What’s in a colour? The Jūdōgi and Japanese Aesthetics: Carl De Crée & Llŷr Jones

Introduction
Recent years have seen the International Jūdō Federation (IJF) introduce several changes to jūdō – none of which were designed for the betterment of Kōdōkan Jūdō itself, but rather were changes implemented solely with the self-serving aim of attempting to increase jūdō’s popular entertainment (and hence commercial and televisial) appeal. The consistency of these changes with the underlying objectives and traditions of Kōdōkan Jūdō was ignored, and no change exemplified this more than the 1997 introduction of the blue jūdōgi—a controversial and ill-judged move which almost resulted in a walk-out by the delegation from the All Japan Jūdō Federation.

Recently there has been some debate about the jūdōgi. Previously Yoshiaki, and co-authors [1] have contributed to the exchange by researching the historical evolution of the jūdōgi—in particular its form and colour in Japan. They have reported their findings in a short paper (in Japanese with an English abstract) and this present article supplements that work by providing a succinct explanation about the culture of the jūdōgi, and explaining why it should be white.

Origins of the Blue Jūdōgi
In the 1970s the legendary Dutch jūdōka Anton Geesink (1934-2010) suggested a new pedagogical approach to jūdō – including a new system for classifying throws, modifications for increasing safety and other changes aimed at improving refereeing. The latter he addressed by proposing changing the colours of the jūdōgi from both being white into one jūdōgi being blue, the other being red.

In April 1975 the magazine France JUDO published a seven-page article on Geesink’s ideas. The cover of the magazine carried a photograph of Geesink and the peerless Isao Okano (also a gold medallist from the 1964 Tōkyō Olympics) wearing red and blue jūdōgi respectively [Figure 1]. Inside the magazine a pull-out A3 poster of the two jūdōka identically dressed was also included. Despite Geesink’s ideas being then rejected, the idea of coloured jūdōgi so upset the Japanese hierarchy that Okano was ignominiously dismissed as Japanese Team Manager for the October 1975 Vienna World Championships and replaced by Nobuyuki Sato. To this day Okano-sensei has continued to be excluded from the Kōdōkan’s promotion process and his rank has been held at 6 dan for over 40 years. Having essentially been mislead into donning the blue jūdōgi Okano can only be sympathised with as an undeserving victim of Geesink’s vain-glorious propaganda push.

Some 20 years later (in 1997) and after much intense debate, part of Geesink’s suggestions finally did get adopted by the UF, with the introduction of blue jūdōgi into international competition. (The use of red jūdōgi was not adopted.) The main proponent for this change was the European Jūdō Union (EJU) who had first experimented with blue jūdōgi at the 1988 European Championships in Pamplona, and the leading opponent was Japan. (The leading personalities on either side were François Besson (1946-2010) for the EJU and Ichiro Abe for Japan.) However, few of Geesink’s original motives, such as safety were quoted, and the UF positioned the change as improvements in terms of the visibility and ability of spectators and officials alike to follow the contests.

Objections to the Blue Jūdōgi
Those who have invested the time and effort to acquire the education which Kōdōkan Jūdō aims to provide (and who understand its mechanisms for doing so as envisioned by its founder, Jigorō Kanō-shihan) tend to object to the blue jūdōgi for the following reasons:

Figure 1 - Anton Geesink (red) and Isao Okano (blue) pictured wearing coloured jūdōgi in the magazine France JUDO—April 1975 edition

In this edition: Respected jūdō scholars Professor Carl De Crée and Dr Llŷr Jones treat us to two articles. The first is on the tradition of the white jūdōgi linked to Japanese aesthetics. The second is about the symbology of the Kōdōkan instructor’s badge.

News: Again we remind you that we have quite a collection of video material now and would be happy to arrange showings for clubs. Remember you can buy copies through the website. Sets of Bulletins may also be purchased on CDs.

