

SHIGERU NAKAMURA

A study of the man responsible for
Okinawa Kenpo Karate

Written By Matthew Apsokardu



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INTRODUCTION

Within the pantheon of karate styles, Okinawa Kenpo is certainly not the most well known. Goju Ryu, Shotokan, Uechi Ryu, and Shorin Ryu all contend for that honor. However, if Shigeru Nakamura's dream had been realized, there might not be anything besides Okinawa Kenpo.

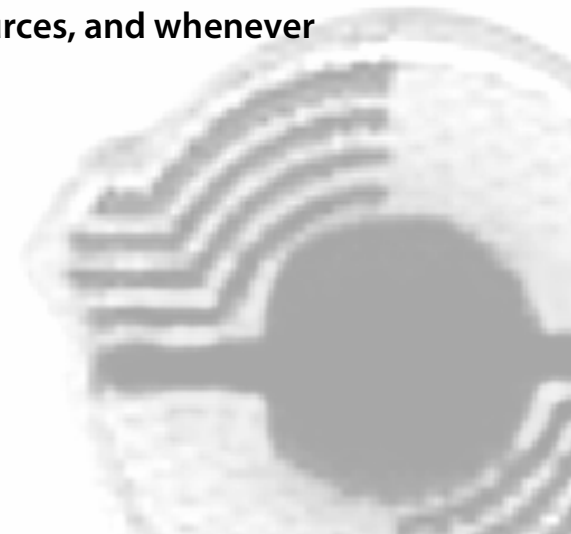
Nakamura was a man of significant vision and ability. One of his desires was to preserve the "old ways" of karate, and in doing so he wished to gather all Okinawan artists under a single banner. The name Okinawa Kenpo was never meant for a style – it was meant for a unified front of Okinawan life protection arts.

* * *

The goal of this book is to explore the life and experiences of Shigeru Nakamura. As with most karate exponents, the details of his journey are slippery and sometimes conflicting. In a culture that revered oral transmission of knowledge and had a strong penchant for keeping secrets, an elaborate dissertation is far from easy.

The following tidbits have been gathered from multiple credible resources, and whenever possible have been double checked through independent outlets.

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KARATE'S TRANSITION FROM FEUDAL TO MODERN TIMES

In the early days of Tode Sakugawa and Sokon Bushi Matsumura the transmission of “te” (later renamed “karate”) was a rather private affair. Teachers like Matsumura gathered their knowledge from Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, etc. sources and combined them with indigenous practices.

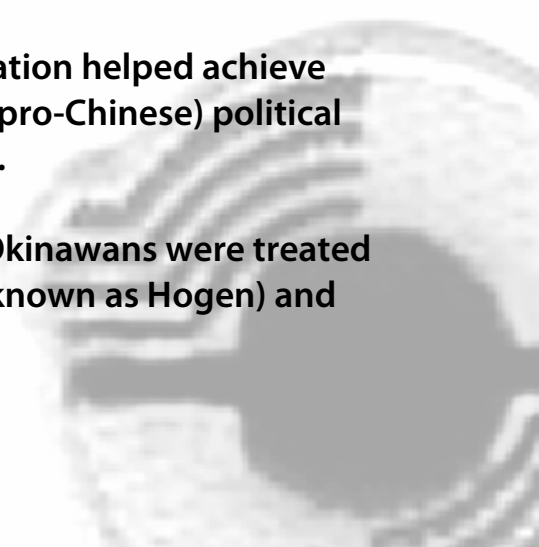
Many martial artists of the time hid their arts from prying eyes. Matsumura himself was a member of the Royal Court and was believed to have embedded much of his technique inside of dance-like movements.

This behavior was not atypical of many Okinawan masters, especially when operating under Japanese rule. The Shimazu Clan of Satsuma Province successfully invaded the Ryukyus in 1609, and for centuries after the two nations shared a tumultuous relationship.

* * *

In 1895, Okinawa proved to be a valuable military asset as their participation helped achieve victory in the Sino-Japanese War. This victory devastated the Ganko-to (pro-Chinese) political party on Okinawa and emboldened the Kaika-to (pro-Japanese faction)¹.

In addition to the new political climate came the realization that many Okinawans were treated harshly by the Japanese during wartime, both for their strange dialect (known as Hogen) and



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for being 'back country' folk. In fact, many Okinawans were mistaken as enemies during hectic fighting and shot.

In order to cure Okinawa's integration problems, the Kaika-to and Japanese Government instituted an aggressive program to teach Japanese language to citizens (mainly children) and promote Japanese social habits. Much of the body politic and general citizenry eventually concluded (or were made to conclude) that assimilation into Japan was key to their overall survival as a nation.

