

# **A Compendium of Traditional Karate Kata Origin, History, and Characteristics**

## **By Andy Pruim**

Kata (choreographed fighting forms) are an integral part of karate training and have a history as full and as rich as karate itself. There are many different kata, as there are many different styles of karate. Some styles list as many as 60 different kata, some no more than 15. In the Shotokan karate style, for example, there are well over two dozen kata, yet Shotokan founder Gichin Funakoshi espoused the philosophy that 15 kata are a lifetime's worth of practice.

Most of the kata taught and practiced in modern karate dojo (schools) are considered "traditional," meaning they embody the spirit and teachings of the original karate masters. A number of the kata practiced in today have their origins in China around the 16th century. Others were developed in Okinawa or Japan proper only a few decades ago. The majority of the kata taught today, however, are on average 75-100 years old.

To examine all of the kata practiced today, as well as their histories, would be a mammoth undertaking. Instead, this article will attempt to trace the origin of a few sample kata. Although the forms detailed here are practiced by Shotokan stylists, they are by no means exclusive to Shotokan. Many styles, in fact, use one or a combination of the kata featured here.

Most of these sample kata originated from two major Okinawan styles-Shorin-ryu and Shorei-ryu-which in turn were developed from a type of empty-hand combat training indigenous to Okinawa. The Shorin-ryu kata were designed to utilize quick, short techniques delivered with rapid, light movements. The kata developed from Shorei-ryu are generally strong forms with very "hard" techniques, performed out of powerful stances. Following is a short history of 11 traditional kata.

### **Taikyoku**

Taikyoku, meaning "first cause," is a series of kata developed by Gichin Funakoshi after years of practice and study. He wanted to put together a set of forms that would enable the beginner to learn Shotokan basics-a sort of beginner's "first look" at the style.

The Taikyoku kata are actually based on the Heian forms, but possess a few modifications. Although Taikyoku are known as Shotokan kata, they are found in many other styles and are considered simple to learn.

### **Heian**

Known originally by the Okinawan name Pinan, Funakoshi is credited by many with being the first to refer to this kata series by the Japanese word Heian, meaning "peace of mind" or "peace and tranquility." The name change was likely due to the growing national spirit in Japan at that time, causing Funakoshi and others to change Pinan to a Japanese word. The word Heian was chosen by Funakoshi to demonstrate a philosophy of being confident in one's karate abilities. The thought was that, if you mastered each of the five kata in the series, you could enjoy the peace of mind the kata afforded. Funakoshi also reversed the order of the first two kata in the original series.

The Pinan forms were developed by Okinawan master Yatsutsune Itosu (better known as Anko Itosu) for the Okinawan public school system. Itosu was one of Funakoshi's instructors and ultimately influenced him a great deal. Because Itosu considered most kata too difficult for the public school curriculum, he developed five new forms he called Pinan, and introduced them to students at the rate of one per year.

Itosu developed the Pinan series from a pair of uniquely different kata called Kusanku and Channan. While Kusanku is still practiced today in one form or another, the channan form is lost to history.

### **Tekki**

Tekki (iron horse) was originally referred to as the Naifanchi kata. As the name implies, this series of kata is performed exclusively out of a straddle or horse-riding stance (kiba-dachi). Naifanchi were originally the basic kata for the Shuri-te style.

The originator of the first Tekki kata is unknown, but it is believed that Anko Itosu developed the second and third forms. It was because of the perceived difficulty of the Tekki kata that Itosu decided to develop the Pinan series as the initial forms taught to Okinawan public school students.

### **Empi**

Originally named Wansu, the Empi kata translates to "flying swallow" and is one of the only forms left from Okinawan Tomari-te. Tomari-te, and most of its kata and techniques, was lost to history due to the secrecy of its practitioners.

**Wansu**, the original name of the kata, was actually a Chinese official who arrived in Tomari around 1683 during the reign of King Sho Tei. Wansu was highly adept at the martial arts, and this knowledge soon became known to the local population. Little is known about Wansu, however, other than the fact he only taught a few students at a time. After only a few years in Okinawa, Wansu returned to China, leaving his students to fend for themselves. He did, however, leave behind a kata that eventually became known as Wansu (and later Empi).

