prime Minister. There are currently more than 30 countries with an instructor affiliated to JKA, so that the system of this institution can be used systematically in other parts of the world. In addition, this association has members in 130 countries and it is the only Japanese karate entity qualified by the Japanese government for its teaching at universities, defining itself as “maintaining the highest tradition of karate” [JKA 2021]. Although this aspect will not be analyzed here, it is obviously a geopolitical and historical factor of the greatest importance since it attributes exclusive national legitimacy and is supposedly above any other institution connected with karate.

JKA has been the entity responsible for the first rules proposals and, despite initial developments towards karate competitions, its current position is that the martial art traditions are being threatened by such sporting emphasis. In this sense, officially, the JKA has a position contrary to Olympic adhesion, which has been the subject of controversies, divisions and even evasions of affiliates. On its website [JKA 2021], it is stated that karate is not a sport, as a game of points with divisions by weight or spectacular demonstrations, but it is rather a way of life based on bushido (the warrior’s path – samurai). Within the scope of this vision and practice of karate, the development of the practitioner takes place in the body, but also in a mental and spiritual sphere, in a quest to become peaceful but, in the event of an inevitable conflict, one is also capable of finishing the opponent with one hit. This is one of the most basic premises in the oral history of karate [Barreira 2013].

We visited JKA’s *Honbu Dojo* (main headquarters, inaugurated in 2001) in Tokyo, where we participated in a Saturday training session, from 10:30 to 12:00, with

Takahashi *sensei*. We have arrived early, to proceed to the payment, sign the terms of visit and consent, and put on the *karate-gi*, the uniform of practice. Although there is an English version of the website, when we arrived at the JKA Headquarters (*Honbu Dojo*), only a few people could speak English well. However, it was possible to communicate with them satisfactorily.

On the JKA website, we have also read about the intensity of the training, which is purposefully vigorous. During the training, we could see it was close to what we were already expecting. Many repetitions of movements, were performed with strength, speed, and accuracy, with almost no rest intervals. Everything seemed to be strictly timed: the rest intervals, the water break, the beginning and the end of the training session. It is important to note that we were aware that this was a more demanding type of training, which allowed us to plan it in advance, so that we could be physically prepared.

In general, the practice consisted of repetitions of displacements and hits, always with the practitioners well aligned. Subsequently, these sequences were performed face to face (*kumite*), applying the strikes against each other, according to the pattern consisting of both starting from the equivalent combat position (*kamae*). The challenge was not that of a free fight, but, as usual in training, it obeyed the turn for each one to attack, while the other could avoid the blows by breaking the distance, defending and, at the end of the sequence, counterattacking. Therefore, the challenge consisted mainly of getting, based on speed, precision, and adjustment of distance and time, to touch the opponent while avoiding being touched.

Among the members of JKA *Honbu Dojo*, regardless of their age or gender, technical expertise and the speed of their movements and hits stand out, always with an attitude of full focus on the actions performed. These combative situations were very well controlled, following the model of sports practice and also that of *budo*, therefore without any space for emotional threat or intimidation. However, the climate for carrying out each task was of competitiveness and perfectionism. No one seemed to facilitate the other or to renounce trying to overcome them. Due to the athletic level of the members of the *Honbu Dojo* and the incorporation of the spirit of the practice, we experienced constant frustrations and only a few moments of self-efficacy when our hits could touch our training partners more quickly.

In this session there were children and adults, men and women, all of whom graduated (green belt onwards). The training was carried out in Japanese, although we did not know the language. Some *karatekas* helped us with small and quick translations, while we could also copy them, in case we could not understand the instructions. However mimesis or, along with the famous concept of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss [1973], “prestigious imitation” has allowed us, apparently in a very satisfac-

tory way, to accompany the practice. Therefore, despite this linguistic issue, the training conducted there seemed to have a logic similar to those performed in Brazil (although notably stricter than the Brazilian version). There were also terms we were already used to hearing (usually the names of karate movements remain in Japanese, even in training which is conducted in other countries), which allowed us to follow the session without major difficulties.

At the end of the session, everyone remained in the *mokuso* position (as a meditation posture, sitting on our knees), facing the Japanese flag. We were asked to repeat, in unison, the *dojo-kun* (the main 05 karate mottos) in Japanese. It is relevant to mention that, even in the training sessions held in Brazil, JKA affiliates are usually able to repeat these mottos in Japanese, which does not seem to be common in other Brazilian federations or associations.

