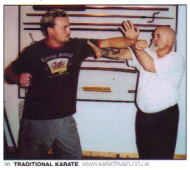
Independent Fighting Spirit of Okinawa

Okinawa exists in two broad manifestations. One is the very real, modern island state - now part of Japan, whilst the other is a combination of ancient history, myth, legend and in-part, mis-understanding. This being so, it is not to say that the two manifestations do not over-lap, on the contrary, they most definitely do. The misunderstanding being the inevitable product of one, for-away culture, being translated into the familiar concepts of many other cultures, all with their own unique 'filter' of interpretation.

Okinawa has been viewed in three distinct ways:

1) An independent island nation, with its own unique martial traditions, culture and language.
2) A part of China, with a number of Chinese families settling, and an import of Chinese culture as a consequence.
3) A part of the nation of Japan, with Japanese cultural traits prevailing.

There is some truth in all of the above statements, but no single statement serves to convey the whole truth of the matter. Yes, Okinawa has been a part of China, and during that time, the government of Okinawa paid tribute to the Chinese emperors. Chinese cultural traits infiltrated Okinawa, and there are the famous Nine Villages - a settlement of various Chinese families, literally transplanted from the mainland of China, to live amongst the Okinawans. And from this, many Chinese fighting systems have been imported, accepted, practiced and adapted. It is also true that many notable Okinawans have traveled to China, (usual-



ly to Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian province) and learnt martial arts by staying many years in China. Okinawa has had extensive trading links with China, and a cross-cultural exchange, up until recent times, had always been encouraged. Fuzhou being a major trading point with Okinawa, tended to be at least the first point of entry into China for traveling Okinawans. And, it must not be forgotten, some of the arts learnt, were associated with the southern Shaolin Temple of Fujian province. A Ch'an Buddhist temple that allowed martial arts to be practiced as part of the meditational training of the Ch'an monks - the martial movements being used as 'moving meditation'. This temple being considered a sister-temple (or branch) of the famous Shaolin Temple of Henan province. Legend recalls that perhaps the only difference in regime between the northern Shaolin Temple, and its southern counter-part, is that the southern version may well have accommodated the ordination of Buddhist nuns, as well as monks, teaching martial arts to both, regardless of gender.

Okinawan culture has a strong Confucian and Buddhist foundation. Infact, to the average outsider, Okinawan social organisation can appear very insular, and there is good reason for this. In the Confucian system, organisation of society begins and ends with the family unit. If order prevails in the family, it is believed that order will prevail within the country. Relationships are regulated through sets of flexible and not so flexible rules and procedures, created to maintain order, discipline and appropriate behaviour at all times. And yet, underlying this order, there lies an informality that is the product of understanding and consideration - forged within the confines and definite boundaries of discipline.

This discipline, during Okinawa's long history, eventually led to a united country, with its own trading empire. During the Sho dynasty (1429-1871), the kingdom of Okinawa, (which, whose influence spread as far as Taiwan), had extensive trading links with China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Java, Malacca and Hue. Indeed, it was the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368-1644), that officially recognised the king of the Okinawan state of Chuzan, as 'Sho' Hashi - the king of all Okinawa - and founder of the Sho dynasty in 1429. Prior to this occasion however, the military forces of the state of Chuzan had done battle with, and defeated the other two states of note, that existed in Okinawa at this time, namely the Nanzan and Hokuzan. Through warfare, and Chinese imperial sanction - Okinawa became a united country. The Ming dynasty, to prevent Chinese piracy, has issued an edict forbidding Chinese people from trading over-seas. However, the Okinawans, who paid regular tribute to the Chinese throne, were viewed as trust-worthy and reliable people. And it was

Okinawans that the Ming court granted full, over-seas trading rights. The island of Taiwan, which was then considered a 'free port', was used as a trading base by the Okinawans at this time.