In 1905 the Emperor of Japan took serious notice of karate and decided that its practice would serve extremely well in building more soldiers for his army. He decreed that karate would be instituted in the Okinawan school system and taught to all boys from a young age forward.

Unfortunately, in its native state, karate was simply too complicated and in-depth to do what the emperor wanted – create better, more obedient soldiers quickly. Children did not have the patience or mental maturity to absorb karate except over many years of hard study, nor did karate's original goals and philosophy match those of the emperor.

The decision was then made to alter karate into a more fitness-oriented system. The highly dangerous and intricate aspects were substituted out for muscle building, discipline, and raw power (the things that would help soldiers endure combat and fit in with the Japanese military mindset).

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KARATE IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

One of the first schools to integrate karate into the curriculum was Icchu First National Okinawan Junior High School located in Shuri City.

Teaching karate in a school setting to many children proved a much different task than the transmission methods of prior generations. In the past karate was learned in backyard dojo where a single teacher would generally have 1-10 students. The Icchu School system increased that number to 40-100, forcing a primary teacher to utilize bulk training and assistants.

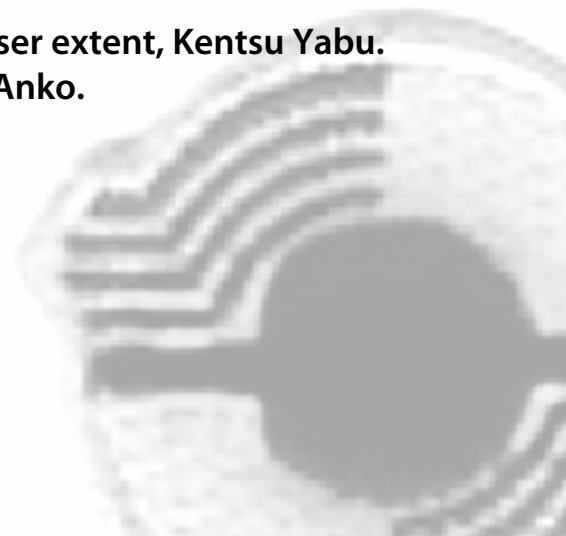
Due to the large number of students, and the naturally low maturity level of children, the instructors at Icchu had to devise new methods of teaching. Whereas in the old days an instructor could carefully guide every student individually at a personalized pace, now the material was set to a regiment. The new structure suited not only the general needs of many students, but also the strictness of Japanese culture and the goals of the emperor.

THE TEACHERS OF ICCHU SCHOOL

The main instructor at Icchu school was Hanashiro Chomo, and to a lesser extent, Kentsu Yabu. These two men were appointed to their positions by the famous Itosu Anko.

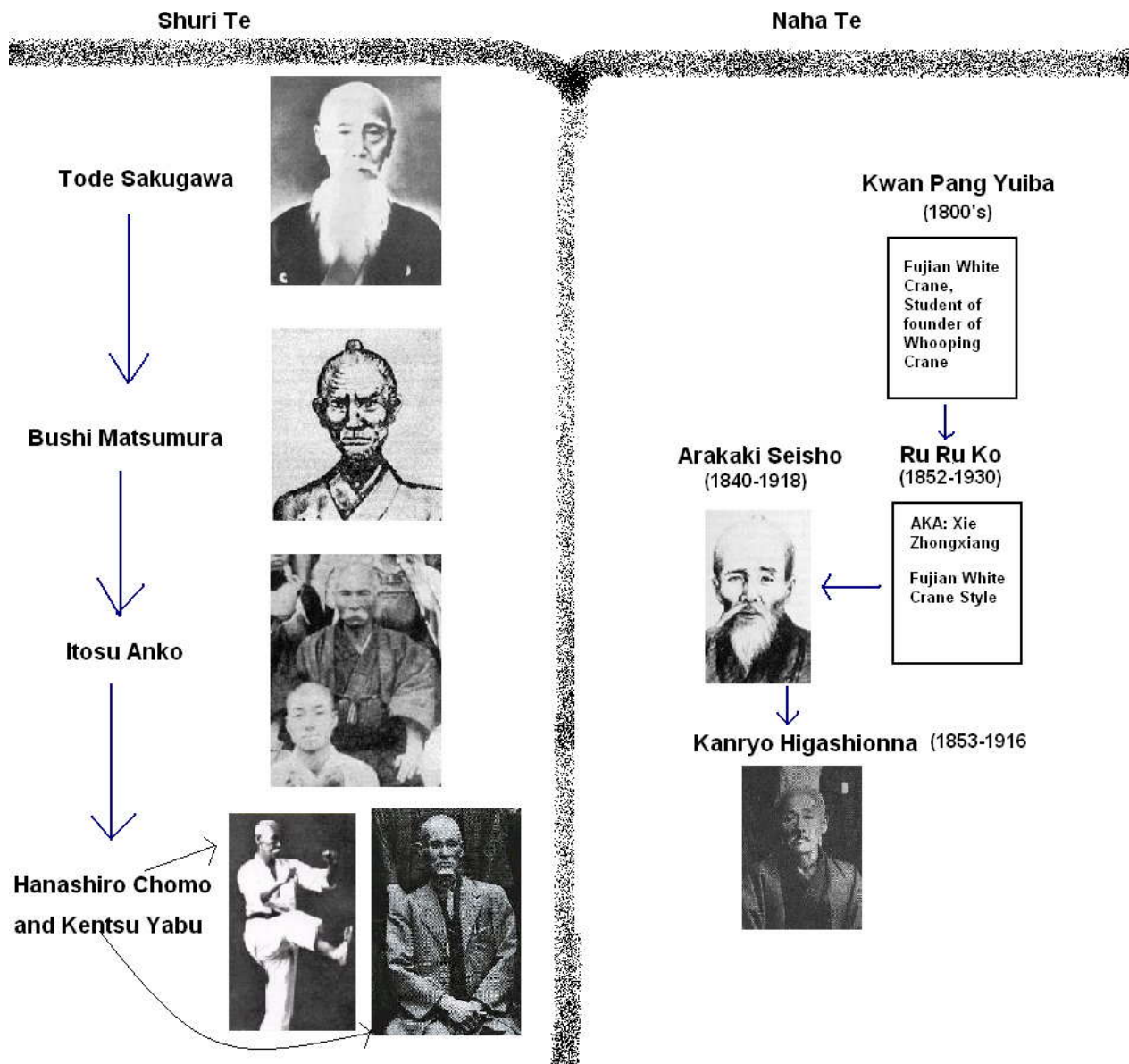
In addition Higashionna Kanryo played a major role.

