

Kanazawa Kyudo 金沢弓道

An Introduction to, Analysis of, and Reflection on the practice of Japanese Style Archery

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Abstract

This essay serves as an introduction to, analysis of, and reflection on Japanese traditional style archery, known as *Kyudo*. Beginning with the history and meaning of Kyudo in Japan as an alternative form of archery with focused value on cultivating oneself physically, mentally, and/or spiritually, an introduction to the historical and cultural contexts in which this practice exists is made. This section also includes morphological contextualization of the bow and arrows found in Kyudo, as well as how these morphologies differ from other regional counterparts. Further analyses is then made as to the process of the form, and spiritual associations that are often made with respect to how such associations are commonly interpreted. Finally, a personal reflection on the international experience is made. The reflection and analyses here are representative of an international experience at the Kanazawa University Kyudo club, and are presented as a single experience out of many.

INTRODUCTION

Archery exists as a practice in most every indigenous culture around the world, save for that of Australia due to the lack of viable flora for crafting a bow and arrow (George 2024). While initially a tool with the practical means of obtaining food and killing either in defense or offense, the bow and arrow transitioned everywhere it was found into a means of strengthening oneself socially, spiritually, mentally, and/or physically through a variety of contexts such as spirituality, sport, and ceremony. As such, archery around the world is extremely diverse and takes on different morphologies and cultural associations in a beautiful array of tangible and intangible manifestations of culture. This essay will serve as an introduction to, analysis of, and reflection on just one of the ways that archery manifests in the predominant culture of Japan, known as *Kyudo*. I myself am not Japanese, and approached the practice of *Kyudo* myself over the course of a year-long study abroad at Kanazawa University on the west coast of Japan. While I do hold great interest in studying archery, I do intrinsically carry biases as a western archer of nineteen years. In those nineteen years, I have practiced archery in the western Olympic style and various horseback styles, none of which prepared me for the specific experiences I would have, or cultural contexts I would begin to understand during my time at the Kanazawa University *Kyudo* club. Further, my personal experiences are not intended to be representative of a greater collective experience, but rather provide personal insights to the practice I gained during the admittedly limited time I practiced this style of archery. To supplement these limitations, biases, and shortcomings, this essay will be divided into two main sections; the first consisting of a history and explanation of what *Kyudo* is, and the second being a personal reflection on the significance of *Kyudo* based on my experience in Kanazawa.

PART I: HISTORY AND EXPLANATION

The earliest archeological evidence of archery in Japan comes from the Jomon period (13,000-300 BCE) in Japan, with more evidence of geographic diffusion coming from the Yayoi period (500 BCE-300 CE). The presumed simultaneous independent invention and prolonged existence of archery in most lasting cultures around the world should ratify its position as a cultural material practice. While things such as language, food, music, clothing, or dancing may be more frequently thought of in comparing cultures, archery holds an equal importance. Comprising a mix of performative, competitive, artistic, and expressionistic qualities, archery also provided a means of sustenance for those who practiced. But the form of archery has evolved quite a bit since the Yayoi period, and as other means of gaining sustenance emerged the form of the bow transitioned to both performance and warfare. Gaining new shapes and styles of shooting across the world, archery branched out from its prehistoric shapes to regionally and culturally specific ones, and the Japanese “*Yumi*” (ゆみ/弓 - meaning “bow”, with the single Chinese character being a pictographic representation) boasts one of the more unique shapes.

Differing from its original shape of the Jomon period (an arced shaped, resembling a crescent moon), the shape of the contemporary *Yumi* can first be seen in the late Kamakura period in its asymmetrical form (though evidence of bow decorating and ceremonial use exists as early as the Kofun period). While most other bows in the world rest the arrow on the mid-section of the bow, the *Yumi* does so about 1/3rd of the way up the bow, giving it an iconic asymmetrical shape when strung. The shape of the *Yumi* may vary depending on the region in which it has been made as well, with slight variations on the build and the curvature of the wood. There are a couple of reasons the *Yumi* might have assumed this asymmetrical shape, to account for its length, the local flora used in its crafting (being bamboo) is a weaker composition in smaller bows. To account for the tiller line (a term for the line where an arrow is rested, pulled back, and released on a bow) being 1/3rd of the way up the body is likely a result of horseback application, moving the majority