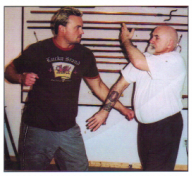
This central role, made the Okinawan people a lynch-pin for the exchange of goods and culture. The Okinawan state itself, had adopted the Chinese Confucian model of hierarchy and respect. Society was ordered, peace prevailed, and Okinawan sea-farers plied their trade upon the seas. It is believed that the sailors were required to protect themselves, their cargoes and their ships from attack. Okinawan 'Ti', or 'Hand' arts existed for at least hundreds of years prior to this date (1400-1500's). The lack of written records precludes an exact description of the ancient martial arts. Chinese influence can not be ignored however, as the Okinawan art of 'Tedi', or 'Teti', translates as 'Tang Hand', a name referring of course, to the Tang dynasty of china (618-907 A.D.). With exactly the same meaning as the Korean art of Tang Soo Do (Tang Hand Way). The West has known 'China' as such, since at least Roman times - the Latin the 'China' being 'Sina' (the word 'China' coming from the 'Chin' dynasty 221BC-206AD). However, in the East, evidence suggests that China was known primarily by its current dynastic name. Okinawa is mentioned as early as 608AD, in Chinese records, as the emperor Yo sent an official to explore diplomatic links. Approximately ten years after this event, the Tang dynasty was founded, and its influence can still be seen in Okinawan martial culture. Even as relatively late as 1392AD, it is recorded that 36 Chinese families settled near Naha city - bringing their martial culture with them.

From this fusion and blending of martial culture, 'Tiu-ti' - or 'Tang Hand' developed. In the Japanese language, 'Tiu-ti' is pronounced 'Karate'. In modern Japan however, 'Karate' is nolonger written as 'Tang', or 'Chinese' hand, but rather as 'empty' hand, with the word 'empty' being pronounced as 'kara'. Japanese Karate, therefore, maybe viewed as a distinct and separate development from its Okinawan and Chinese roots. With its own unique cultural content, definition, and of course, physical techniques. As such, Japanese karate is very well known in the world today. Okinawan karate is also known and practiced, but perhaps what is not so well known, is the continuing practice of indigenous Okinawan 'Ti' techniques, passed on down the generations, by lineages of inheritance.

One such eminant style is maintained in the world today by Taiko Oyata. As a descendant of a high ranking official of the Shuri government - prior to the Japanese invasion of 1609AD - he embodies all the traditional values and hallmarks of provess of the Okinawan legacy, and early Chinese influence. In his youth, he trained with both an Okinawan 'Ti' master, and a Chinese kung fu expert. Again, manifesting the blend of martial culture that has entwined its way through Okinawan history. And Taiko Oyata has worked tirelessly to convey his art to sincere students outside of Okinawa. One such student is Mr Andrew Weare, who has kindly agreed to be interviewed for this article, and give an insight into the workings of Ryu Te, or Okinawan Hand, as it is practiced today:

Q. Thank you for helping with the research into Okinawan Te. How long have you been practicing Ryu Te? And how did you become involved, and have you practiced any other styles?

ANDREW WEARE: I have been practicing Ryu Te for about Eight year. Previous to this, I certainly tried out a few styles.Wado 1st dan, Ju jitsu 1st dan, dabbled Sankukai, Shotokan which in retrospect, felt entirely unnatural. I also had the same discomforts with some Chinese 'styles' tao, Hop Gar, Eagle Claw, so all these ancient arts are well diluted. Then I saw a small advert mentioning Atemi, Kyusho and Tuite, and I wondered what these 'new' words were about !! Among the answers came this reply "you've gotta see this guy !! (Taiko, Seiko Oyata) he is visiting for a week here..don't miss him..the answers are here !" I am now, currently, a Nidan blackbelt



Q. Is Ryu Te a 'style', in the usual sense of the word?

ANDREW WEARE: I mentioned "style" at the introduction to this art, and was told "this is not a style". Meaning it was not formulated just to look 'different' from another school such as we see in the contrasts between the modern, eclectic "styles" of say, Wado-ryu and Shotokan for example. 'Style-less' then, this is the Classical Art, Original & Genuine, from which all Traditional and Modern karate schools developed.