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A visual look at how Icchu School acquired its teachers



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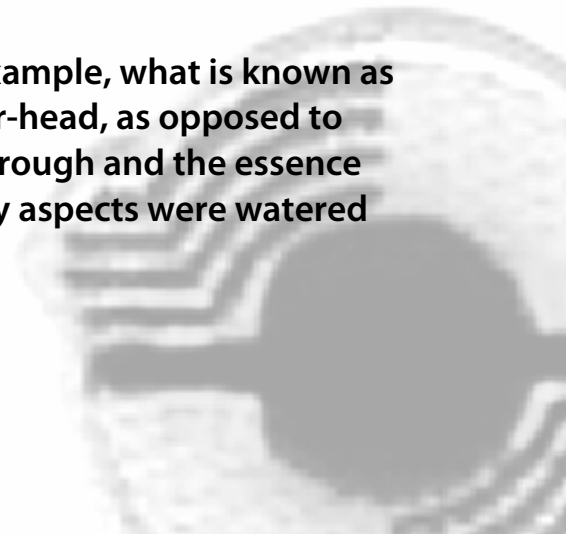
Itosu Anko was known to make appearances, but was not considered a primary instructor.

Hanashiro Chomo and Kentsu Yabu were famous throughout Okinawa, Yabu for his challenge match victories and Chomo for his depth of knowledge. Together they formed a formidable duo and provided great insight to the students of Icchu, even under the restrictions and difficulties of teaching in the new school format². Higashionna Kanryo was the famous student of Arakaki Seisho and had excellent experience with the Chinese elements of karate. However, like the other instructors, his specific style was adapted and tweaked.

TECHNIQUE ADAPTATIONS AT ICCHU MIDDLE SCHOOL

The Icchu project was a fine balancing act of priorities and objectives. In order to best serve the children while fulfilling their obligations, Chomo and the other instructors needed to adapt their curriculum (whether they also did this to continue hiding some of the deeper meanings from the Japanese is an argument for debate). One major element that got altered was the killing strokes ingrained in karate. As a life protection art, practitioners of the past would focus on the most vital and destructive parts of the human body. Those techniques could not be safely placed in the hands of children.

As such, the explanations for movements in kata were changed. For example, what is known as “age uke” (or rising block) was used to block a punch coming from over-head, as opposed to striking the esophagus with the forearm. The raw technique still got through and the essence of the movement was maintained with some usefulness, but the deadly aspects were watered down. This mentality was applied throughout the system.



The physical performance of karate was also adapted to strengthen the bodies of the youngsters. The stances were deepened and the actions changed to become more dynamic. Exaggerated techniques allowed children to improve their musculature and experience a more rigorous callisthenic workout as well as grasp the “basics” of each movement. Furthermore, a step-by-step breakdown helped keep big classes synchronized and orderly.

Many open hand techniques as learned from China were changed to closed fist. The reasoning for this was simply that closed fist techniques could be taught and utilized more quickly than open hand. Even a child could safely make a closed fist punch, whereas spearhand and finger techniques required extreme persistence and practice. The effectiveness of the techniques was reduced, but it made sense in the context of the program.

