

A Brief History of Matayoshi Kobudo, and Kodokan

The Okinawan kobudo are, essentially, an eclectic mix of armed civil fighting techniques that compliment the Okinawan karate systems. They cover a large selection of weapons, and are somewhat notable in that they neglect the knife, sword, and spear, which are primary weapons in the rest of Asia. They are also unusual in that they are often taught separately from unarmed styles. Most systems in China, Japan, and the rest of Asia teach weapon and unarmed techniques as part of a continuum of technical knowledge using the same principals of combat.

While there is little historical evidence to work with to date the origins of Okinawan weapon arts, there are references to staff techniques and weapon dances going back as far as the 1500's. Many sources credit the weapon bans of king Sho Shin O (1507) with the impetus for the development of the current kobudo arsenal. It is said that due to this ban on the owning of swords and spears, the Okinawans developed local tools to use as weapons. Later, from 1609 onward, it is said these skills were further developed and used to combat the Satsuma invaders.

But while the current weapons used do resemble local agricultural implements, it is unlikely they originated from farm tools, or from peasants. The martial artists the weapon forms can be traced back to were not farmers, they were primarily of the shizoku or pechin, (lower or middle nobility) class, international merchants, and government personnel. The weapon techniques were, more likely, developed from mixed Japanese, South East Asian, and (primarily) Chinese and local sources, with techniques being adapted to local conditions and implements. Similar weapon techniques, including the use of the bo, sai, tonfa, kama, guwa (hoe), and eku (oar) are common in Indonesia and China, and are not primarily peasant arts in those countries. The Satsuma Jigen Ryu also has a record of teaching specially developed techniques for the eku, kama, bo, and guwa to locals for militia purposes during their occupation of Okinawa. So while the concept of secretly meeting to learn how to fight off the Japanese occupying forces is romantic, there is no record of armed insurrection in Okinawa during the Satsuma occupation. On the other hand, there is record of local martial artists studying in China and Japan, and passing this knowledge, as well as local traditions, on to their students.

For the most part, these weapon techniques have been passed down piecemeal, with one or two, or sometimes many more, forms being passed from teacher to student over generations; often a teacher would specialize in one particular weapon and teach it alone to his students. However, in the early part of the 20th century, a few teachers began collecting and organizing these forms. Among the schools that have collected and kept this knowledge is the Matayoshi ryu. This is the Kodokan style of kobudo.

The style has its origins with Matayoshi Shinko (1888-1947). As a young man he studied martial arts from his father, and studied bo, eku, kama, and sai with Agena Chokubo (also known as Gushicha Teragua or Gushikawa Tigagawa). He also studied tonfa and nunchaku with a teacher named Irei (also known as Jitude Moshigawa or

Matsutaru Ire), and bo with Chinen Yamane and Shishi Ryoko. Later in life he took two trips to China. On the first, he traveled through Manchuria and it is said that in Saharin, Manchuria, he learned ba-jitsu (horse riding techniques), shuriken throwing, and nagenawa-jitsu (lasso techniques) from Manchurian nomads (possibly mounted bandits). On the second trip he went to Shanghai and studied tinbe (sword and shield), suruchin (weighted rope or chain), sansetsukon (three section staff), and nunti (a hooked polearm), along with Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture, from Kinkoroushi (Kingai). He also learned what was to become the family style of Chinese boxing, the Kingai ryu, from Kingai. On his way south, in Fujian province, he then studied Chinese Kempo before returning to Okinawa. He was very well known on Okinawa, taking part in a number of well documented demonstrations with other famous Okinawan martial artists, like Funakoshi Ginchin and Miyagi Chojun. He passed away in 1947, and his style was eventually formalized by his son.

Matayoshi Shinpo (1925-1997) studied with his father when he was young. He was heavily involved in the martial arts, and in addition to kobudo also studied Shorin ryu under Kyan Chotoku, his father's Kingai Ryu, what was to become Goju Ryu under Miyagi Chojun, and the white crane system of Gokenki, a Chinese tea merchant living in Naha. He moved to Kawasaki city in 1945, and for many years taught there. He returned to Okinawa in 1960, and began teaching his father's art, first at the Higa dojo, but in other places as well. A few of his father's other students, among them Kakazu Mitsuo, were still active at that time, and Matayoshi sensei also practiced with them. After teaching out of various karate teachers' dojos for a while, he felt that while karate was becoming more popular, kobudo was not, and was in danger of dying out on the island. To help forestall such an event, he decided to establish his own kobudo school, which he called "Kodokan," taking one kanji, "Ko" (meaning light), from the "ko" in his father's name. After establishing the Kodokan dojo, and organizing the material he had learned more carefully, he contacted other kobudo instructors and students and together they organized the Ryukyu Kobudo Association in the late 1960's. Their purpose was to keep the traditions and spirit that had been passed down alive, and to make Kobudo more popular. In 1972, this association became the All Okinawa Kobudo Federation (Zen Okinawa Kobudo Renmei).