Q. How old is Ryu Te?

ANDREW WEARE: Ryu Te appears to be at least 500 years old, and seems to have evolved out of a grappling art. Today, it is a fully rounded art, with kicks, punches throws, elbow strike, knee strike, and so on. All delivered in a very natural way. It is a classical art, rather than a tradition or modern art.

Q. I am interested in your distinction between the terms 'classical', 'traditional', and 'modern'. Why is Ryu Te considered 'classical', but not 'traditional'?

ANDREW WEARE: It is classical because it pre-dates and pre-exists those style which are called 'traditional', or 'modern'. It does not follow modernistic trends but emphasises a Style-less approach, because Ryu Te has its designs based upon the human being's body alone, and it's naturally efficient capabilities. Modern 'styles' delivering for example, singular high kicks, may not be good for defence purposes. In principle, it is not natural, adopting one leg to stand on, in a combative situation. It may be considered a waste of time then, with all that supposed 'balance' practice, on teetering, over stretched legs. The excuse that it's 'done for exercise', won't cut it either. A bad training habit, is a bad training habit. It is the same for 'stances'. Over-stretched Cat stance, long forward stance and poorly formed horse stances are all examples of very bad stability.

Q. I understand that Ryu Te practice includes kata - what can you tell me about this?

ANDREW WEARE: Yes, it does. The katas then, are designed to be a 'design', for fighting one assailant only. The Okinawan Bushi could despatch a 300lb assailant in far less than a second. An art that cannot do this, is not good for life protection. Ryu Te has this capability....idea for old men like me. One can understand then, the sheer confidence in the katas that are deal with ONLY ONE assailant, never ever was it two or several, as is the assumption with modern kata interpretation

All katas deal with only one man. Okay, the man is dispatched in less than a second - leaving plenty of time for the other ONE MAN then to be dealt with. A Kata that work well, make it your personal kata - Nai Hanchi, I recommend.

All katas however, are equal in value. Pinan Nidan is equal to Bassai, and so forth. One kata will take ten years of study, for the mastery of the techniques, be it Bassai or Pinan Nidan. Did you know that all the Pinans came out of Kushanku? Kushanku was in Okinawa first, and Master Hanashiro developed the Pinan katas later. Nai Hanchi came down from the Sai master Kuniishi, all three of the Naihanchi and Bassai came from Tomari..within this kata lies much power. Kata practice must be relaxed and natural.

Karate was developed in Okinawa, and with its evolution, the katas were developed. These katas were all about the 'correct positions' whilst in motion. Which means that the foot and hand positions, are always trained to be in the 'optimum' point of position, whilst in CONTINUOUS motion, from start to finish. There is no 'robotic' movement, or discontinuous transitions - the movement is mooth and powerful.

The same katas are recognised in all karate schools, even in the so called 'Korean' karate, (i.e., Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do - the latter actually pronounced 'kara-te' in Japanese, meaning 'Chinese-Hand'), contain all the mainland Japan traditional and modern versions, of these same katas, as well as the all - so - obvious suit of the karate 'Gi'. See Taekwonda's 5 'Heiwa' katas, by way of illustration.

In Shotokan we see the 5 Heian katas, which are called in Wado Ryu, the 5 'Pinan' Katas. These are the very same katas, with some slight variations. It might be that much has been 'lost in translation', from the original Okinawan versions so to speak - but nonetheless, the general structure is easily recognizable. In a very real sense, Ryu Te is the great grandfather of anything we call karate today, including 'Korean' karate.

Q. With the naturalness of movement that you explain, how would you define Ryu Te? Is it an internal or external style?

ANDREW WEARE: I remember hearing such things, as these debates about 'internal' and 'external' before I found Ryu Te. We always experience our bodies internally as well as externally all the time. But I do remember a new recruit asking Oyata "Is this a hard or a soft 'style' ? And in his usually brilliant way, Oyata said "hard is soft - soft is hard" And he then whipped his "soft" hand forward and back like a whip, strucking the enquirer, thus showing the 'soft' whipping, has a truly harder impact! Hence I am holding back much, in this regard. A 'new' guru, "Be cautious about becoming too theoretical and technical, for these will leave a weakness in your defence". So soft- hard and internal-external. At a glance, Ryu Te then is hard because it is soft.