* * *

These new methods of teaching spread extremely quickly. Instructors like Funakoshi Gichin went to Japan to help disseminate the art even more. His role in 1921 was as an ambassador whose primary function was to integrate karate into the realm of physical education. To do so he began teaching at various Japanese schools and college clubs much the same as Chomo and Higashionna did at Icchu School³.

There are very few styles in existence that were not effected in some way by this broad social shift. Karate in Japan and Okinawa had a blueprint for teaching large groups of people and individuals at a beginner level.



THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF ICCHU SCHOOL

Let's step away from technique for a moment to examine the cultural aspects of Icchu School.

Icchu wasn't only remarkable because of its karate program. It was also a gathering place for the different classes of citizens. Despite the small size of Okinawa, there were still distinctions of class and culture in varying cities.

The three main karate cities of Okinawa were *Shuri*, *Naha*, and *Tomari*:

- Shuri was known as the governmental capital and center for all things political.
- Naha was considered the center of commerce.
- Tomari was known as an important fishing port.



Shuri originally held the distinction of being the royal capital of the Ryukyu kingdom. As time went on though it became a district of Naha, relinquishing the title of capital to Naha as well.

Tomari was a separate and important sea port but was also ultimately integrated into Naha as the city expanded.

The three cities were notably different in culture and function. But Icchu, which was located in Shuri, served as a gathering place for youngsters of all three cities whose parents could afford it.

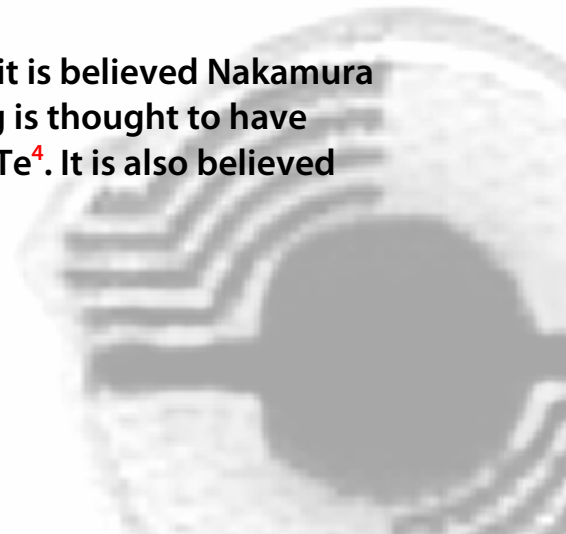
SHIGERU NAKAMURA THE YOUTH

(Born 1894 - Died 1969)

Shigeru Nakamura was born January 20, 1894 in Nago City. His father Keikichi was a successful merchant and a man who valued education. Despite the fact that they lived in a relatively distant northern city, young Nakamura was slated to go to the prestigious Icchu Middle School, which had developed a reputation for quality.

Unfortunately Nakamura's father died when he was only 10. Although it is believed Nakamura received a brief introduction to "te" from his father, his earliest training is thought to have come from his uncle Teiichi and family friend Choki Motobu of Tomari Te⁴. It is also believed that Nakamura was introduced to the Naihanchi kata through Motobu.

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Nakamura's father was also friends with Kentsu Yabu - so naturally between his father's wishes for an Icchu education and Yabu's influence within the karate program, it was inevitable that Nakamura would get involved with the martial arts.

Nakamura made the trek from Nago to Shuri and spent five years under the direct tutelage of Hanashiro, Yabu, Higashoanna, and Itosu.

SHIGERU NAKAMURA POST-GRADUATION

After his graduation from Icchu, Nakamura began study at the Prefectural Teacher's Training College where he continued his pursuit of martial arts. While there he interacted with other artists in the nearby city of Miyazato⁵ and continued studying with his Icchu teachers outside of the confines of the school program, including more significant time with Itosu Anko⁶.

After the Prefectural Training College Nakamura returned to his hometown of Nago City. To his surprise he discovered that Shinkichi Kuniyoshi, a well-known practitioner of Naha-te/Tomari-te and student of famed Kitoku Sakiyama, had moved to Nago. Nakamura's penchant for seeking out top practitioners led him to Kuniyoshi, whereupon he requested instruction. Nakamura's karate résumé and dedication impressed Kuniyoshi, who accepted him as a student.



This training went on for 10 years; during that time, Nakamura became a preferred student to Kuniyoshi, who proceeded to share his experience in the ways of Chinese Kempo. Due to Nakamura's excellent karate foundation laid in Icchu, he thrived under Kuniyoshi's advanced system. Nakamura was able to take hard karate and combine it with old style Chinese arts, following in the footsteps of the original progenitors of te.

