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# *The Martial Art of Aikido: A Metaphor for a New Multicultural Southern Africa*

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*We enter into the covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both Black and White, will be able to walk tall without any fear in their inalienable right to human dignity . . .  
A rainbow nation, at peace with itself and the world.  
President Nelson Mandela: Inaugural Speech ( 10/05/94).*

In his inaugural presidential address entitled "The Rainbow Nation," Nelson Mandela (1994) described two forces that had shaped the historic change to democracy in South Africa. President Mandela described the first force as one of coercion — expressed in the implementation of the policy of apartheid (separation). The second, he described as a force of cooperation based on a vision of a democratic future.

Just as in the West, where Calvinism generated a philosophy and value system which is still evident in the industrialised world<sup>2</sup> — so too has Africa evolved its own philosophy and corresponding world view which still prevails today.<sup>3</sup> These world views have not only formed the basis of the forces which historically have spawned decades of conflict in South Africa, but continue to exist as the potential energy for the evolution of a new multi-cultural society. The symbolic reference to a "Rainbow Nation" has had graphic sig-

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<sup>2</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> L. Mbigi, "Unhu or Ubuntu?" in *People Dynamics*, 11 (1): 20-26, 1992.

nificance in offering the possibilities for peaceful co-existence between Western and African cultures in Southern Africa.

With the advent of democracy, the question to be considered is how and in what form a new multi-cultural society may emerge? In Africa it is the predominantly black culture that has had to adapt to an imported Anglo-American system. This stands in direct contrast to the situation in Chinese and Japanese cultures, where the Western capitalist system has been adapted to meet the needs of the local culture.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, traditional Japanese cultural values have much in common with the African community orientation and may provide a metaphorical example of a process from which to develop a new identity for the emerging rainbow nation. This paper describes a process in which a new identity may be formed by:

- presenting a descriptive case-study illustrating the differences between African and Western cultural paradigms;
- describing similarities between African and Japanese world views;
- discussing the application of the martial art of Aikido as a multi-cultural metaphor for a new South Africa.

The case study describes the Japanese martial art of Aikido in order to illustrate the use of a metaphor that is practical in its possibilities for facilitating participative interaction between peoples of differing cultures. The co-operative outcome for both parties serves as a symbolic means of identification with a peaceful future vision. It is a vision in which different cultures grow from initial differences of interest to an enriched relationship, much as a rainbow rises from the storm clouds of its genesis.

In part one I describe a workshop that formed part of a three-year project, using the martial art of Aikido as a practical metaphor to achieve multicultural harmony in a South African biscuit manufacturing industry. Aikido was used as a symbolic means for participants of differing cultures who interact on a daily basis to identify with a common humanity — and as a practical process to enable participants to embrace their differences as the energy of change.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Thomson, "Cultural Differences" in *Human Resource Management*, 9 (4): 4-6, 1993.

In Part 2, I reflect on the nature of Aikido as a metaphor for a new multicultural society, by describing three principles of the art which have common meaning in the traditional African world view.

In order to describe what is essentially revealed through experience of Aikido, I specifically use the language and meaning formation derived from the European tradition of existential-phenomenological thought.

I conclude that Aikido, a Japanese art form, provides a symbolic bridge between Western individualistic thought and African group consciousness, and demonstrates the practical possibilities for peaceful coexistence in a multicultural Southern Africa.



## PART ONE : a description of a multicultural group encounter

### Group

The multicultural group described in this case-study comprised three white male managers, and three black female workers representing the local trade union. Historically antagonistic racial divisions were thus overlain by management-union differences in the organisational structure. The group process spanned two days with the objective of developing mutual understanding of each other, and the improvement of relationships.

### Process

The group process was interactive and experiential, allowing for lengthy introductions with the option of translation, and many tea breaks. In the Western tradition this type of meeting would usually involve formal seated participation around a table, with verbal expression of individual opinion, according to a set agenda. In contrast to this, Mbigi and Maree note that the African way of dealing with transformation to new relationships would usually involve a nightlong ceremony, punctuated by music, dance, and various soothsayers helping to interpret in the same way as Western psychotherapists<sup>5</sup>. The ceremony called "Dambe" is thus symbolic, interactive and group focused, without adherence to a specific agenda and timetable.

In the workshop I describe, a combination of the above traditions was used to allow both groups to feel comfortable and to begin to share perceptions about cultural differ-

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<sup>5</sup> Mbigi and Maree, "The Spirit of African Transformation," in *People Dynamics*, 12 (11): 21-31, 1994.

ences and the needs of the groups. Tables were removed and the group sat in an inclusive "circle of influence" implying acceptance and co-operation. Group discussion was punctuated by the demonstration of Aikido, after which the group would practise the dance-like art form, accompanied by music.