Q. Does Ryu Te allow for weapons practice? If so, how many weapons are there, and to what extent are they used?

ANDREW WEARE: Yes, Ryu Te does encourage weapons practice. Infact, there are some 16 weapons in Taiku Oyata's Okinawan martial system. Compulsory weapons include the six-foot Bo, the four-foot Jo, and metal Sai - historically, these weapons evolved purely from agricultural and domestic tools, without acception. In this respect, Ryu Te does share a common developmental ground, with the more 'complete' systems of unarmed Okinawan 'kara-te'.

The Bo, Jo, and sai are intrinsic to Ryu Te, one starts practice with them immediately. Then a Ryu Te student may choose any other weapon to perfect, such as the Chizikun-bo (which comprise of two 6 inch long hand sticks, used as a pair). This weapon is an inch thick and is fitted to the hand by way of a looped cord around the middle finger, with..the cord's knot laying on the outside of the hand; when tied, and can be utilised for striking. These handy, pocket sized and clandestine weapons have developed from Okinawan fishing nets, where they were used as darning needles - a very unusual weapons

Then there is Ton-bo, again used in pairs. They are 2 foot long sticks, similar to those used in Escrima. And then there is Eku, the boat oar, with its beautifully natural katas. Manji-sai - those with forward and reverse tines (or handle guards). There are kama sickles, but in my experience, most Ryu Te students are not too interested in them. The sai are former's dibbles. A manji-sai tied to the end of the 6' long Bo staff is called the nin-te Bo. It's a little bit like the naginata in that sense. The Jo is a four foot staff. This is its standard length, but it s length can vary. The JO in my informed view, is the absolute, non-bladed, hand weapon of choice. The Jo doesn't look very 'flashy'..yet it is a weapon that when mastered, excels all others. It's versatility, in the case of Ryu Te, retains the original principles of the art. Of the weapons of Classical Okinawa, the Jo's versatility is astounding...It's use can easily dispatch a swordsman. Ryu Te has the original family Sakagawa Jo arts.

The sai arts are of the reknowned Master Kunishi and Taiko Uhugushuku the Bushi, from whom Taiko Oyata was directly instructed. As he was entitled to be instructed in the ancient martialways, due to his family lineage and connections, in the traditional handing down of these hidden arts. No weapons are bladed for cutting in Bushi arts. The Masters knew high morality played a major role in effectiveness. As such, Ryu Te weapons are civil, and evolved for

self-defence from everyday objects of use, unlike weapns designed specifically for, such as the bow, or the weapons used by mounted warriors. Apart from sai agricultural 'weapons', all Ryu Te weapons are utilised wooden articles. The nunchaku is seen also. It is not considered however, as pragmatically moral, and is used primarily as a grappling weapon in Okinawan classical. Ryu Te, which emphasises'..consider the well being of your attacker..think about that then. We can afford to do that in Ryu Te because we are that confident. Moral aspects are recited by students. Ianet S - restrain physical ability through spiritual attainment" an Okinawan Bushi creed. Further, "Strive to be a warrior for the construction of a peaceful and free world by using the character building morality and spirituality FOUND in the way of Ryu Te"..

Q. There is a part of Ryu Te pratice called 'kara-te' - what doe sthis mean?

ANDREW WEARE: Kara-te refers only to the unarmed aspects of Ryu Te training. Using the body without the use of another object. Being 'free' of, or 'empty' of any weapon.