of the body of the bow upwards so as to reduce risk of hitting the horse with the lower limb of the bow. Despite its morphological differences, the *Yumi* functions with the same applied physics as all other bows, with the grip being located on a node with antinodes found further up and down the limbs (Mariani and Matsuo 2020). Nodes and antinodes are terms used in relation to the physics of vibrations, with antinodes being the apexes of movement, and nodes being where a material is most stable as a vibration or flex occurs. A comprehensive analogy might be to imagine a see-saw, where the end points move up and down over the greatest distance, but the space in between those points remains stable and the same. That in between space is where bows have their hand grips so as to produce a stable and straight release of the arrow. The same is true with the *Yumi*, as with the aerodynamics of the *Ya*, or Japanese arrow. Morphologically, Japanese *Ya* are much longer than western arrows, and have several other distinct differences. First, the reason for their length is due to the size of the *Yumi* requiring a draw length that reaches far past the archer's face, as opposed to western draw lengths that usually stop around the cheek. But one of the other interesting differences found in *Ya*, is that there are two types found in *Kyudo*: *Haya* and *Otoya*. *Haya*, or “first arrows”, rotate clockwise while *Otoya*, or “second arrows”, rotate counter-clockwise. Traditionally one side of a feather is used for each type of arrow, with the curvature of a side of the feather determining which direction it will send an arrow through the air (“*Kyudo*: Japanese Archery,” n.d.). In the performance and practice of *Kyudo*, archers must recognize and use the *Haya* first, usually marked by a small cut on one side at the base of the feathers, with the *Otoya* marked by a small cut on the opposite side. These arrows are commonly shot either in pairs, or as groups of four with two *Haya* and two *Otoya*. Japanese archery also features a unique material adaptation to the traditional thumb grip with the *Yukake*, a fitted leather glove with a hard notch at the base of the thumb to hold the bow string. This differs slightly from the traditionally bone, wood, or metal thumb rings of other Asian and Middle Eastern cultural archery. The *Yukake* generally

holds the spare arrow(s) in the performance of *Kyudo*. But to better understand why this performative process is important in *Kyudo*, I will now explain how it is that *Kyudo* is commonly understood.

Kyudo, is the Japanese cultural manifestation of archery into a means of strengthening oneself socially, spiritually, mentally, and/or physically, and differs from *Kyujutsu* (弓術) in that it reflects this personal development through practice of archery as an art focused on the choreographed form. *Kyujutsu* pertains more to the practical applications of archery, focusing on efficiency and accuracy, and applying the bow as a means of obtaining food and killing in either defense or offense. As bows left the grand theater of war in favor of guns, *Kyudo* began to shape as a common practice in aristocratic and cultural spaces. Much of the contemporary performance of *Kyudo* is a result of many styles and practices within samurai communities, vying for different teachings and statuses as masters of the craft, all the way from the Muromachi period (1336-1573 CE) to the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the practice became more standardized with the foundation of the “Dai Nippon Butoku Kai” (the largest governing body for martial arts in Japan) in Kyoto. But even before this standardization of *Kyudo* as a practice, it had been functioning in a non-military context for so long in forms such as *Shihanmato* (a form of *Kyudo* usually practiced indoors and using a half-sized *Yumi*, where participants socialize and perform in a kneeling position while releasing the arrows), that *Kyudo* was excluded from restrictions on martial arts that occurred as a result of WWII (“The History of Kyudo | International Kyudo Federation,” n.d.). *Kyudo* has also existed (and still exists) in a variety of other culturally significant practices such as *yabusame* (a form of Japanese horseback archery) competitive tournaments, individual rankings in the dan system, many of which consist of different variations on the same eight steps traditionally practiced in *Kyudo*. In my time at Kanazawa, we learned several variations from regular practice to a tournament setting in the forms of *zasha* 座射 (sitting form) and *rissha* 立射