After the training session, we talked with two students, who could speak very good English. They explained to us more about their training routine (usually daily) and showed us the facilities at *Honbu dojo*, a two-floor building. We did not have much time, as the *dojo* needed to close and we still needed to bathe and change. Following traditional patterns, we could remark that students usually leave their *karate-gi* in the locker room, which is not common in Brazilian karate practices.

From this description, we highlight our capacity to be able to perform such a hard training without understanding the verbal language (none of us could speak Japanese). Considering perception-action processes, we also rely on the notion of affordance, developed by James Gibson and influenced by phenomenology [Heft 1989]. It can be defined through properties of the environment which are taken with reference to an individual, including both objective and subjective features. As an example, we can perceive the *sensei* counting the numbers in Japanese, however, we can only move because this objective input was perceived as a command for us to start kicking as we have previously trained karate and heard those moves in Japanese.

According to this concept, we give meaning to the objects around us from sensory inputs and mental processes. Hence, the stimuli themselves are not sufficient to generate meaning, which is only possible through a complex perceptual system. During the training, once we heard “*mae geri jodan*”, for example, we were able to perform the same kick as other fellows. Even in a different language and without comprehending the rest of the sentence, there was no need for further explanation.

In sum, we knew we were in a place to practice karate, we knew how to perform some moves and we knew specific words that have allowed us to keep training in such a different country and language. This is not a mental construction but a skillful and ecological ability: “affordances of a given place in the environment estab-

lish for an individual what actions are possible there and what the consequences of those actions are” [Heft 1989: 3]. To understand such a concept, we must consider an important intertwinement among body, mind and the world. An individual can only move in relation to what their body can do and in a specific environment.

Okinawa – the birthplace of karate

As we had never been to Okinawa, we had planned the training and the visits with the help of Miguel da Luz, who worked at the Okinawa Karate Information center in *Okinawa Karate Kaikan*. We told him about our goal of researching historic places and training sites and he could make appointments with the masters who would be available to welcome us, especially those who could speak English or had a student who would be able to make translations. The following masters were confirmed by him: Tetsuhiro Hokama *sensei* (*Goju-ryu* style) at the *Nishihara Kenshikai dojo*; Uema Takeshi *sensei* (*Shorin-ryu* style) at the *Shubukan dojo*; and Arakaki *sensei* (*Matsubayashi-ryu* style). We have decided not to seek out much information about the masters nor their *dojos* before visiting them in order to rely more on our immersion process through these embodied activities.

Goju-ryu: Hokama sensei

Tetsuhiro Hokama *sensei* (born in 1944) was mentioned by Miguel da Luz as a master of *Goju-ryu* style. He holds a 10th dan degree and is recognized worldwide as one of the great connoisseurs of traditional (Okinawan) karate. His residence houses his *dojo* and is also a local karate museum, with various items consisting of documents, photos and instruments, such as weapons and old training objects.

When entering the *dojo*, we could see a large arsenal of objects for the practice of karate and *kobudo* that, in Okinawa, are understood as inseparable from each other. Our training included a brief presentation on the use of those different objects, explanations of some techniques, and also a brief discussion on history, and politics, among other subjects. The session was all conducted in English. Personally, Hokama *sensei* showed good humor and willingness to share his broad point of view about karate, exposing an erudition compatible not only with the martial art, but also with the academic education of someone with a degree in psychology and a PhD in archaeology, in addition to countless books written on the martial art of Okinawa.

Starting with one of his anecdotes, he told us that his mother had asked him not to forget an episode she experienced before his birth, during World War II when Okinawa was the scene of some of the deadliest fighting between Japanese and North Americans. Pregnant, her mother was thrown to the floor and kicked in the stomach by a soldier: “and the soldier was not American,

he was Japanese”, Hokama *sensei* confided to us. It was with an air of disapproval that the master told us how the Japanese came to Okinawa to observe how karate was practiced, taking what they saw to the mainland. He also stated that he had no inhibition in, despite the discomfort it might cause, claiming that the origins of Korean *taekwondo* are in *karate*, practiced by the masters who formed it only a few decades ago as a Korean martial art. From a family of noble origin – his ancestors had a castle represented on the stamp used to sign his documents – Hokama maintained a posture of altitude without arrogance, captivating our interest with his good humor and his critical and geopolitical conscience, which in the Japanese martial arts environments is usually eclipsed by a disciplinary behavior.