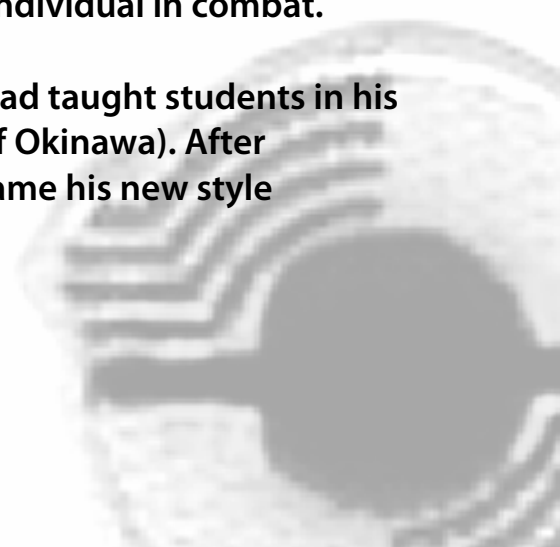
Kuniyoshi, known as 'Iron Fist Warrior', was renowned for his striking ability. He passed on his knowledge to Nakamura, who in his own time was renowned for his punching prowess and became known as 'Chiki Bushi' (Punch Knight).

After his extensive study with Kuniyoshi, Nakamura's methods had been forever changed, and his karate had become an integrated collective of experiences.

THE BIRTH OF OKINAWA KENPO (THE STYLE)

Prior to Nakamura's time, "Okinawa Kenpo" and "Okinawa Te" were general terms used to describe the martial arts of the Ryukyu Islands. Te meant "hand" and Kenpo roughly meant "sword hand". They were both allusions to the actions of an unarmed individual in combat.

In 1953, Nakamura opened his first stand-alone dojo in Nago City (he had taught students in his home prior to this, but his house was burned down during the battle of Okinawa). After combining his experiences in naha, shuri, and tomari-te, he chose to name his new style Okinawa Te, which would come to be known as Okinawa Kenpo.



Nakamura Sensei did this with the eventual intent of gathering all the splintering groups of karate under a single banner.

NAKAMURA'S MOTIVATION

Nakamura had a mindset for the old ways. The teachers he had studied under formed a quiet but tight knit circle, constantly benefiting from each other's knowledge. They showed great respect and admiration for each other's unique skills. Nakamura liked those methods and hated seeing an increase in divisiveness and hostility among styles.

Furthermore, through his years of study, Nakamura came to understand the deadly and intricate nature of pre-war/pre-school-system karate, which was now fading on the Ryukyus and on Mainland Japan. He believed that if karate were taken down the "physical fitness and sport" path it's true essence would be lost to antiquity.

Also, eight years before Nakamura opened his first dojo in 1953, Okinawa was embroiled in World War II (1939-1945). Many old karate masters were killed or maimed during the Battle of Okinawa, including Hanashiro Chomo and Chotoku Kyan. This left a gaping hole in the once cohesive line of students and teachers on the island. As such, it became the responsibility of some of the younger yet experienced practitioners (like Nakamura) to take the reigns of where karate was being directed.



THE CULTURAL EFFECTS OF WWII

The after effects of WWII were deep seeded. The allied forces in command had seen what karate was being used for (the building of soldiers) and were guiding the Okinawans away from that. Furthermore, a new, young generation of Okinawans had seen the frenetic and militaristic mindset the Japanese had created using both karate and Bushido as tools.

Those young adults and children begun to shun all things “old”, and wanted to disassociate with anything that seemed connected to World War II Japan. Part of that package was both pre-war and wartime karate.

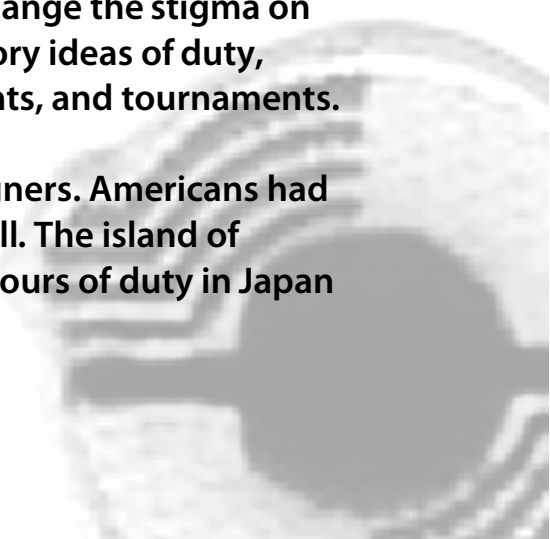
As you can imagine, this caused problems for someone like Shigeru Nakamura who was concurrently trying to preserve and even resurrect the old ways of his teachers. Despite the fact that his methods stemmed from pre-war ideas, he still battled against the tide of culture.