From a Western perspective the group process addressed content issues of industrial relations concern, including team building, work time, health and safety and the amount of work done. From an African perspective the content of discussion was less important than the way in which the group interacted, particularly when consultation and co-operation formed the basis of the group process.

### Themes

Although multiple levels of meaning emerged from the group process thus described, a theme of mutual significance to both groups emerged. I term this a "letting-go-letting-be" theme. The process of group discussion, music, dance and the use of Aikido allowed the various cultural groups to get in touch with their feelings, so that they could release negative emotions by "letting go." Establishing a new reality, and thereby finding a common identity, the group described as a feeling of mutual acceptance termed "letting be."

For the management group this emergence of a new reality was conceptualised in the form of an organisational vision. However, from the workers' viewpoint "Dambe" occurred for the group as the "spirits" were inaugurated in a ritualistic sense to create a new community in the work place.

It is not of importance to describe the content of issues discussed, since cultural perceptions define reality. What was important for the whole group was the emergence of *common meaning*, and the creation of a *common identity* using the metaphor of Aikido.



## PART 2 : a reflection on the nature of Aikido as a multicultural metaphor

The martial art of Aikido, translated from the Japanese means "the way of life through the blending of energy."<sup>6</sup> However, in this Western translation the Japanese meaning of the term "ki" is lost to a Western scientific conception of energy as an entity. I prefer to describe Aikido from an existential phenomenological perspective as the (Ai) -

way (do) - of "ki" (the spiritedness of our being). Bugental describes the potential pregnant in our being as "spiritedness:" "We are humans, be-ings ... We are not what we do, but the do-ing... Our beingness impels us into do-ing, act-ing, relat-ing and so on... Only by *ing-ing* can we express/experience our be-ing."<sup>7</sup>

In this light, all of life, including a physical attack is a "pregnant" (spirited) opportunity to experience our being. Attacks are considered an opportunity to actualise our potential in harmony with the spiritedness of the other and thereby reveal our common humanity. What unfolds is a dance of flowing spiritedness in which neither party is injured. Tohei describes Aikido as teaching the ability to honour and acknowledge the "ki" (ing of being) of the other by moving with the spiritedness of the attack and neutralising the intention of harming, thus revealing the potential for *harmony*.<sup>8</sup>

From this description of the nature of Aikido, it is clear that the Japanese meaning is best illuminated in existential phenomenological terms. This is because phenomenology avoids the dualistic terminology embedded in our Western mode of thinking. Dualism implies separation for measurement purposes, from which conflict as the revealing of difference emerges. Aikido explicates the dialectical relationship between being human, and the potential for non-being which can only be revealed in-relation-to-another. Co-operation and harmony follow an acceptance of the dialectic yet complementary nature of our varied cultures.

Let us consider three principles of the art, as they are applied in the case-study to reveal the dialectical nature of cultural differences and the potential harmony of our humanness. In the African world view, we would now be asking: "How was the rainbow revealed in the dancing of the spirits?"

### Being

In order to engage with the other party and thereby reveal our potential *being*, Aikido establishes the importance of being present in the here-and-now with the other. From a phenomenological perspective this "being-in-action" means that the defender's intentionality flows from himself to the attacker in the world. Without this "presence" in the moment, authentic being-in-relation-to-the-other is not possible, and conflict or difference

<sup>6</sup> K. Ueshiba, *The Spirit of Aikido* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> E. K. Bugental, and F. T. Bugental, "Dispiritedness: A new perspective on a Familiar State" in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 24 (1): 49-67. 1984.

<sup>8</sup> K. Tohei, *Ki in daily life* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1978).

in intentionality results in "fallenness." The concept "fallenness" is used to describe both the result of the physical act of throwing the attacker, and in the existential sense to mean separation or loss of authentic being.

This experience of "being" or "presence" through the practice of Aikido in the multicultural group described in Part One, allows participants to experience two fundamental ways in which Western and African world views differ. Aikido reveals the meaning of space and time for both cultures.