These reports by the master are historically emblematic since they express the tension in the relations between Japan and Okinawa, marked by the colonialist spirit of the official state policy that prevailed in the country of the rising sun until the defeat in the Second Great War. The colonial spirit of Japanese nationalism is well known for military interventions in China and Korea. In that context, it is not surprising that karate practiced by Koreans has gained a national version, possibly in reaction to Japanese colonialism that had led to the military occupation of Korea at different times, especially at the beginning of the 21st century [Moenig 2015].

After the explanations and training with the objects, we went on to a training session in which Hokama explored the vital points of the body. He mentioned that he was older and considered the need to know his own body in order to use his best resources to fight well. In his case, it would not be a good option to insist on training with a lot of strength or speed, and this is what justified his recent interest in vital points – that would require less physical preparation, but noted precision, study, knowledge and experience. He showed us several ways to break the opponent, pointing out the accuracy of applying those locks in exact places.

The visit to Hokama *sensei* *dojo* was very thought-provoking because we were introduced to a way of seeing karate differently from what is commonly spread. Worldwide, the idea of memorizing the *dojo-kun* (the 5 mottos of karate) is frequent. However, when talking about this issue, he has claimed that each one needs to develop their own *dojo-kun*, based on the values that are most relevant in one's *dojo* and in training. For Hokama, his *dojo-kun*, for example, is based on the idea of good manners, in care for how parents, colleagues and even the objects around him are treated: “Are you making this pencil? No? Then, this is important [...] Who is paying food?”

He has told us how he usually presented these ideas to children, always based on the idea of respect. Thus, his *dojo-kun* relies on the notion that parents are as important as the ones who came before us and made it possible

for us to be there and learn that martial art. Also, he stated that one should take pleasure in practicing karate, together with the feelings of happiness and satisfaction.

Moreover, Hokama *sensei* has criticized the harsh way a few teachers and masters treated the students as if they were always doing something wrong or bad. For him, the more we encourage them, believing in their potential, the more they will develop. He stated that these words have power and it is wiser to focus on what people can do than keep commenting only on their mistakes. In that sense, there is a constant need to be humble. Relating this aspect to his idea of *dojo-kun*, he said:

Today I smile, myself is a sun, myself is a treasure, each, treasure. If [we say to the] kids, ‘you’re bad man, bad man...’ [...] then you have [to say]: ‘you are very important, you are a person’ [...] Then Japan Okinawa is supporting man creature (sic) – video recording from a field trip

What is strong in Hokama *sensei*'s accounts is the great difference between Okinawan training patterns and Tokyo karate sessions. These latest were influenced by the militarization process in post-war Japan and are the most popular model of karate around the globe. After Funakoshi Gichin *sensei*'s trip to Japan (since many Okinawan people do not consider themselves part of Japan), karate started to be developed within a more educational and pedagogical character: the systematization of colored belts began, the progression of movements, the establishment of Shotokan style katas and, still, the standardization not only of the techniques, but of a rigid moral of the practitioner [Barreira 2013; Telles 2018]. According to de la Fuente and Niehaus [2020], such changes regarding “the Japanization of karate then also served a political end as it helped to integrate an Okinawan cultural practice into the national and cultural framework of a ‘homogenous’ Japanese nation” (p. 42).

After visiting Hokama *sensei*'s *dojo*, we visited the Shuri Castle, where part of the political power of the island was concentrated, with a museum that could teach us a bit of the Okinawa's history. Unfortunately, this castle was recently destroyed by a fire and we hope it can be rebuilt soon. Another important point to be highlighted from this visit is that there is an understanding that karate would have started to be practiced by local fishermen and farmers; nevertheless, in Okinawa, it is often commented on the association of the first karate training among the nobles. It seems to have been initially practiced within the castles by those who had had the chance to learn from other cultures, especially the Chinese. Later on, it would have been spread to the rest of the local population. Although we have already known the correct version from the literature, on our visit it has become clear that the narrative that attributes the origins of karate to the lower social classes comes from Japan, being perceived in Okinawa as a way to reduce the social credibility of karate in its origins and legitimize it from its japonization.