THE RISE OF SPORT

One of the best ways that both the allies and the Okinawans found to change the stigma on martial arts was to emphasis sport. Rather than focus on the now unsavory ideas of duty, obedience, and self-sacrifice, the focus was placed on performance, points, and tournaments.

As sport grew so did the number of interested karateka, including foreigners. Americans had established Kadena airbase, and other countries were showing up as well. The island of Okinawa became a very important international hub for soldiers doing tours of duty in Japan

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(like William Dometrich Sensei) or who were preparing for other military engagements (like Bill Hayes Sensei).

Springing up from the solemn ashes of World War II were fresh ideas, fresh schools, fresh faces, and fresh money.

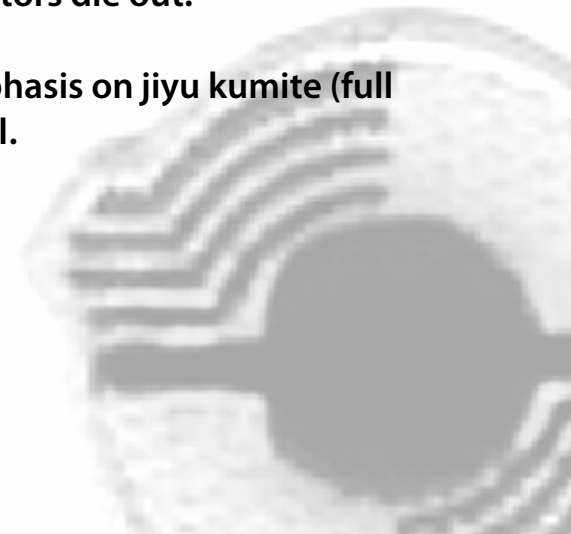
NAKAMURA SENSEI'S BACKLASH

As westernization and new cultural trends gained momentum, some Sensei tried their best to keep old methods and traditions alive. Nakamura was one of them.

One very interesting and important part of Nakamura's efforts was his money. If you recall from his youth, Nakamura came from a well established merchant family with comfortable finances. Therefore Nakamura had the ability to sponsor meetings, social gatherings, training events, etc. without having to engage in the now lucrative practice of sport karate.

During these meetings Nakamura met and conversed with other like-minded individuals on the island who didn't wish to see the ways and experiences of their instructors die out.

One of the most critical decisions Nakamura made was to keep an emphasis on jiyu kumite (full contact free sparring) as opposed to point sparring or no sparring at all.



Nakamura always believed it was important to simulate combat as closely as possible without damaging opponents permanently. This led him to develop Bogu Gear. Bogu was based off of Kendo design but added foam padding for the hands and chest.

In addition, Nakamura thought that the new, popular sport focus was dissolving all of the qualities that made classical karate effective and full. He felt that kata, kihon, and kumite needed to be present in a system and based around life and death rather than points.

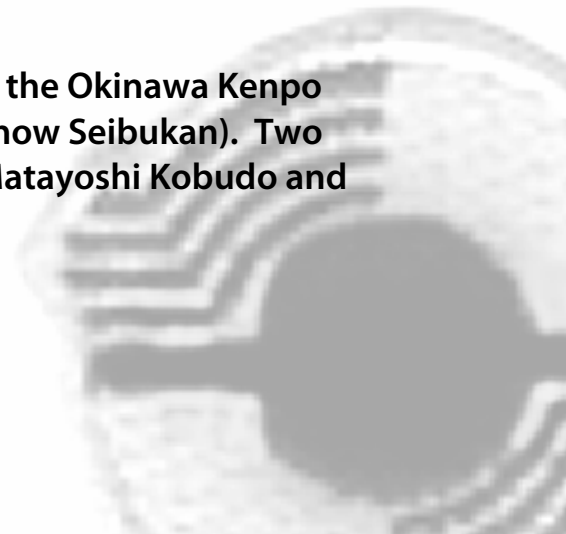


The All Japan Karate-do Federation: Okinawa District, which was the leading body of the time and a heavy proponent for sport, rapidly lost Nakamura's support (even though he was originally a member).

NAKAMURA'S ORGANIZATIONAL PUSH

To begin shaping the future of the arts as he saw fit, Nakamura formed the Okinawa Kenpo Renmei (Federation) in 1955 with Zenryo Shimabukuro of Shorin Ryu (now Seibukan). Two other notable members that would join include Shinpo Matayoshi of Matayoshi Kobudo and Seikichi Uehara of Motobu Udun Ti.

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There was also a younger tier of experts that included Shian Toma, Seikichi Odo, Seiyu Oyata, and Kuda Yuichi.

