

The problem with writing a paper on Matayoshi Kobudo is that so little is actually known and so much of that has already been written. One need only to pick up the works of Bishop, Clarke, Kim, Loshe, Masahiro, McCarthy, Sells and Tetsuhiro to find a reasonably consistent, but factually sparse, history of Matayoshi Shinko Sensei and his son Matayoshi Shinpo Sensei. This is truly a shame, as the elder Matayoshi in particular seems to have cut the dashing figure of an adventurer during the latter 19th and early 20th century, while the younger Matayoshi spent a lifetime preserving and promoting an art form that might likely have vanished but for his efforts.

While the purpose of this paper is to look back into the history of Okinawa and decipher what it was about the island and its people that led up to Matayoshi Kobudo Kodokan, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the family history, albeit briefly.

Born in Kakinoara, Naha in 1888, Matayoshi Shinko, the third son of the relatively wealthy businessman, Matayoshi Shinchin, whose family was involved in the lucrative sugar growing and processing trade, started the martial arts at a young age.¹ During his teenage years he trained in Bo, Sai, Kama and Eku with Akena Chokuho, one of the greatest martial arts masters of the time.² He also studied Nunchaku and Tunkwa with two of Akena's students, Ire Matsutaro and Ire Jitude.³

Leaving home at the age of 22, Matayoshi Shinko traveled "northward through Japan to Hokkaido, then across the strait to Russian Sakhalin and finally into Manchuria, where he wound up living with a group variously reported as Mongolian nomads or Manchurian bandits."⁴ Apparently bitten by the adventure bug, Shinko Sensei would travel twice more to China in the 1920's and 1930's to study the martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine. During these travels it appears he learned Timbe, Nunte and Suruchin before returning permanently to Okinawa in 1935.

Matayoshi Shinpo Sensei was born December 27, 1921 in Yomitan Village.⁵ While his father traveled abroad, the younger Matayoshi studied "Shorin Ryu from Kyan Chotoku, and in 1938 he also learned Southern Shaolin Boxing from Go Kenki"⁶; both of whom were legendary masters from the dawn of modern Karate. However, when it comes to the weapons arts, it appears that his father was his only teacher.

With the onset of the war years, very little is known about the Matayoshi family. Shinpo Sensei apparently moved to Kawasaki, Japan in 1938 returning to Okinawa in 1957.⁷ Initially Matayoshi Sensei taught Kobudo at the dojo of Higa Seko Sensei until he opened

¹ Christopher Clarke, Okinawan Kobudo: A history of weaponry styles and masters,

² Clarke, Okinawan Kobudo, pg. 188; see also Mark Bishop, Okinawan Karate (Tuttle 1999) pg. 126

³ Clarke Okinawan Kobudo page 188; see also Bishop Okinawan Karate page 126

⁴ Clarke Okinawan Kobudo page 189

⁵ Clarke Okinawan Kobudo page 194

⁶ Hokama Tetsuhiro, Okinawan Karate Timeline & 100 Masters pg. 276

⁷ Clarke, Okinawan Kobudo, Ozato Print Company, pages 194 - 195

the Kodokan in roughly 1960. From that point forward Matayoshi Sensei would embark upon a lifelong mission to preserve his family's art and spread Matayoshi Kobudo throughout the world until he passed away in 1997.

As I stated earlier, the information above is hardly complete; but, then again it does capture most of the known history of Matayoshi Kobudo. Those looking for a more thorough explanation should look into the works of the authors previously mentioned. The intent of this paper is to look into the history of Okinawa and see if we can find out the confluence of circumstances that brought about the weapon and empty hand traditions that have so fascinated the world. With that in mind, I believe the answers lie in three concepts, namely: Trade, War and Privilege.

Modern realtors are fond of saying that it all boils down to location, location, and location. As the map on the right shows, when it came to trade in Asia, Okinawa was ideally located.⁸



According to “the Nihon Shoki and the Shoku Nihongi; i.e., two of the six classical Japanese history texts, both contain articles stating the people from the Southern Islands arrived in Japan to pay tribute in 600 A.D., accounting for the existence of trading management in those southern islands.”⁹ This early connection to Japan is significant to the development of both the armed and unarmed martial arts as it belies the belief that China was the sole source of “Te” and Kobudo. “Arriving with contingents of heavily armed security personnel, Japanese aristocrats were venerated and ultimately retained the services of local soldiers. As a result of this the standard Japanese combative methodologies of the Heian Period (794-1183), including grappling, archer, halberd, spear and swordsmanship, were introduced to Uchinanchu (Okinawans).”¹⁰ That is not to say that the Ryukyu Islands were incorporated into Japan at the time as the existing records make clear that they “existed as an outside group of islands, i.e., they constituted a foreign land relative to old Japan.”¹¹

Patrick McCarthy posits another fascinating theory regarding another source of martial influence as he observed the Okinawan use of the closed fist as compared to the historical Chinese and Japanese practice of using the open hand.