Shorin-ryu: Uema sensei

Uema sensei was an indication of a *Shorin-ryu* style master, also by Miguel da Luz. Thus, we went to the Uema family *dojo*, located on the top floor of a house where the whole family seemed to live in. Like Hokama sensei's *dojo*, Uema sensei was living in the same building he was used to train and teach. Apparently, Hokama sensei's *dojo* was more visited (especially because there was a museum inside) and had colorful walls indicating that it was a karate place written on the outside. On the other hand, it was not easy to find Uema's *dojo* as it was located inside a regular family house. But the domestic appearances of the facilities of the Uema family *dojo* should not be confused with a local closure. A 2015 catalogue, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the *Shorinryu Shubukan Uema dojo*, allows us to identify the international connections of this school with *dojos* in countries like Canada, Spain and the Czech Republic. Therefore, it is relevant to mention that usually the karate training places in Okinawa are still located inside the masters' homes. This is another point of divergence between an Okinawan karate and the Japanese (or even Western or globalized) one, which is more popular and frequently practiced in gyms and specific training places apart from a family daily life.

Another interesting aspect of both *dojos* refers to the number of students and classes. We went to Okinawa in a period of a traditional holiday, then most of our training turned out to be private ones or with only one other student. However, while talking to the masters, we have understood that lots of classes with numerous students were not common in Okinawa even during a regular training season.

Moreover, it was frequent to discover that some masters or high-level *karatekas* had other professions. For example, the taxi driver who guided us during part of our visit, indicated by Miguel da Luz, was an eighth *dan* master. Thus, karate was much of a way of life as a daily practice rather than a job, as it usually is in other countries and cultures. In addition, Okinawa is a place where almost all of its inhabitants have some knowledge of a martial art, especially karate and *kobudo*, with a large number of *dojos* scattered throughout its territory, totalling between 350 and 400 *dojos* in Okinawa alone, considering their different schools and ramifications [de la Fuente, Niehaus 2000; OKIC 2020].

Shorin-ryu's training session was taught by Takeshi Uema, who continues his father's legacy, Yasuhiro Uema sensei (9 *dan*, born in 1945). This latter has reached the end of the training session and also talked with us for a while, both with basic English skills. Uema Takeshi sensei requested that we take off our black belts to put white belts on to train – this is something that might easily happen, especially when visiting some *dojo* of another style, as ours originally is Shotokan karate. He has also held demonstrations on the use of training instruments,

with exercises that seemed to have remained in Okinawa, based on *kobudo*. Although it is now part of Japan, its residents constantly refer to the country's central island (mainland) as Japan (or what is outside the Okinawa region), maintaining a differentiation that has historical, cultural and political reasons. As we could have observed, this differentiation extends considerably in terms of understanding and practicing karate.

We were taught to handle some of the *kobudo* instruments and, in the end, Uema Takeshi sensei asked us to choose and perform a karate *kata* from the style we were used to training (Shotokan karate). He was very respectful and kind while seeing us performing them. He made important observations and pointed out some similarities and differences with respect to the more traditional styles, practiced in Okinawa. It is important to mention that Shotokan style, although quite popular around the globe, is not a modality which is easily found in Okinawa. It was named as such and developed the way we know it after Funakoshi Gichin sensei's departed to Tokyo. In this sense, regardless of the style, the Shotokan karate has stressed this possibility of karate training under modern and Western, rather than the ones found in Okinawa or even in the Ryukyu Islands (name given to the archipelago to which Okinawa belongs).

It is also noteworthy that Okinawa is located in a place close to Taiwan and China, consisting of a specific cultural scene as the result of these influences and, therefore, different from what we can easily find in Japan mainland. Regardless of karate training, these aspects can also be seen through the clothes, the cuisine, and the accent (sometimes considered dialect). In this context, we understand how karate might sometimes be considered as Chinese in its origins. Indeed, Japanese karate uses such ideograms meaning "empty hands", a change made by 1920s, defended by Funakoshi Gichin sensei and conducted to an intense controversy, however before that, the ideograms used meant Chinese hands and the pronunciation was the same: karate. Okinawa is in a region that has been the scene of major territorial disputes, having already been independent (Ryukyu Islands), and only recently (1879) annexed to the Japanese territory, which justifies the lack of identification of its inhabitants as Japanese.

Matsubayashi-ryu: Arakaki sensei

Arakaki Toshimitsu sensei (10 *dan*) was presented to us by Miguel da Luz as a master of the *Matsubayashi-ryu* style, which seems to be a derivation of *Shorin-ryu*. During our session, we have also trained with James Pankiewicz, an English *karateka* and Okinawan resident for over twenty years. He was also responsible for carrying out a Japanese-English translation during the training session. As expected, the training took place at Arakaki sensei's home, which made it difficult again to find the address. For this reason, we have arrived a

little late to a karate session for the first time. Still, they seemed to be kind and receptive at our arrival. Despite their apparent hidden *dojos*, the three *senseis* who conducted our training sessions in Okinawa seemed to be used to deal with different cultures and visits from *karatekas* from all over the globe.

