

# **Okinawan Martial Arts Evolution in North America**

Igor Akkerman

The history of karate in the United States can be traced to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of Okinawan immigrants to Hawai'i. The first Uchinanchu (Okinawan) immigrants came to Honolulu on January 8, 1900 - forced out by the increasing economic hardship and to lesser extent by relentless "japanization" of their homeland. Karate came with these first immigrant contract workers. Mr. Chinzen Kinjo, one of the initial 26 contract laborers recalls using karate to protect himself from an abusive plantation field boss. (Center for Oral History, 1984). Until the mid-1920's karate was practiced similarly to how it was once done in Okinawa – privately or in secret. Uchinanchu immigrants suffered isolation and discrimination from their Japanese counterparts. In addition, there was no effective transportation to connect separate Hawaiian Islands or even remote areas within the same island. This kept the Okinawan community isolated and hindered the spread of karate to the outside world. (Goodin, 2000). Among the Okinawans, karate was taught to those of high moral standards. It was not uncommon for a sensei to spit upon, swear at or even slap a prospective student to see if he is volatile and quick-tempered and as such unsuitable for the study of karate. New students typically had to ask sensei to be accepted as students multiple times and if they were, money was usually not accepted as payment and a student was expected to perform a variety of household chores in sensei's house.

As Okinawan community grew and became better integrated into Hawaiian society, karate started to be taught openly during the 1920s and demonstrations were given during local social events, weddings and sumo tournaments. During those years a number of famous sensei came to Hawaii. After a 50-year old Choki Motobu defeated a Western (probably German or Russian) boxer in Kyoto in the early 1920s, a group of expatriate Okinawans invited him to Hawaii to face some local judo and boxing opponents there. He was however deemed an undesirable by the immigration authorities and was forced to return almost immediately. (Noble). Chojun Miyagi Sensei visited in 1934 (incidentally his visit was sponsored by Kinjo's son Chinyei who became an editor of a Japanese language newspaper for Okinawan community) and gave multiple demonstrations of "Goju Ryu Karate". (Goodin C. , 2000). Kentsu Yabu (commonly known as "Gunzo" or sergeant – a reference to his career in the Japanese Imperial Army), an Okinawan officer purportedly the first to teach karate in Okinawan public school system, gave classes in Honolulu and on Kauai. He performed the first "official" karate demonstration in United States on Oahu in the Nuuanu YMCA in 1927. The spectators there were treated to a number of Shorin-Ryu kata like Kusanku, Naihanchi, Pinan and Passai, which we still practice today. Yabu was a student of Ankoh Itosu Sensei; with reputation as a genuine karateka and a true expert. He was famous for defeating Choki Motobu, although it is was most likely not a karate match but a bout of tegumi – a type of Okinawan wrestling. (Noble, Masters of The Shorin-ryu, 1988).

After the end of WWII, Okinawan karate found its way into the United States through a different group of martial arts adherents. American military personnel stationed in Okinawa studied karate and began to teach what they had learned upon return to the US. This became the starting point for the spread of Okinawan karate not only in the US but also in Europe. (Asia Times Online, 2010). GIs who wanted to study karate while stationed in Okinawa during and after the occupation were faced with a number of obstacles, which some may argue had a formative and profound effect on the future of karate in the United States. The war-torn country did not have an economy to support itself, so teaching karate to the Americans, however unpalatable it was for the Okinawans (ironically Americans were primarily responsible for rebuilding the Okinawa after it was virtually obliterated during the war), was a good way to make a living. A language barrier prevented clear transmission of information from teacher to students because of the latter's lack of Japanese and important concepts were not passed on. The very secretive nature of karate, as it was taught for hundreds of years, further complicated the students' understanding of the art. Add the short amount of time available for training as compared to years and years of regular hard practice required to glimpse under the surface of karate and one may understand how the karate that was brought to the US with some exceptions was not exactly the same karate that was taught in Okinawa.