(standing form), with the ceremonial and ritual form of *reisha* 礼射 being performed by club presidents to open the tournaments we had between schools. Even the variations seen in tournament settings have further sub-variations, with different schools practicing different movements for each step. It is my understanding that these variations are generally a result of regional and local differences in teaching, likely stemming from the different clans that taught the art before a standardized performance was accepted. These modern forms of *Kyudo* owe their existence to a long history of religious and social association with archery in Japan, as is common in many societies with extensive practice of archery. The tools of the bow and arrow themselves served as efficient means of practicing hunting, alongside warfare both on foot and on horseback. But beyond the realm of man, archery worked its way into tales of *Amaterasu*, the goddess of the Sun, with tales from the *Kojiki* (a collection of Japanese myths and tales) where she equips herself with a full arsenal of a bow and a thousand arrows. There exists as well the deity *Hachiman*, a god of archery and warfare long prayed to by soldiers, and who even gained status as the guardian deity of the imperial family during the Nara period (710-794 ce). Such sacred association with the bow was not solely from warfare however, as the sound born from the string gained its own status as a spiritual symbol. The sound of a bow string was seen as an auspicious thing, where Shamans employed the sound as a means of communicating with spirits and dispelling evil during the Heian times. The bow itself, sometimes regarded as a conductor by which spiritual mediumship could be practiced, and arrows too of similar properties. *Hamayumi* (破魔弓) and *Hamaya* (破魔矢, evil dispelling bows and arrows) are still employed via ritual practice in blessings and sacred honorings of Shinto deities (Newman, 2015).

While the religious contexts of *Kyudo* are still strongly prevalent, it is worth noting as well the manner by which the contemporary form of *Kyudo* got its shape. Consisting of eight official steps, *Kyudo* differs from *Kyujutsu* (弓術) as the latter now refers to the more war and hunting-

based practical applications of the bow and arrow, while *Kyudo* refers to the practice of a choreographed form with mental, physical, and spiritual growth as a focus. But even before our now modern *Kyudo*, archery existed as a social practice besides hunting and war for aristocratic classes that would adopt their own practices, styles, and games. *Shihanmato* is one such aristocratic form, employing a half-sized *Yumi* alongside half-sized arrows, targets, and distance. The archer even stays kneeling or seated the entire time, as this was often practiced indoors and required much less space. As these forms of archery gained popularity and the application of archery outside of hunting and war became more socially apparent, the practice itself became more common amongst a variety of classes. Archery did maintain its high status however, through war, social, and religious contexts, with certain clans even emerging as prominent archers that would go on to teach and establish the more institutionalized systems that exist today. The Ogasawara Ryu clan is one such, that specialized in ritual *yabusame* and exists even today internationally. There exists a common association of *Kyudo* with Zen, a concept largely associated with Buddhism. While Buddhism is extremely prevalent in Japanese society, this association stems from a series of misinterpretations, mystifications, and misrepresentations in the internationally acclaimed *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by the German author Eugen Herrigel. While Herrigel's account of his experience with *Kyudo* has inspired a great amount of international interest in the practice alongside spreading international recognition to a broader audience, his work has been strongly criticized for the above mentioned reasons of poor portrayals and understandings. In Yamada Shoji's work, "The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery", he takes passionate stances with these critiques calling into question the validity of how Herrigel expressed his experience and ultimately aims to demystify the presentation of *Kyudo* that Herrigel writes. In his critical analysis of Herrigel's work, Yamada explains that he has "...attempted to present a new reading of Herrigel and associated documents from a different perspective so as to clarify the mythic function that

creates our conception of what constitutes ‘Japanese-ness.’ (Yamada, 2001). The problem that Yamada references here is the apparent fetishization of a mystic and zen Japanese identity, within and without martial arts. While the scope of this issue deserves its own paper, within the context of *Kyudo* such mystification does bring a beauty and appeal to the practice but ultimately is dishonest to the actual practice and both creates and reinforces stereotypes of Japanese martial arts.