⁸ Okinawan Trade Route from:

http://rca.open.ed.jp/web_e/history/story/epoch2/daikoeki_1.html

⁹ Andreas Quast, *Karate 1.0 Parameter of an Ancient Martial Art* (Andreas Quast, 2013) page 11.

¹⁰ Patrick McCarthy, *The Bubishi*, (Tuttle 1995) page 45.

¹¹ Quast, *Karate 1.0* page 11.

“I learned that Muay Boran [lit. ancient boxing] -using the very same tools as Ti’gwa (i.e clenched fists, head, elbows, knees, shins and feet)- was hugely popular especially during Thailand’s old Kingdom of Siam Period. Adding to the plausibility of this theory, I also discovered that Ryukyu ships had vigorously plied the waters between the two cultures, conducting a bustling commerce, for more than two hundred years during the old Ryukyu Kingdom Period!”¹² (Roughly the 10th through 16th centuries)

These two instances are only intended to show how the trading relationship with multiple countries brought along some of the core techniques to the Okinawan martial arts; not to take away from the clear Chinese influence. As we will see, Chinese trading and warring throughout history was a huge influence to not only the Okinawan martial culture, but in the end would heavily influence the creation of the Matayoshi art.

Early in the eleventh century a privileged class of leaders known as Anji (many of whom may have been foreigners) would create numerous fortresses and small state-like communities.¹³ These leaders and their retainers would administer justice, collect taxes and “in their free time they practiced the martial arts and in case of emergency followed their Anji into battle.”¹⁴ As their influence grew into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries we begin to see the influence of metal smiths in the creation of not only agriculture implements but also the implements of war. This becomes significant as by the late 1300’s we find that the Okinawans are a major source of horses, sulfur, and weaponry to the Ming emperor’s war efforts. In return, the Okinawans were importing metal from China for use in their own martial and agriculture systems.

Sometime during the period of the Three Kingdoms (1322 to 1429) an anthology of song-poems known as the Omoro-soshi appear.¹⁵ Contained within the poems is a fascinating account of the use of the Bo:

“The military commanders of that time utilized a special kind of drill with the Bo by means of which this fighting method was spread among the people”... “The method was described by the term Mokei, that is, a model, a template, or a routine”.... “For the purpose of a relatively safe training of techniques with all pole arms, namely all kinds of lances, halberds, pikes, etc., with various lengths of the Bo resembling different intended weapons, including swords. Such a mock weapon drill would have not only suited professional warriors, but also mercenaries and

¹² Patrick McCarthy, Siamese Boxing – The original source of Okinawa-te (<http://irkrs.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/siamese-boxing-original-source-of.html>, 2013)

¹³ Quast Karate 1.0 page 16

¹⁴ Quast Karate 1.0 page 16

¹⁵ Quast Karate 1.0 page 351

especially ordinary citizens who were drafted only in case of civil emergency.”¹⁶

Later reference to a Bo like weapon is found in the report of a number of Korean castaways in 1450 called “The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty”.¹⁷

“This is the oldest written record with regards to firearms in the Ryuku. The firearms in question were called Hiya. It literally translates to ‘fire arrow’. Firing from three iron barrels, it was the same type as the Chinese-style handheld cannon called the Sanyanchong, or three-eyed gun. They consisted of a wooden handle-which was basically a kind of Bo...their hit rate was low, thus they were fired only when the enemy was close. As it took time to reload, these handheld cannon were then use as a striking weapon like a club...”¹⁸

Apparently the “oaken pole had exactly the same length of the Okinawan Bo and were provided with conical ends for connection; it is quite possible that the typical conical form or tapered ends of the Okinawan Bo used in martial arts originated in their use as a handle-pole of the Hiya Firearms.”¹⁹

As evidence of the close trading relationship with China, the Ming emperor granted license in 1392 to the “thirty six families” who would begin to emigrate from China to Okinawa to “propagate learning, take charge of communication with China, and to keep tributary records.”²⁰ From 1392 until 1609 a large number of weapons and armor such as swords (possibly from Japan), naginata, lances and helmets along with horse armor were sent from Okinawa to the Ming dynasty.²¹ These families settled themselves in Kume village and along with the Chinese special envoys (Sapposhi) would influence the growth of the martial arts in Okinawa.²²

Moving rapidly through the years we come to the consolidation of the Okinawan kingdoms under the Sho Dynasty. The Sho Dynasty’s importance to the growth of the martial arts as we know them today cannot be understated; however, the outcome of at least one event may have been exaggerated, namely the 1507 weapons ban by King Sho Shin. Often cited as one of two events that forced the people to develop the empty hand and Kobudo skills passed on through history, the reality is that “Sho Shin organized the mishmash of the already existing army corps of the various Anji and completed a unified

¹⁶ Quast Karate 1.0 page 351

¹⁷ Quast Karate 1.0 page 354

¹⁸ Quast Karate 1.0 pages 354-355

¹⁹ Quast Karate 1.0 page 359

²⁰ Quast Karate 1.0 page 63

²¹ Quast Karate 1.0 page 352

²² McCarthy Bubishi page 47

royal army under direct control of the royal government. Thousand of men were part of the military system, called Hiki.”²³

Perhaps a more important outcome, in terms of the modern martial arts, of King Sho Shin’s reign was the division of the population into classes, with the Pechin being most important to the development of the self-defense arts.