Unlike the other training sessions, Arakaki *sensei* did not speak English and we needed James' translations throughout the activity, who was really helpful. This time, we did not handle the *kobudo* instruments and he had emphasized the learning of a *kata* (imaginary fight), since we were from another style, as well as the *bunkai*, the application of *kata* movements in real situations. We also did a small training of *ippon kumite* (combined fight), in which it was possible to feel the power and accuracy of the hits, probably the result of repetitions and callusing. By the way, the *makiwara* (a wooden piece for karate callusing) was present in all the *dojos* we have visited, whether in Tokyo or in Okinawa. This is an important similarity among the differences we have found in such sessions.

Arakaki *sensei* has supervised the training and we also have trained together with James Pankiewicz, as we stated earlier. After this training session, he told us about the *Dojo bar*, a karate themed bar, which he was the owner. He also owns a clothing line based on Okinawan karate lifestyle and has recently opened his own *dojo*, offering karate and *kobudo* training, according to the Okinawa tradition. Today James is one of the great promoters of Okinawan karate, especially for his fluency in English, which allows him to constantly organize events, such as the 100 Kata for Karate Day Challenge, in 2014. Another important name to be mentioned in this context is Jesse Enkamp, a Swedish *karateka* who was used to training in Okinawa from an early age because of his parents. Today, he has a YouTube channel called Karate Nerd, which helps to disseminate the studies and training related to karate, with special editions held in Okinawa. These two examples are relevant to highlight the hospitality of Okinawan culture, including in the karate field. It was frequent to hear from them that once we train together we are considered part of a family.

Through this whole field trip we were told that Okinawan karate remains, in a way, marginal to the development of Japanese karate, as it is part of the local culture, with no intentions of massive dissemination or constant tournaments. The scenario regarding competitions seems to be changing today as Okinawa held its first international karate tournament in August 2018. Although there were other competitions before, this one appears to be an attempt to stress out its important space in the midst of a karate globalization and Westernization in recent years. Such initiatives, along with the construction of facilities such as the *Okinawa Karate Kaikan* tend to call the attention of *karatekas* from all over the world to the Okinawan version. In addition,

there are also attempts to recognize and strengthen the Okinawan karate through a process of applying it to be included as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) by UNESCO [de la Fuente, Niehaus 2020].

We have considered above the notion of affordance to support the comprehension that we were able to train karate in Tokyo even without speaking Japanese due to similarities to our training in Brazil. It seems that form of karate practice has been more commonly spread throughout the globe. On the other side, Okinawan versions were always practiced in English during our visits but they seemed harder to understand probably because of the intentionality of the movements. Intentionality is a key concept in phenomenology and pertains that subject and object are always inextricably connected to one another [Merleau-Ponty 1945].

Such phenomenological understanding supports the idea that a movement is never randomly executed, but on the contrary, it is always related to an object and to the world, even if we are not reflexively conscious of it. We move always engaged in a specific situation [Telles, Vaittinen, Barreira 2018]. Nevertheless, taking the example of Okinawan karate practices, how could we be able to move if we could barely understand this context? Such training were only possible with the verbal guidance of the *sensei* and also through an important corporal learning. This term is discussed by Wacquant [1989] in order to highlight our ability to fight without constant thinking and based on previous training.

From immersion inspired by phenomenology to a transcultural highlight: karate in Okinawa, Tokyo and elsewhere

The most remarkable aspect from this immersion experience refer to an important cultural issue: even if we understand karate as a widely known martial art, its training can differ more than what is already known from existing research. Cynarski [2014, 2019] argues that recent modifications in karate include not only more sportive versions – usually quoted as an important reason to globalization and popularization of various Martial Arts & Combat Sports – but also turns this practice into a recreational one. The author adds that karate can be considered in its pedagogical facet, as well as entertainment or utilitarian ones.

During the technical visits in Okinawa, karate was observed as part of a daily life in most of their inhabitants, which is different from a sportive or hobby practice, more common in Western training. Interests regarding competition or educational standards are recent in that region where karate has been taught more as an oral tradition. Although there is still some rivalry and negative associations towards the Japanese (from mainland Japan), karate techniques now appear to be less

devoted to self-defense and more important drills on a daily routine. On the other hand, Western karate practices tend to rely on extrinsic reasons, such as health, self-development, recreation, fitness, spiritual education, self-defense, etc. which could be summarized in psychological, mental, spiritual dimensions and fighting skills [Jakhel, Peter 2013].