Regards Diana Birch

In This Issue
• What’s in a colour? The Jūdōgi and Japanese Aesthetics by Carl De Crée & Llŷr Jones
• Symbology of the Kōdōkan’s Instructor’s Badge by Llŷr Jones & Carl De Crée
• Richard Bowen collection
• Videos available

May 2014
Tradition: People like their traditions and for over a hundred years jūdōgi were traditionally white. Underpinning this tradition was the belief that the white jūdōgi symbolises the spirit and energy of jūdō and its core concept of seiryoku zen’yo (good use of mind and body).

Uniformity: The jūdō uniform is meant to be uniform. Around 1910 Kanō introduced a standard uniform for the practice of Kōdōkan Jūdō so as to remove class distinction. Previously jūdō practice took place in everyday clothes. Kanō wanted jūdō to be practiced by everyone, rich and poor, as a means of education and for the betterment of society. By putting everyone in the same white, modest uniform, one could not tell a jūdōka’s social class and students would be judged solely on the merit of their training and effort.

Distortion of Jūdō: For many, the blue jūdōgi—with the inane thinking behind its adoption—has come to represent the physical manifestation of what is wrong with contemporary jūdō. In short, today’s jūdō has been distorted by the IJF away from an all-round pedagogy to a commercialised, garish jacketed wrestling sport.

Japanese Aesthetics & the Blue Jūdōgi

Further insight into the inappropriateness of the blue jūdōgi can be found by considering concepts from Japanese aesthetics—including the ancient values of wabi-sabi (imperfection and transience), shizen (naturalness and without pretence) and kanso (simplicity and the elimination of the ornate). These concepts, which are difficult to accurately translate, form the basis of many Japanese cultural and aesthetic standards on what is deemed to be tasteful or (beautiful) and are a basic part of everyday Japanese life [2].

In terms of wabi and sabi although both terms are often linked together—and used in the same sentence—they do not mean the same. Wabi means “austere beauty”, and sabi refers to “rustic patina”. Properties of wabi include understated elegance and simplicity. As well as sabi, wabi is often linked to shizen (naturalness and without pretence) and kanso (simplicity and the exclusion of the ornate).

The reader interested in acquiring further insight into the application of Japanese Aesthetics to jūdō—and particularly to its Itetsu-no-kata 五の形 (The Five Forms)—as well as Jigoro Kanō’s appreciation of the topic is referred to a recent Master’s dissertation by Carl De Crée [3].

Taking the concept of wabi-sabi and applying it to the jūdōgi - it is the original, natural, unbleached cotton jūdōgi [Figure 2] that most conforms to wabi-sabi ethic. Such a jūdōgi will often be handmade with all the flaws and imperfections associated with such a material and such a process.

Additionally, over time such a jūdōgi can seem to develop a character all of its own – becoming well-worn and soft and with its original yellowish colour fading to a creamy ivory “off-white” through repeated wearing and washing after practice. However, in recent years an unbleached jūdōgi is thought, by many students and instructors, to be a beginner’s uniform – often low cost and often single weave. Something to be worn until one dedicates oneself to jūdō and purchases a bleached brilliant white double weave premier jūdōgi – often with a prominent upmarket brand manufacturer’s logo sometimes with man-made polyester blended in with the cotton. The brilliant white jūdōgi, though not strictly adhering to the wabi-sabi ethic is though acceptable, whereas the blue jūdōgi is distinctly non-traditional, lacks simplicity and certainly does not conform to the wabi-sabi ethic.

It is essential to point out that obtaining a high quality, unbleached jūdōgi today is a non-trivial task – even in Japan. Several of the leading jūdōgi manufacturers no longer carry them in their catalogue—though they are available on a bespoke, custom order basis. Natural jūdōgi also still exit as traditional true handicraft. Such jūdōgi will usually cost a lot more—typically about £2000.