The work of International *Kyudo* Learners Dan and Jackie DeProspero alongside their *Kyudo* instructor Hideharu Onuma present a different narrative to Herrigel’s (Onuma, DeProspero, and DeProspero 1993). Onuma is a 10th Dan lifelong *kuydo* practitioner, and expresses the importance of concepts such as truth, beauty, and “goodness” in *Kyudo*, emphasizing embodied personal experience (*seishahichu*) a *kyudoka* performs over the accuracy of their shot (*noshahichu*). Onuma actually refers to *seishahichu* as the “correct and right-minded” state of shooting. One of the more important aspects of this embodiment of *Kyudo* performance is shown through the *tekichu*, a state of being where the arrow has landed, comprising three forms. In the simplest of these forms, *toteki*, the arrow hits the target. But in the following forms of *kanteki* and *zaiteki*, the archer pierces the target or places the arrow to exist within the target respectively. It is here that an important distinction is more directly made through *Kyudo*, being that of the metaphysical and personal experience. A union is made between the mind, body, and bow that allows the archer's personal expression to truly show. To western archers that I have shown *Kyudo* to and as Onuma relates in their book, many non-practitioners view *Kyudo* as rule-bound and absent of individual expression. And while the eight-step process does demand specific motions and movements, it also allows for an individual experience with each archer’s *Kyudo* being ultimately unique. These eight steps, while formative, are more akin to a painter using set practices and tools to create a self expressive work of art. Therefore, *Kyudo* as a practice neither thrusts one into a state of “zen”, nor does it

indoctrinate one into a regimented and uniform state. Instances of either in the experience of *Kyudo* are reflective of the individual practitioner, and thereby clarify the diversity found within *Kyudo*.

PART II: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON *KYUDO*

The aspects of truth, beauty, and goodness to me, are meant to be expressed through the eight steps of *ashibumi* (足踏み), *dozukuri* (胴造り), *yugamae* (弓構え), *uchiokoshi* (打起し), *hikiwake* (引分け), *kai* (会), *hanare* (離れ), *zenshin* (残心), plus the extra *yudaoshi* (弓倒し), are performed in a variety of ways in competition of *shinsa* (審査), with performance methods varying between regions and teachers. The tempo of these performances is crucial throughout though as one must work in tandem with their team or co-performer to make a legible and cohesive performance for judges if there are any, but more importantly for themselves. Particularly in *shinsa*, one can find more prominent examples of the hidden systems within *Kyudo*. One such system is the duality between the right and left. As a left handed person, I experienced some difficulty in learning how to use a bow in not only an entirely new form, but with the opposite hands that I was used to. I was also a little saddened that I was not allowed to use my left hand to pull the bow string at all, as the gloves made to hold the string with your thumb are only made for the right hand. But I soon came to understand that there were more reasons than just the glove. The *kyudojo* faces south, with the *kamidana* (神棚), a shinto altar hung high on the wall to which we prayed before each practice and tournament) and coach/judge's booth on the western wall. It is such that the archer will always be releasing their arrow facing the *kamidana* and judge or coach. But there is also a matter of continuity embodied in *shinsa*, that grants these directions particular importance. In *shinsa*, the archer always moves in accordance with these directions. While going through tournament movements, the right foot always initiates a back-step, while the left holds the forward position. If one is to kneel, they must first bring their right foot back a quarter-pace before doing so. The left

however must be positioned thus that it is closer to the target and pointed forward always. Changes in direction must be initiated by the right foot, while the left holds the form thereafter. It is a specific and intricate choreography that reflects the motions one makes with the bow while shooting, and even the importance of each direction as valued in *Kyudo*.

In the west, we are well accustomed to the traditional paradigm of right being greater, with the left being inferior. Whether it stems from the latin *sinistra* association of the sinister, or how many young adults' parents might have experienced forced-handedness with ruler smacking, there is some association of the right holding a higher position. Japan is subject to this as well, with right-handed orientation holding the absolute majority and forced handedness in past. But *Kyudo* offers a different interpretation, as such directional importance in tandem with yin and yang derived themes are likely inspired from Chinese cosmology and geomancies through influence of *onmyodo* (the way of yin and yang) (Lytton 1989). This historical influence of emphasis on the left hand being higher status in *Kyudo* is further shown by the unveiling of one's left arm and shoulder in traditional ritual *Kyudo*, as well as in the referencing of the right hand as *tsuma* (wife) or *mete* (horse hand, being used to control riding in horseback practices such as yabusame). Cosmological significance is further revealed with the archers entering from the east, and leaving towards the west, in accordance with the sun. Furthermore, a mythological connection may be made.