The first US dojo was opened in 1945 in Phoenix Arizona by Robert Trias, who was a Shuri-ryu practitioner. Additional schools followed, by devotees of different styles – Isshin-ryu (Don Nagle), Uechi-ryu (George Mattson), Kenpo (Ed Parker), and Goju-kai (Peter Urban). The first Matsubayashi-ryu dojo was opened in 1960 by James Wax, former US serviceman in Dayton, Ohio. While I am not qualified to speak about the level of these early American teachers' expertise, it is clear that as the years went by, something was "lost in translation". The US offshoots of the Okinawan and Japanese karate styles and organizations broke off for various reasons (on a Japanese karate side for example, Sensei Peter Urban's USA GoJu was formed after Urban's teacher Gogen Yamaguchi refused to allow the establishment of a separate American karate system) and with time, more splits and divisions took place creating various subsets of what were once a few well-defined schools of karate. To further dilute the value of karate-do, indiscriminate self-promotion and aggrandizement created a number of new "style founders" or soke, grandmasters, shihans and hanshis.

Today, it seems that there are almost as many martial arts styles and variations as there are actual dojos. The last 40 years saw an explosion in popularity of the martial arts and along with serious schools, a number of for-profit, disreputable and sometimes fraudulent martial arts schools were open. These so-called "McDojos" and "black-belt mills" have and continue to do significant damage to the reputation and understanding of karate. The term "karate" itself became so diluted by the proliferation of bad schools and the "Karate Kid"-type films, it is mostly meaningless as it can be applied to anything from kick-boxing to taekwondo to an after-

school baby-sitting jumpy gym. There is, however, a silver lining in the commercialization and “mainstreaming” of karate and I feel that the evolution and market forces will correct the mistakes of the past. Allow me to draw a parallel. Police in the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia recently decided to phase out the iconic German Shepherds as their police dogs in favor of a Belgian Malinois – a smaller, faster, more robust dog of similar genetics. The popularity of the German Shepherd Dog created a flood of poorly-bred, sickly animals from the unscrupulous puppy-mills that care nothing for the animals or the breed and are strictly for-profit operations. As the popularity of the German Shepherd declines due to their health problems, the bad breeders will have no incentive to continue and will either go under or move on to the next greatest way to turn a profit, leaving the serious breeders to care for and produce much smaller, high-quality numbers of this amazing dog. Likewise – the hype of the killer martial art du jour will continue, and the headlines will shift from karate, to MMA, to krav maga, to spetz nats taking all the superficial learners and unscrupulous commercial schools with it. The smaller number of excellent enthusiast-run dojos will continue teaching those who understand and appreciate the art for what it is.

Karate is a life-long physical and intellectual pursuit. Today, we are in a new era of learning spurred by the Internet, accessibility of information and supported by the true karate devotees willing to share their ideas and knowledge. Traditional Okinawan karate is a beautiful, complex and deadly martial art. If given time and effort, with the methodical study of kata, basics and biomechanics, it will continuously reward the practitioner and evolve with him.

## Works Cited

Asia Times Online. (2010, June 15). Retrieved from [www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/LF15Dh01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/LF15Dh01.html)

Center for Oral History. (1984). *Uchinanchu: A history of Okinawans in Hawaii*. University of Hawaii.

Goodin, C. (2000). Chojun Miyagi's 1934 Visit to Hawaii: A Brief Update. *Dragon Times Online*, Volume 16.

Goodin, C. C. (2000). *The Roots of Okinawan Karate in Hawaii*. Retrieved from [seinenkai.com](http://seinenkai.com).

Noble, G. (1988). *Masters of The Shorin-ryu*. Retrieved from <http://seinenkai.com/articles/noble/noble-shorin2.html>

Noble, G. (n.d.). *www.dragon-tsunami.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.dragon-tsunami.org/Dtimes/Pages/articlec.htm>