The contrast between a natural unbleached jūdōgi and brilliant white bleached one can be seen in Figure 3 which shows, from Left-to-Right, three iconic French jūdōka namely Henri Courtine FFJDA 10 dan, Maurice Gruel (1920-2010) FFJDA 9 dan and Guy Pelletier (1921-2011) FFJDA 9 dan. In the photograph Courtine-sensei is wearing an unbleached jūdōgi and the contrast between his jūdōgi and that of the other two senior Frenchsensei is obvious. (FFJDA = La Fédération Française de Jūdō-Jūjitsu, Kendo et Disciplines Associées.)

Concluding Remarks

Today, many jūdō students and coaches believe that the colour of the jūdōgi is either white or blue and that either colour – or even split colour (blue trousers/white jacket of vice-versa) - is acceptable for everyday training. The reality is that no one who does not compete in a tournament that mandates their use requires a blue jūdōgi at all, however so low is the aware-
ness of most of the issues raised in this article that many chose to buy a blue jūdōgi for no reason other than they supposedly “look cool”. The issue has indeed gone beyond merely blue jūdōgi, with for example, black jūdōgi being often worn in the United States, and jūdōgi of sometimes other colours featuring in the various “jūdō leagues” in Europe and elsewhere.

The authors are though heartened by the fact that blue jūdōgi are not permitted at the Kōdōkan—a conservative organisation, who remain, to a degree, the last custodians of the concept of jūdō as a physical and mental education, and not just a sport [Figure 4]. In these times of significant IJF-induced change for jūdō it is essential to remember that traditions when lost, tend to be lost for ever—and to understand that not all innovation is good, and not all change is for the better.

The character 指 is pronounced “shi” and indicates instructor, although it can also be read as “yubi”, which means finger, in the sense of “a pointer” - that is “someone who points (you into the right direction)” - i.e. an instructor. It is really an abbreviation of 指南役 shinanyaku which means an “instructor”, a term that was used in some classical martial arts schools; it appeared, for example, on the teachers qualification diploma’s issued by some Kitā-ryū jūjutsu school branches.

Protocol Aspects
The badge itself serves to identify those “performing the function” of a Kōdōkan instructor more so than denoting an “appointment” or “qualification” as an instructor. Accordingly, Kōdōkan sensei tend not to wear the badge on a day-to-day basis, and restrict its use for special events. This makes sense as such

References

Symbology of the Kōdōkan Instructor’s Badge: Llŷr Jones & Carl De Crée

Background
Anyone who has attended a special Kōdōkan course for example the Kōdōkan International Summer Courses or an overseas Kōdōkan Kata Seminar such as those held in Europe (Zagreb, Croatia – 2011; Lignano, Italy – 2012; Rome, Italy - 2013) will have noticed the distinctive badge worn by the majority of the Kōdōkan instructors [Figure 1].

The Kōdōkan Instructor’s Badge
The Kōdōkan instructor’s badge [Figure 2] is the kanji 指 set within the yata-no-kaɡami outline (the same form as the well-known Kōdōkan emblem) and is usually embroidered onto the jūdōgi. The yata-no-kaɡami 八咫鏡 is part of the Imperial Regalia of Japan and is a sacred mirror that is supposed to reflect our souls. According to myth the mirror is stored in the Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮 in Mie Prefecture, Japan. Whether that is actually true we cannot say for sure as it has not been verified by historians or other independent scholars. The reader interested in further information on the mirror/emblem is directed to an article by Senta Yamada-sensei and published in the magazine Judo [1] and also to one by Professor David Waterhouse and published in issue 5 of this Bulletin [2]. It is though important to note that the use of the yata-no-kaɡami shape itself is not the exclusive monopoly of the Kōdōkan.

Protocol Aspects
The badge itself serves to identify those “performing the function” of a Kōdōkan instructor more so than denoting an “appointment” or “qualification” as an instructor. Accordingly, Kōdōkan sensei tend not to wear the badge on a day-to-day basis, and restrict its use for special events. This makes sense as such.