In the Western conception of *time*, a linear, and measurable entity is the consequence of a dualistic world view. Time is usually objectified as a continuum that is divisible, and subject to precise measurement. Out of this time-sense comes concepts foreign to African cultures such as time tables, diaries and deadlines. However, in the Japanese view, time is cyclical and relative to specific events. In Buddhism, since events are illusory time is illusory, while in Taoism time travels in a circle, since existence comes from non-being and returns to non-being.<sup>9</sup> The African view of time is similar to the Japanese view, in the sense that time is experienced in relation to specific life events. Mbigi describes time for the African as "a relationship of events in one's human life, for it is these that make it meaningful."<sup>10</sup>

Aikido allows a common understanding to emerge for both African and Western participants when in movement the relative nature of time is experienced. This is particularly important in the multicultural work place, where the meaning of time for the black worker differs from that of his white colleagues. Examples include arising to travel to work at the event of sunrise, and a focus on the experience of work, rather than attaching importance to meeting production or other deadlines. For the African person time is meaningful at the point of the event, and not at the mathematical moment.

A second cultural difference that is revealed in the experience of Aikido concerns the notion of *spatiality*. From a Western perspective space is a measurable entity that is in absolute existence between people. However, from a phenomenological approach space is an anticipation of the relationship between the person, and others or things in the subjective world of the intending person. Moving with the other is the act of creating space, since the subjective experience resides in the person and not the physical entity.

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<sup>9</sup> Tohei, *ibid.*.

<sup>10</sup> Mbigi, *ibid.*.

Hence from the point of view of human spatiality, we are always the centre of our world. In Aikido this view of human spatiality is revealed by the injunction "choose to be centred" as it is used by Tohei.<sup>11</sup> By this it is meant that when we choose to be the subjective "centre" of our world of experience our relationship to others in the shared world of human experience is authentic, and allows the true nature of things-as-they-are to be revealed. *Centring* is not easily explained from a western scientific viewpoint, but may best be described as a mental state of calmness that arises when the mind returns to the physical centre of gravity of the human body. In phenomenological terms, an awareness of the human dimension of spatiality in relation to the other is manifest in one's attuneness to others and things in the world as-they-are.

The separation of self as object from the world, and objects in space around it, follows the classical Greek world-view and underlines what Oshawa terms "Western man's attempts to clothe the world in dualism."<sup>12</sup> This separation, termed the great "Cartesian split" in existential-phenomenological thought, lies at the heart of Western man's individual orientation in his world. His relationship with others, often including his family, may be described as instrumental in nature, since in association with others his motive is to gain things for himself.

This view contrasts sharply with Oriental and African views of the self. For the Japanese a person is considered in terms of his relationships with others, and not simply as an individual. The African view is similar in the sense that each person forms part of an interdependent community consciousness. Mbigi describes the concept of "*uBuntu*" as the mutual recognition of one's humanity, in the role each person plays as a link in the chain of vital forces, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry, and sustaining him below the line of his descendants<sup>13</sup>. Ubuntu implies mutual respect through an understanding of the totality of one's inter-dependent humanity. To practise Aikido is to experience the vital force, termed spiritedness, that is the living link of a common humanity.<sup>14</sup> In this phenomenological sense of "connectedness," our human potential of being is revealed in the "ki" of the "in-between," which we have also termed "spiritedness."

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<sup>11</sup> Tohei, *ibid.*.

<sup>12</sup> G. Oshawa, *Le principe de la science et de la philosophie d'Etrême-Orient* (Paris: Vrin, 1931).

<sup>13</sup> Mbigi, *ibid.*.

<sup>14</sup> Ueshiba, *ibid.*.



## Looking

A second fundamental principle of the art of Aikido termed "looking" is best described phenomenologically as a "discovering" mode of attunedness, which allows for the things as they are in the world to be revealed. Coming from discovery reveals an awareness of "what is."

An "openness" to the things in the world, as they are revealed in Aikido, contrasts with the scientific tradition underlying the Western world view. Description is replaced by an obsession with "explanation." This Western notion of causation Van den Berg (1981) describes as originating from the world view of the ancient Greeks.<sup>15</sup> In this view, if a particle of matter occupied a particular place at a particular time, it was because another particle had pushed it there. Linear cause-effect thinking still dominates Western attempts to explain human behaviour, and to classify cultural differences.

The African understanding of the way things come to be, has some similarity with the Eastern approach described as that of discovery. Mbiti notes that African notions of causation follow from their ontology.<sup>16</sup> African ontology is hierarchical and based on the amount of "vital force" which each tier in the hierarchy possesses, flowing from God, through the spirits, man, animals and plants, to physical objects without life. Since all things are found in a relationship according to the laws of ontological hierarchy, one mode of existence presupposes and validates all the others. In African culture the importance of mutual respect for all things as they are in the world, underlies the maintenance of the ontological structure. Each person's place in the community is pre-determined and important in the maintenance of the ontological structure. Each person's place in the community is pre-determined and important in the maintenance of the hierarchical order of life. Causation is of little importance in this view, since the existence of all things depends on ontological relationship. Discovery of, and adherence to the collective relationship that defines humanity provides meaning in each individual's life.

