“Cleansing the Universe”
(uchū no misogi):
Religious Nationalism and Spiritual Training in Pre-war Aikidō

IMAP Lecture (via Zoom)
Registration required: https://tinyurl.com/aikido-niehaus

February 17, 2021
17:00–18:30 pm
Japan Standard Time

Aikidō nowadays is globally taught and practiced as a sport and a philosophy of life. However, this interpretation of aikidō is the result of a post-WWII process, in which aikidō under the guidance of the Aikikai Headquarter was reinvented, and to a certain extent ‘de-religified’ and ‘de-ideologized’. When Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969) first developed aikidō in the 1920s he was highly influenced by the syncretistic shintō sect Ōmoto-kyō and incorporated teachings and practice of this new religion into his martial art. In this lecture I will analyse how Ueshiba in (auto) biographical writings is established as a charismatic religious leader and medium—and ultimately as a living god. In a second step, I will analyse primary sources that define the practice of aikidō and the performance of its “heavenly techniques” (kamuwaza) as ritual acts, which connect practitioner and gods in order to transform the world. Finally, the teachings of aikidō will be contextualized within the contemporary political climate and (ultra)nationalist as well as imperalistic ideology. An approach that critically addresses the religious dimensions in the teachings of Ueshiba Morihei is relevant within the most recent trend in Japan to revitalize religious aspects of aikidō devoid of their historical and ideological meaning.

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Image credit: Yamaoka Asa, Gekiga aikidō kaiso ueshiba morihei monogatari
(Shuppan Geijutsusha, 2000)