Figure 1 - Kōdōkan instructors at the 2013 Kōdōkan International Summer Course I “Kata” (Photographs © Marc Lonsdale 2013 and used with permission)

Figure 4 - Kōdōkan signage outlawing blue jūdōgi (and rash guards)
courses usually have a lot of high ranking Japanese jūdōka present, and it is particularly helpful to have the designated Kōdōkan instructors easily identifiable. Kōdōkan instructors sometimes wear the badge while not in residence at the Kōdōkan, for example while giving guest instruction abroad as part of a travelling Kōdōkan mission, or when invited as a specific guest instructor in other establishments. However, in other circumstances it is unlikely that they would wear the badge so as to avoid the potential for misunderstanding in issues of protocol, particularly were someone of a higher dan rank to be present.

**Concluding Remarks**

It should be noted that the Kōdōkan does not use the Shōgō 手号 system of titles—Renshi 韓師 (Well Trained or “Skilled” Expert), Kyoshi 教士 (Teaching Expert), Hanshi 範士 (Model Expert or Teacher by Example). Traditionally, these titles are the preserve of the Dai Nippon Butokukai 大日本武徳会 and also the Kokusai Būdōin 国際武道院. Additionally, the Kōdōkan does not issue formal instructors’ licences - this is done by the All Japan Jūdō Federation 全日本柔道連盟 whose Certified Jūdō Leader Qualification System has “A”, “B” and “C” grades (“A” being the highest) depending on jūdō expertise and teaching experience [3]. Furthermore, the Kokusai Būdōin also award an Official Instructor License to qualified individuals in recognition of their experience and expertise as a teacher. There are seven levels of licence available—ranging from G.S1 (the highest) down to G.5.

**Reference**


---

**The Richard Bowen Collection**

In 1949, Richard Bowen began judo training in London at the Budokai, of which became Vice-President. He lived in Japan for four years to deepen his studies. A former British International, he fought in the first ever World judo Championships in Japan in 1956. He was the author of more than eighty articles. Richard Bowen built up an extensive judo Library in the course of research for his articles and books, and he kindly donated it to the University of Bath Library. Items in the collection are for reference use only (not available for loan). Items can be viewed between 9am-5pm. If you would like to look at an item from The Richard Bowen Collection, please contact the Subject Librarian, Peter Bradley. +44 1225 384784

A copy of the video ‘An Interlude with Richard Bowen’ has also been donated to the collection.

**Martial Arts and Zen**

**Titles Available from www.Dial-Media.com**

Visit www.Dial-Media.com or email the Kano Society at sensei@kanosociety.org

**Videos and DVDs**

- NEW - ‘Ko-Izumi, Little Spring’ - DVD or VHS 35mins £10 donation plus p&p
- Sword and mind
- The flowers of the heart
- Judo for life
- The soft and the hard
- The Stone sermon
- Tips and icebergs
- Tapes by Trevor Leggett

All above titles £10 donation each plus p&p.

- An Interlude with Richard Bowen £15 donation + p&p
- Gunji Koizumi 35mins £15 donation plus p&p;
- Go-shin jutsu Part I & Part II £15 plus p&p each;
- Kawamura technique & gokyo - 55min £15 + p&p
- An Englishwoman in Japan - Sarah Meyer and Ichiro Hatta - Based on letters to Gunji Koizumi - 15 mins - £10 donation plus p&p
- Budokai advert 90 secs clip £3 donation
- Allan Zipeure Allan Zipeure Allan Zipeure Allan Zipeure jūdō Man at 90  £10 donation
- The Stone sermon
- Tips and icebergs
- Tapes by Trevor Leggett

All above titles £10 donation each plus p&p.

- NEW - ‘Judo for life’
- £15 donation + p&p
- £15 donation + p&p
- (Proceeds of sales to charity)

In preparation—Kime no Kata