“The pechin served from 1509 to 1879, starting from when Sho Shin imposed a class structure upon the gentry, until the dynasty was abolished. The pechin officials were largely responsible for, but not limited to, civil administration, law enforcement and related matters. The pechin class was divided into satunushi and chikudun. The satunushi were from gentry while the chikudun were commoners...” The Ryukyu Kingdoms judiciary system engaged the services of bailiffs who served writs and summonses, made arrests, took custody of prisoners, and ensured that court sentences were carried out. These chikusaji pechin, or street cops, so to speak, enforced the law while the hiki (garrison guard), provided military defense, guarded the castle and protected the king. It was these officers who were responsible for cultivating and perpetuating the development of unarmed self-defense disciplines...based upon the principles of Chinese gongfu”²⁴

In 1609 the Satsuma invaded the Ryuku islands. Once again a weapons ban is put in place (1699) that is often cited as a reason for the rise of a peasant based self-defense. However, as Clarke notes, “But legends that the Japanese confiscated all weapons appear to be vastly overstated. There is no credible evidence to suggest that they tried to ban the ownership or use of such items as bo, tunfa and nanchaku.”²⁵ In fact the decree specifies that the royal family and its warriors could maintain their swords, spears, bows etc.; so the Pechin classes would have maintained their weapons in order to maintain the peace and protect the king. Of course one unintended side effect of the Satsuma period (1609 – 1872 when the Meiji government incorporates the Ryuku fiefdom into Japan) was that the need for a Ryuku military ceased leaving the Pechin classes to focus on policing and the personal defense of their king (Shuri guards).

From the Satsuma period forward we start to see the names of various individuals that influence both the Kobudo and empty hand arts.

“Tradition has it that the staff fencing method of Tsuken Bo was handed down from Tsuken Uekata Seisoku (circa 1615) and that it shows a striking resemblance with the sword style of Jigen-ryu... Thus the spear-cudgel-method of the Keicho-era is considered the origin of Bojutsu.”²⁶ Roughly fifteen years later, around 1630, another story appears of Jiryo who challenged his brother to test their skill with the Yaribo (spear-cudgel). In

²³ Quast Karate 1.0 page 364

²⁴ McCarthy Bubishi page 79

²⁵ Clarke Okinawan Kobudo page 22

²⁶ Quast Karate 1.0 page 380

1682, Nago Oji, an envoy of King Sho Tei, along with nineteen horsemen arrived at Edo castle and met with the Shogun. “The nineteen horsemen are given by name in the account, and among them was one Hama Higa Pechin, who on occasion of this visit is said to have performed Todi and Saijustu in front of the Shogun and in this way laid the foundation of the Sai-kata called Hama Higa No Sai.”²⁷

In 1762 a Ryukyuan ship was blown off course and eventually made shore on the island of Kashiwashima. The local authorities made an account of the ship and its passengers entitled the Oshima Hikki. Included in the account is the story of a Chinese envoy named Kusanku whose Chinese Kempo techniques amazed the passengers. Kusanku himself becomes a major influence on the Okinawan martial arts as he becomes the teacher of the great Tode Sakugawi (ca 1733 – 1815).

We are now inching closer to the founder of our art. Tode Sakugawi would eventually become the teacher of the great Matsumura Sokon (ca 1809 – 1901). Matsumura Sokon would eventually become the chief martial arts instructor and bodyguard for the Okinawan King Shō Kō. He subsequently served in this capacity for the last two Okinawan kings, Shō Iku and Sho Tai. Matsumura traveled on behalf of the royal government to Fuzhou China and Satsuma bringing back the various weapons and empty hand forms (to include the sword art of Jigen-ryu).²⁸

And finally we come full circle, as Matsumura Sokon taught many of the great karate and kobudo practitioners of the modern era such as: Anko Asato, a high ranking official in the King’s court; Asato’s student, Gichin Funakoshi, a member of a lower ranking Pechin family and himself proficient with the Bo; the other Anko, Anko Itosu, who was a member of a lower Pechin family but whose influence on modern Okinawan martial arts was profound to say the least; and also Agena Chokuho one of the aforementioned instructors of Matayoshi Shinko Sensei.

In conclusion

As is often the case when dealing with history, a lot of the minutia gets lost in the authors’ attempt to cover so much. With any luck, this paper will at least provide the reader with a broader view of the factors that went in to the creation of the art we study. So much more could be said and I encourage the reader to look to the many sources out there, particularly Andreas Quast’s Karate 1.0 Parameter of an Ancient Martial Art.

Respectfully submitted.

Robert Johnson
Nidan
Matayoshi Kobodu Kodokan International

²⁷ Quast Karate 1.0 page 397

²⁸ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matsumura_S%C5%8Dkon