Matayoshi sensei continued to teach kobudo, and practice and occasionally teach Kingai Ryu and Gokenki's Hakutsuru Kempo, throughout his life. He is remembered as one of the foremost Okinawan martial artists of his day. He taught many of the premier kobudo instructors of today, and his system is alive and well in Okinawa.

His former dojo, the Kodokan, is currently headed by his son, Matayoshi Yasushi, who does not train due to a physical handicap; the head teacher is Itokazu Seisho. Many of the other top students of Matayoshi sensei have gone on to form their own organizations or to work with the Renmei, the most notable being Gakiya Yoshiaki, who assumed the position of chief instructor of the Kodokan on Matayoshi sensei's death in 1997, and formed the Okinawa Kobudo Doshi Renseikai in 2002.

The system itself includes a vast number of weapons and kata. The kata taught come from various sources, both in Okinawa and China. A few of the kata were created

by Matayoshi Shinko from techniques he learned from his teachers. Some were also created by Matayoshi Shinpo, and a couple by senior students in the dojo. The paired forms are also the creation of the Matayoshi family, though in general the paired forms were specific to the students, created by them in collaboration with Matayoshi sensei. Together they form a system that is as in-depth for each weapon as a karate system is for unarmed combat.

Kodokan Kobudo

In Kodokan, our kobudo comes from Kimo Wall sensei, and from our instructors' training under Matayoshi sensei and other of his senior students. Kimo sensei began studying Kobudo in the 50's in Hawai'i, and later continued his studies on Okinawa. He began training with Matayoshi sensei in 1962, when Matayoshi sensei was living in the dojo of Higa Seiko sensei. He was ranked nana-dan (7th dan) by Matayoshi sensei.

In Kodokan, we study kata for the bo, sai, tonfa, nunchiyaku, kama, eku, guwa, tinpe, sansetsukon, nunti-bo, and chizikunbo (small sticks held in the palm), and techniques for the kuramon bo/utsu-bo (a large flail), tekko (knuckle dusters), and suruchin. However Kimo sensei has been known to periodically add to this list from what they learned from Matayoshi sensei. We study 5 classical kata for the bo, 3 for the sai, 2 for the tonfa, and one for each of the other weapons. We study paired sets (*bunkai kumite*) and sets of individual paired techniques (*yakusoku kumite*) for each of the weapons.

Kobudo training is much like karate training, in that it is made up of basics, kata, and applications of the kata. In studying the kobudo, the same level of commitment is required; some teachers say more, as each weapon has aspects of range, timing, and application that are specific to it, and must be learned.

Other Okinawan Kobudo Styles

Ryukyu Kobudo Hozon Shinkokai

This style was formalized by Taira Shinken, in the 50's. Taira sensei also felt that the weapon arts of Okinawa should be preserved, and in trying to do so collected a vast number of kata from various teachers across Okinawa. His style covers most of the same weapons as the Matayoshi ryu, though the kata are different, and the Tinbe uses a short spear instead of a machete. This style is the other main kobudo style on Okinawa.

Yamani Ryu

This is primarily a bojutsu system, though it also includes some sai kata. It is said to be related to the Jigen Ryu, the fencing system of the Satsuma clan, which formerly ruled Okinawa, as well as to the techniques of Sakugawa Tode, one of the most famous early karate exponents. It is considered one of the oldest bo styles on Okinawa, and while currently small, is gaining popularity.

There are also a number of other smaller kobudo styles on Okinawa, including Uhuchiku Kobudo and Honshin Ryu. Some karate teachers have also mastered a large body of kobudo knowledge and continue to pass it on within their dojos, and many karate teachers teach a few weapon katas that are either a part of a larger kobudo system, have been handed down outside any formal system, or were created by those teachers.

Japanese Kobudo

There are a number of schools that teach Okinawan kobudo in Japan, particularly those stemming from Inoue and Sakiyama sensei, students of Taira Shinken, but in general the level of instruction and in-depth knowledge on the Japanese mainland is limited. While there are some excellent teachers, Okinawa is still the center for kobudo.

Japanese koryu, the traditional Japanese martial arts, do not resemble the Okinawan arts very much at all. They were primarily military, not civil, arts, and their main weapons are swords, spears, and naginata (long bladed polearms). They do not use much solo kata- most all of their kata are performed with two people, much as our bunkai- and unarmed arts in general are taught to the student of the school after some understanding of the use of weapons is reached.