Nakamura's gatherings often involved a lot of training focused both on kata and hard sparring. According to Hanshi Bruce Heilman: "the old Okinawa Kenpo dojo would often have buckets of water waiting beside kumite combatants. They would get knocked out, revived with a cold splash of water, and walked off to make room for the next fight".

In addition to these tough bouts Nakamura liked to add social aspects to his gatherings. He enjoyed conducting dinners with sake, music, and festivities.

NAKAMURA SENSEI THE SENIOR



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As he advanced in seniority and age, Nakamura became increasingly well known around the island. He was seen as a guardian of karate and the “real deal” when it came to ability and effectiveness⁷.

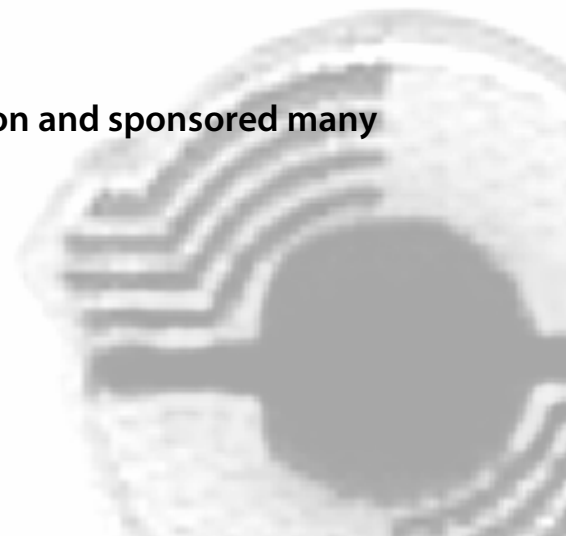
As a man, Nakamura was said to hold himself with the serenity and slight aloofness indicative of a respected senior. His manner was influenced by the cultural respect given to older citizens on Okinawa combined with his skill in life protection arts.

In the dojo Nakamura was a kind but tough taskmaster. He expected full effort from his students, but was also attentive and had a great love for the art.

Bill Hayes of Shobayashi Shorin Ryu once stated: “Nakamura was a man with gleaming eyes and a strong personal aura. Had I not known he was a karateka I would have still thought him a special person”.

Since Nakamura’s main area of operation was the North near Nago, and most of karate’s activity happened in the south at Shuri/Naha/Tomari, Nakamura was sometimes seen as a bit of an outsider. Not disconnected, but also not in the “thick” of the martial arts boom as federations and dojo were springing up in the south.

Despite that, Nakamura still made trips down into the heart of the action and sponsored many gatherings of his own.



THE RENMEI'S RISE AND FALL

Nakamura's finances and reputation, combined with the reputations of the other skilled masters in the Renmei, made the association quite successful. As time went on, the Renmei garnered more and more support as they began to truly represent the "old ways".

It could not be said however that every master on the island flocked to them, as many had their own ideas of where karate should be taken.

If momentum was positive during Nakamura's late life, it certainly shifted after his death. At the age of 75 (January 1969) Nakamura passed away. To make matters worse, Zenryo Shimabukuro died October of 1969, the very same year. As you might imagine, this caused great distress and tension in the Renmei.

Even though the next generation of masters attempted to keep things together, their different visions for karate ultimately led them in separate directions.

NAKAMURA'S DEATH AND SUCCESSORS

Unfortunately there are many instances throughout martial arts history where a master fails to appoint a successor. These situations almost always cause factions among stylists as different people disagree about who should take over. Nakamura's death was one of these situations.



Nakamura was survived by his son Taketo. Some sources state that Shigeru Nakamura named Taketo as the successor to the style, while others suggest Nakamura passed away without naming anyone. Either way, at that time Taketo was quite young and unable to fully lead Okinawa Kenpo. Seikichi Odo, on the other hand, was Nakamura's most senior student.

Since Taketo was the biological heir, some practitioners such as Teruyuki Higa chose to follow him (heredity was and still is very important in Japanese/Okinawan cultures). Other students felt that the system would be best placed in the hands of the senior student Seikichi Odo. Taketo was also said to have recognized this problem, and stated that Odo should become headmaster of the style. Upon Odo's passing, Taketo would then take the mantle⁸.