This topic can be framed within the discussions carried out by phenomenology, considering the body as a space of intertwinement among the other, our culture, our shared world, and a certain situation. The issue of corporeality in phenomenology has been constantly addressed, whether in a classical [Husserl 1952/2011; Stein 1917/1980] or French perspective, most notably in Merleau-Ponty [1945/2006; 1953/2011] discussions. Currently, the theme of corporeality is found not only in the scope of philosophy / phenomenology or anthropology, but also in recent studies that approach neurosciences and cognition, and defend the idea that the mind is shaped through the body [Leder 1990; Gallagher 2005; Noe 2004, 2009]. These ones seem to be important aspects that point to fruitful fields of investigation that, although growing, have pointed out many paths that still deserve close attention.

From the results of this study, we claim that one can only understand what karate is nowadays considering where specifically its training occurs. Through an attentive perception after our immersion procedure, we could feel in a pre-reflexive perspective the difference among karate practices in Tokyo, Okinawa, Brazil and even France, where both researchers also have trained. Each *dojo* is embedded by a particular rhythm, specific ways of blocking, attacking, etc. and such patterns are followed more by a body listening than reflexive processes.

Following this proposition to phenomenologically and transculturally comprehend how karate training occurs in different places, we rely on the notion of consciousness as an act towards something in an environment. This can happen not only reflexively, but also as pre-reflexively and inherently embodied. Furthermore, we can say that we know something both when we think of it and when we do it.

Conclusions

Karate is currently popularized and spread much more based on the so-called Japanese karate, which is quite different from the traditional Okinawan version. However, we note that efforts are being made so that practitioners and those interested in this topic have more access to Okinawan karate, either virtually or in person.

This was a description of an investigation based not only on narratives and reflexive data but also concerned with the body in its pre-reflexive aspect, as an important role in the sense of understanding the bodily nuances

of training which might be different depending on the country and the culture.

It is hoped that this type of research can boost an already growing trend of studies that contemplate such a pre-reflexive character of the body, although there is still a scarcity of works considering the immersion of the researcher. In this sense, phenomenology can be pointed out as a fertile ground for the development of investigations and methodological procedures in this field. Such perspective can be also fruitful to transcultural research, especially in Martial Arts & Combat Sports domain. To conclude with, we underscore that an immersion process in an embodied activity can only be understood through an interdisciplinary approach.

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Praktyki karate w Japonii i na Okinawie: Opisywanie procesu immersji poprzez podejście fenomenologiczne i transkulturowe

Słowa kluczowe: karate, sztuki walki, sporty walki, fenomenologia, ucieleśnienie, emersjologia

Streszczenie.

Tło. Karate jest rozumiane jako wschodnia sztuka walki, szczególnie związana z kulturą japońską, chociaż pierwotnie została opracowana na Okinawie. Wraz ze zmianami kulturowymi w japońskim społeczeństwie i stosunkach międzynarodowych, praktyki karate również uległy zmianom w swoich technikach i metodach nauczania.

Problem i cel. Opierając się na istniejących fenomenologicznych badaniach nad karate, rozumiemy tę modalność walki nie tylko w kategoriach techniki, ale także poprzez pojęcie intencjonalności. Celem niniejszego artykułu było opisanie procesu immersji w karate w Japonii (kontynentalnej) i na Okinawie wśród zachodnich praktyków, którzy są autorami

tego artykułu, omawiając go z perspektywy fenomenologicznej i transkulturowej.

Materiał i metody. Wizyty techniczne w Tokio i na Okinawie miały miejsce w 2017 roku, w tym sesje treningowe obu badaczy. Wyniki zostały przeanalizowane i omówione z perspektywy fenomenologicznej.

Wyniki. Głównym rezultatem dla autorów było uczenie się się nie tylko poprzez dyskurs mistrzów, ale także poprzez ich ciała w takich ucieleśnionych działaniach. Był to opis badania opar-

tego nie tylko na narracjach i danych refleksyjnych, ale także na ciele w jego aspekcie przedrefleksyjnym, jako ważnej roli w zrozumieniu cielesnych niuansów treningu.

Wnioski. Autorzy mają nadzieję, że ten rodzaj badań może pobudzić rosnący trend badań, które rozumieją przedrefleksyjny charakter ciała, chociaż wciąż brakuje prac uwzględniających immersję badacza. Fenomenologia może być wskazana jako podatny grunt dla rozwoju badań i procedur metodologicznych w tej dziedzinie.