Q. Is Ryu Te influenced by the Chinese or Japanese martial arts? Or is it an purely indigenous to Okinawa?

ANDREW WEARE: Okinawan Ryu Te, differs immensely from the modern Japanese eclectic styles. Indeed, looking at Ryu Te with its circular, natural way, it would look more akin to Chinese circular techniques. But does not necessarily mean that Ryu Te "came from China". It is a common fallacy to think so. Karate, including the diluted eclectic modern styles, developed from what is absolutely an Okinawan art, honed over centuries in the Ryu Kyu islands. Granted, many Okinawans have a thread of Chinese ancestry, and contribution may well have been made, but the art is considered distinctly Okinawan. Many Chinese arts are modelled upon the movements of animals. The Okinawans distinguish themselves as having made an art based deliberately upon the form of the Human being (and not any animal), hence Ryu Te is very comfortable to practice physically. The movements are not 'forced' and are completely natural for the human body to perform.

Q. How would you describe Taiko Oyata?

ANDREW WEARE: Taiko Oyata - The man is the embodiment of arts within arts! His principles are the utmost foundational. Clearly a teacher! What is heard in the myths of dojo locker room talks and karate club bars, is a standing fact with Oyata. He's very modest, kindly and charitable. He's the only man I have ever met that punched a dent in a steel grille..no psyching up, just zap, and as casual as brushing a moustache. He is credibly, the Last Bushi, he having been trained privately, by an Emperor's bodyguard, a Bushi, no less, and is the highest authority on Karate katas. Anyone serious about training in martial arts, I would recommend Taiku Oyata. This art survives through "Taiko" Oyata. Its evolution would be quite a very confidential matter to transmit. Usually elder son, to elder son, was the tradition in Okinawa.. My impressions are that these Bushi's - that is karate masters, trained daily, all day long to perfect their art. For within Ryu Te, there are the hidden arts of Tuite and Kyusho - developed over time by these dedicated Bushi - Taiku Oyata may rightfully be considered today as a Lord Bushi - as he has descended from okinawan nobility and inherited the true martial arts.

Q. How is Ryu Te doing in the rest of the world?

ANDREW WEARE: Ryu Te has a teacher in Poland and Jordan. Most dojos however, are in the USA. It is not a commercial venture. The work is demanding. Because of this, dojos remain traditionally small, a group of say, six practitioners makes six serious practitioners. More time, much homework. Dojo training is one thing, "at home" training is the bulk of it, to get it dead right. It is a small association then, due to earnestness and demand. Someone once asked Taiku Oyata the definition of a 'Master'? Oyata replied..."One who can check his mistakes as he goes along"..

Q. Is there a website, so that readers may find out more information?

ANDREW WEARE: Yes - please visit http://www.kushu.com/ for more information.

Thank Andrew, for answering my questions.

It is clear from the above information, that regardless of other cultural influences throughout Okinawan history, it one looks closely enough, a thread of 'distinct' and 'certain' culture runs through the middle. This may be termed 'indigenous' to Okinawa, and correctly viewed as a unique contribution to world culture in general, and martial culture inparticular. Okinawa has served as bridge between many nations, and today, with people such as Taiko Oyata, that bridge is crossing into the West.

It is a fitting testimony to the enduring and independent 'spirit' of the Okinawan people, that regardless of the upheavals of history, and the many sufferings such unheavals convey and inflict, that the essential core of a nation, can persist and be preserved, even under occupation and adverse political situations. For centuries, the Okinawans, with the support of China, served the purpose of bringing many diverse cultures together - via trade - but in so doing, effected world history dramatically.

This experience of diversity, actually seems to have added to Okinawan culture, increasing is uniqueness, as it did so. For Okinawan culture has been influenced by many strands - but right in the centre of this culture lies such arts as Ryu Te, which have managed to survive, down to the present time. Its artistic 'directness', and its 'purity' of expression, says something about the simplicity of nature, as experienced through the eyes of the Okinawan people. For the Okinawan arts are divine in as much as they have not lost there direct link with nature. Nothing is forced, but like the internal arts of China, surprising and perhaps massive amounts of power is produced with movements that do not require 'excessive' expression. Nature is powerful as it is. There is no need to add to it, when this power is harnessed through the human body and human mind. Intention and expression become 'as one'.

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