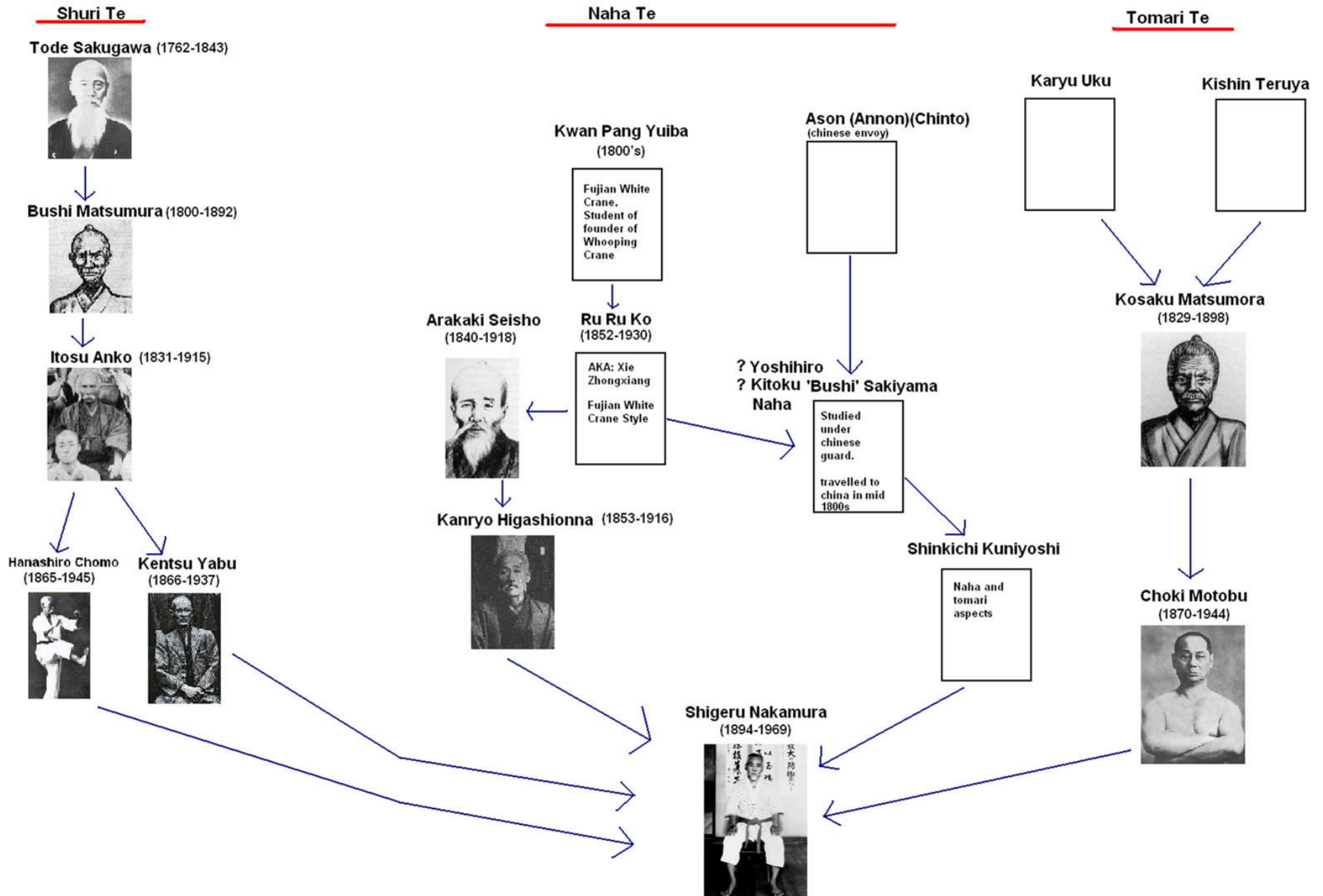
This uncertainty resulted in a major schism as the style of Okinawa Kenpo split, some following Odo, others following Taketo directly. Meanwhile other highly respected students of Nakamura, such as Seiyu Oyata and Fusei Kise, continued the growth of the arts in their own way.

All of these respected men did much to spread Nakamura Sensei's art and dream across the world.

Shigeru Nakamura's Master chart on the next page:

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CONTRIBUTIONS AND SOURCES

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C. Bruce Heilman, 9th Dan Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Matthew Apsokardu has been a student of the martial arts for 14 years and has acquired the rank of 4th Dan Okinawa Kenpo Karate (Nakamura, Odo lineage), 4th Dan Okinawa Kenpo Kobudo (Nakamura, Odo lineage). He has also studied Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu Kenjutsu for 4 years. Matthew has taught for 8 years and routinely attempts to expand his horizons at training seminars.

Instructors / Main Influences:

- C. Bruce Heilman (9th Dan Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo, 3rd Dan Jujutsu)
- Rick Zondlo (7th Dan Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo, Shodan Kendo, Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu)
- Ann-Marie Heilman (8th Dan Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo)
- William Hayes (7th Dan Shobayashi Shorin Ryu).

Personal Background:

Matthew Apsokardu is a writer and SEO specialist. He graduated from Penn State University with a BA in Professional Writing and a minor in Natural Science.

If you have any stories, information, or pictures regarding Shigeru Nakamura Sensei that might enhance this book, please contact Matthew at ikigai108@gmail.com for possible inclusion.

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AJKF, OKF, and IKKF*

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