“Mythologically speaking, the chief is the rising, victorious sun, and the chief's title is ‘Archer.’ He must be directed toward the south which is associated with the left which, in turn, is correlated with the male principle as well as with religious and prestigious activities. For protection, the chief is accompanied by archers and swordsmen, the latter being on his right. The archer is on the left which is the side where he carries his bow (GRANET 1970)” (Lytton 1989)

However these are deeper dualities that one may discover in their time practicing *Kyudo*. Not every archer is privy to these historical connections and metaphorical possibilities, but the individual subjective experiences of each archer's own acquired confidence may be entirely unrelated to these causes. There is the 8th step in *Kyudo*, *zanshin*, in which one's own subjective *Kyudo* truly is found. It is the moment where the archer, the bow, and the arrow must simply exist in tandem. But where exactly the archer finds this existence is their own story. It again shows *Kyudo*'s importance of beautiful form over accuracy, and where the hidden individuality of the practice is truly found.

As a western archer of many years, there are many assumptions made about the art of archery in this way. From associations made via the international spread, alongside assumptions of "zen" and spiritualism in the practice, there can be much confusion about what modern *Kyudo* truly is. *Kyudo* does however hold significant association with Shinto, the most predominant surviving indigenous religion of Japan. Many rituals still feature usage of the bow and arrow, and many *Kyudo* clubs will take a moment before practicing and bow to the *kamidana* (神棚), a Shinto shrine that hangs on the western wall of the dojo.

It is important to recognize however that archery in Japan does not solely exist as *Kyudo*, and other indigenous groups such as the Ainu of Hokkaido have their own forms, styles, and religious connotations and associations with the bow and arrow. Herein exists another contrast to the common "zen" view of *Kyudo*, where these other indigenous forms of archery are vanishing from their native contexts of hunting and ritual as acculturation takes place over time ("Ainu Cultural Advocate - Monbetsu Atsushi - FRONTRUNNERS | NHK WORLD-JAPAN," n.d.). It is easy to get lost in the language surrounding *Kyudo*, talk of spiritualism and mental prowess give certain connotations especially to the western mind. But it itself has still been institutionalized and takes place in favor of other equally indigenous forms of archery. This is not to argue that *Kyudo*

itself is at fault, but rather to steer those connotations I myself once had of *Kyudo* towards recognition that it exists still in the context of colonizing institutions.

I do truly love *Kyudo*. I love the people that taught it to me, that practiced with me, I love the feeling of releasing the arrow after traveling through the eight steps and the aesthetic that surrounds the whole process. This love I have for it is very different from that fascination with which I first approached the practice however. *Kyudo* holds an extremely long and convoluted history, and exists in conversation with many institutions and social structures that reveal a part of one's subjective experience with the practice. No two such experiences are the same, and mine is subject to many western biases as well as the limitations of solely a one year long experience, non-fluency in Japanese, and practicing it in the context of a collegiate club. Further, the mystification of *Kyudo* does exist within Japan despite critiques from long time archers, and it is easy to see why with the challenges of trying to climb ranks in the *Dan* system when parameters such as "The truth of *Kyudo* should be revealed" are all that's given for the second highest rank, and the parameters for the highest rank are not even spoken of or written ("Kyudo Shinsa Regulations | International Kyudo Federation," n.d.). But as a part of this Kanazawa club, I was able to travel the country having made the competitive team as a substitute, and both witnessed and experienced the practice of *Kyudo* in a variety of forms and performances by a great many people, who experienced it in a great many ways and expressed it with their own interpretations and experiences. I will always be grateful for the experiences and insights gained at this club, and continue to develop my practice and understanding of *Kyudo* with the hope that it, alongside archery as a whole, continues to grow in the academic literature as a profound and important manifestation of culture.

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