

Aiki Corps Report –Ethiopia

Establishing aikido in a country is a difficult honor. The first dojo in East Africa was started by Tesfaye Tekalu in Ethiopia. His group sprang up inspired by AE president Don Levine and the Training Across Borders seminar. With the conception of Aiki Corps, I was sent to the “Awassa Peace Dojo” from England, to instruct for three months. I’ve had an unforgettable adventure!

Firstly I should dispel some prejudices about Ethiopia: Everyone is not starving (though there is widespread poverty), it’s not all desert (the south where I was is very green), and its population are more likely to carry mobile phones than spears these days, in the towns at least.

Ethiopia has a troubled past consisting of the publicized famines, wars and ethnic tension. In spite of, or perhaps because of this, the idea of a peaceful martial art was well received in Awassa, and the small group I encountered quickly grew. I was lucky in that my first students largely consisted of the talented “One Love” HIV awareness theatre, which is based at the youth campus where I lived. This gymnastics group were fast learners and their back flipping, unicycling antics made for a colorful environment.

There were of course difficulties. Limited space often necessitated practicing outside, which meant torrential rain, burning sun or mosquitoes, depending on the hour. Our tatami consisted of bed mattresses covered in tarpaulin and resources such as gis, books and videos were in short supply. When Ryo, a Japanese aid worker, brought an aikido DVD he’d shipped from home, there was a small party and many wows at the advanced technique. The pale first kyu teacher was no longer the ideal! Incidentally, Ryo is now a student of the Ethiopians - a circle completed.

Perhaps the hardest thing about starting a dojo from scratch was the lack of “aiki ambience.” Standards taken for granted regarding behavior, cleanliness and punctuality had to be explicitly established, and Anglo-Japanese attitudes can seem somewhat uptight in laid back Africa! That said, the whole dojo worked incredibly hard over the last three months, with a passion beyond that of many of the more established clubs I’ve known in The West (perhaps we’re spoiled?). Instructor training started every morning before breakfast, and there were demonstrations to the chat-chewing public, monkeys and hippos of lake Awassa, and on the concrete floor of the national taekwondo school in Addis Ababa.

A thriving children’s class has also been formed. There is no shortage of young people wanting to participate and the dojo is a safe, constructive oasis for Awassa’s youth. Some of whose practicing are street children and AIDS orphans with unimaginable outside lives. The adult class is now also very diverse, and includes both sexes, many of the country's tribal groups, religions, and a variety of occupations. It may be of interest to some readers to know that Ethiopia is roughly half Christian and half Muslim, and that the two religions have coexisted peacefully for hundreds of years – a fact mirrored in the dojo.

While the Peace Dojo at first seemed exotic, I quickly came to realize the people there are just people like anywhere else – aikido reaches beyond surface differences and is a great leveler. In the street I stood out as a white “ferenji” celebrity, attracting sometimes enjoyable and sometimes tiring attention, but in the dojo I was just an aikidoka. Two unusual training methods do deserve a mention though – machete dori and midnight hikes up a hyenas-infested mountain! Bring strong legs and nerves!

The transformative power of aikido was apparent in my time in Ethiopia, with positive changes effected in all students. Watching the club and its members grow was truly gratifying. The great responsibility for this as a junior grade did not escape me, and I feel the experience has aided my own development, on and off the mat.

Alongside traditional training, students were also keen to hear about applied aikido, such as Non-Violent Communication and the somatic leadership work of the Strozzi Institute. This is an Aiki Extensions initiative after all! Interestingly this is the first aikido community where such ideas have been present from conception. It’s my belief that aikido can be of real use to the people here, and in the hands of the new instructors the future of aikido in East Africa is as bright as the equatorial sun.

On a general note my time away with Aiki Corps was hugely rewarding. Living within such a warm community was an experience that will stay with me forever. Tongue-clicking Amharic, hot berbere spice and “Tedj” honey wine are all tastes worth acquiring! Ethiopia has a fascinating culture, and is a collage of wonderful people. I urge any instructors reading this to consider an aiki-visit there – you’ll be made most welcome. Ameseginalhu (thank you) Ethiopia and Aiki Extensions!

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