The "how" of relating in the work context is thus of greater importance in the African world view, than the end product that is generated by the act of working. In the case-study presented in Section one (above) experience of the meaningfulness of a discovering attitude in the practice of Aikido, allows for a common meaning to develop for participants of both cultures. Discovery increases empathy and appreciation of cultural differences, and

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<sup>15</sup> J. H. Van den Berg, "Phenomenology and psychotherapy" in *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 21-49, 1981.

at the same time calls into focus fundamental similarities in our human experience of the world. Participants in the multicultural group described earlier, discovered common meaning in the world, by experiencing a nurturing quality of relationship that is the philosophical basis of Aikido. Often for the first time in their lives, black and white participants came into physical contact (touched) each other as they experienced Aikido. Discovering a common humanity overcomes the tendency to separate and objectify others in terms of physical differences.

### Doing

A third fundamental principle of the art of Aikido, I term "doing." The term is used in an existential sense to describe "the meaning that we express in our living."<sup>17</sup> The dynamic process of being-in-action is a movement "towards" that which makes our human life meaningful. We have noted that the Western tradition based on Cartesian dualism, seeks causal explanation of human action, implying that man is a mechanical thing being "pushed" to act. African and Japanese world views describe being human as only revealed in the process of doing. It is the way in which our lives unfold and not the end product, that is of importance in these cultures. The word "spirit" as it is used for example in the terms "the Spirit of Aikido" or "the Spirit of uBuntu," refers to the way of taking action which reveals the meaningfulness of the person's being in relation to his ontological inheritance. It is the "doing" and not the outcome that is the focus of an art form.

The term "spirit" or "ki" as it is used in this sense, is a cornerstone of both African and Japanese systems of morality. The tradition of honour in Japanese culture, and of community spirit (Ubuntu) in African culture, imbues each person with moral and legal obligations that are to be fulfilled in order to enhance the quality of his being. This emphasis on "the way of doing" to fulfil one's ontological destiny, is in marked contrast to Western notions of morality which use injunctions based on absolute standards of individual behaviour. The Protestant work ethic may be described as one such injunction that relies on the development of "guilt" in relation to past actions to enforce future behaviour. African and Japanese cultures rely on "shame" as an external sanction to lead action in the direction of community well-being. To "do" in a way that reveals one's place and identity in the community.

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<sup>16</sup> Mbiti, *ibid.*.

<sup>17</sup> Bugental, *ibid.*.

In the multicultural group case-study described in Part one. I offer a vision of a common future morality based on co-operation and harmony. I am specifically demonstrating through metaphor a "moving towards" approach rather than resorting to an explanation of cultural differences underlying past conflict. This implies the use of a phenomenological understanding of the future "as an invitation from the past, that is coming to us in the here and now."<sup>18</sup> The vision that I offer from the martial art of Aikido involves a calling forth of the "Warrior Spirit." The metaphor of a "warrior" has commonality of meaning in African, Japanese and Western cultures. In the African tribal tradition the term is used to denote responsibility for community protection and provision. This warrior image also emerges in Western man's increasing involvement in, and identification with, sports and high performing athletes.

The "Warrior Spirit" intends a courageous taking of action to cut through the blinkers of past preoccupation with differences, and a stepping forth to a new morality and common humanity. Aikido, as "the way of harmony through the blending of energies," intends the experience of one peaceful world through the recovery of our humanity.



## CONCLUSION

The creation of a new "Rainbow Nation" requires a commonality of vision, and a new world view capable of embracing the complexity of our multicultural existence.

Adapting cultural traditions in a "best-fit" compromise will remain a short term solution. A new identity must evolve based on a dialectic and divergent way-of-being. In this sense, Van den Berg notes that "the true problems of living are always problems of overcoming or reconciling opposites . . . they are divergent problems and have no solution in the ordinary sense of the word."<sup>19</sup> The call for a new moral restoration<sup>20</sup> heralds the start of a change process that will move beyond present world views based on individualism and

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<sup>18</sup> D. Kruger, *Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology* (Cape Town: Juta, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Van den Berg, *ibid.*.

<sup>20</sup> Mandela, *ibid.*.

communalism. The search for a multicultural identity in Southern Africa, indeed reflects the greater challenge of global movement to a common humanity.

"By nature man is alike...  
By practise he becomes wide apart".  
(Confucius)



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