The Wansu kata was therefore practiced exclusively in Tomari until after 1865, when it spread to both Shuri and Naha. Funakoshi altered the original name to the Japanese word "Empi" in order to describe the upward and downward movements of the kata. These movements, along with the quick shifting of stances, are similar to the movement of a flying swallow, thus its namesake.

### **Bassai-Dai**

There are actually two forms of the Bassai kata: Bassai-dai (bassai major) and Bassaisho (Bassai minor). Bassai-dai was originally known as Passai-dai, but was more commonly referred to as Matsumura-No-Passai. The original Passai form was developed by Bushi (Sokon) Matsumura, and was one of the first kata taught to Anko Itosu. After years of practicing the kata, Itosu developed the Passai-sho form, which is seldom practiced today.

Even though the most common interpretation of Bassai is "to penetrate a fortress," another translation gives a more descriptive definition of the intention of the kata. Because of the variety of techniques in the kata, one of the best interpretations of Bassai is "to break through the enemy's defenses by shifting and finding the weak points." Although this is not a literal translation, it is ultimately the true meaning of the kata.

### **Kanku-Dai**

Kanku-dai is one of the oldest forms practiced today. The original name for this kata was Kusanku (sometimes pronounced Kushanku). Kusanku was a Chinese official and martial artist stationed in Okinawa. It is not known if he was sent to Okinawa by his government to spread martial arts, or was simply on a diplomatic assignment. Nevertheless, he eventually stayed in Okinawa for at least five years and taught karate to many individuals, the greatest of whom may have been Tode Sakugawa.

When Kusanku was transferred back to China, he left behind many students but only one official kata, which eventually was named after him. From this form, Sakugawa developed many others as he disseminated this early style of karate.

It was, however, Anko Itosu, and not Sakugawa, who probably discovered the most from his practice of Kusanku. Around 1900, Itosu was asked to teach karate in the Okinawan school system. Because he thought the Kusanku kata was too difficult for elementary school children, he developed from Kusanku the Pinan kata series over a five year span. Kusanku ultimately became known as kanku-dai when Funakoshi introduced it to his Japanese students. Kanku-dai means "to view the heavens," which describes the opening move in the kata whereby the practitioner literally views the sky through his hands.

### **Sochin**

Sochin, meaning "to keep the peace," evolved from Naha-te, but its actual origin is in China. Naha-te master Ankichi Aragaki left Naha to introduce his style to martial artists in the capital city of Shuri. By the time he returned, Goju-ryu karate had become the most popular style in Naha. This is a reason that Sochin was more popular in Shuri than it was in Naha.

The version of Sochin that was later introduced to Japan was developed by Funakoshi and his son.

### **Jion**

Jion is the name of both a Buddhist temple and a patron saint of Buddhism. The kata by the same name is thought to have developed from a Chinese monk who learned his art in a temple. The Jion form was very popular in Tomari and is one of the few kata that remains from the Tomari karate style.

### **Gankaku**

Originally known as Chinto, this kata was eventually called Gankaku (crane on a rock) because of the one-legged stance which is predominant throughout the form. Because of its complexity, Gankaku is one of the most advanced kata in Shotokan as well as other karate styles. Gankaku was developed by Anko Itosu, and it is his version which is practiced in most Shotokan schools today.

### **Hangetsu**

The Hangetsu kata, originally known as sesan, has many crescent-shaped techniques, stances and stepping routines, which is why it was later named "half moon" (Hangetsu).

Hangetsu has Chinese origins, and a similar version of the kata is practiced by Naha-te stylists. Although the Shotokan version of the kata has the same origins as the form practiced by Naha-te stylists, the application of the techniques is very different, primarily due to the advent of Goju-ryu in Naha.

## **Gojushiho**

Gojushiho, originally known as Useshi, is considered the most advanced kata in Shotokan karate. It originated in China, but was developed fully by the great Bushi Matsumura.

Some styles have two versions of Gojushiho: the original is known as Gojushiho-dai, while the second version, introduced by Itosu, is Gojushiho-sho.

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The preceding are but a few of the kata being practiced today by traditional karate practitioners. There are, however, many, many more, with equally rich histories. Kata practice is still considered an excellent training method for traditionalists and modernists alike. For the karate masters of old, kata was the primary method of practice, the foundation upon which other skills were built, and these men spent their entire lives developing and honing their kata. The next time you begin to practice a particular kata, remember and appreciate the fact that you are learning a set of self-defense movements that someone spent a lifetime to perfect.

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