

# **UNIQUE SIGNATURES OF OKINAWA KENPO KARATE KOBUDO**

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Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo is a unique system of Okinawan Martial Arts established by the late Seikichi Odo.

Master Odo's karate came primarily from his connection with Shigeru Nakamura, the founder of Okinawa Kenpo. Master Odo also trained with Seki Toma and Shinpo Matayoshi and as a result some of the open hand katas taught under Odo's Lineage include katas from these two individuals (Wansu and Chinto from Toma, and Gojushiho Ichi from Matayoshi).

Master Odo's kobudo came from a number of sources with the Matayoshi kobudo comprising a majority of the katas currently taught under the Odo Kobudo Lineage. Also represented are katas from the Taira and Yamani lineages.

The focus of this discussion is on the Odo Lineage of karate and kobudo which has become known as Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo, and what are considered some of the "unique signatures" of the Odo Lineage as taught by Hanshi Heilman under the IKKF Program.

## **Formal Combination of Karate and Kobudo:**

During the time Odo studied with Nakamura, he was also studying kobudo with others such as Matayoshi, Kakazu and others. While Nakamura did teach some kobudo at his dojo, it was limited compared to the expansive kobudo that Odo had acquired. As a result, Odo had been asked/permitted to instruct kobudo at Nakamura's dojo. Upon the passing of Nakamura, Odo formally incorporated his kobudo program into the Okinawa Kenpo Karate system to form Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo. This was a significant break from tradition as up to that point the karate and kobudo organizations had been separate entities. Initially this approach was met with some opposition by both the existing karate and kobudo organizations, but as time passed most of the traditional karate systems adopted a package of kobudo as part of an expanded karate – kobudo system.

## **Use of Bogu Gear:**

One unique signature of Nakamura's karate was the use of bogu gear (protective equipment) for fighting. The gear was created by Nakamura and Shimabuku based on use of the kendo men and kote (headgear and padded gloves) and a newly created chest protector made out of canvas. The adoption of the use of the bogu gear was in direct opposition to the non-contact sport sparring approach which was being pushed by the Japanese karate groups at that time. The use of the bogu gear for fighting was continued

by Master Odo. However, today most dojos have replaced the bogu gear with more modern sparring gear for improved safety.

### **Kicking Techniques Based On The Influence Of Bogu Gear:**

Kicking techniques within the open hand katas of Okinawa Kenpo include just two kicks: a front snap/thrust kick and a side kick. Unlike other Shorin-ryu based systems, the front kick in Okinawa Kenpo is executed to the face (chin specifically) as a snap/thrust kick movement. This is different from most other versions of our katas as performed in different Shorin-ryu systems which tend to use a mid level front snap kick. The incorporation of the front snap/thrust kick was a direct result of the use of the bogu gear. With the gear on an opponent, one was not able to kick effectively to the body, but a kick under the chin at the base of the men (helmet) was effective and could knock out the opponent.

The incorporation of the side kick into our Okinawa Kenpo kata is also another unique signature. In other Shorin-ryu systems the same katas (example – Pinan and Kusanku) use a 90 degree shift into a cat stance followed by executing a low or mid-level front snap kick. In some styles this kick has been modified to turn it into a “front/side” kick by turning the ankle. Here again was an instance where the use of the bogu gear influenced our kicking technique performed in the kata. The side kick was created and incorporated into the kata as it provided a strong mid section kicking attack to an opponent in bogu gear. Initially this kick was know as the “kenpo geri”. In the katas the kenpo geri was performed without retraction with the emphasis being on hitting at the hip or upper thigh level and then using ones weight to unbalance the opponent or in the case against the leg to bring the opponent down or break the leg. More recently, the side kick is executed with retraction in the katas resembling what is now considered a standard side snap or thrust type kick.

### **Seisan Stancing, Zen Kutsu Distancing and Two-foot Movement:**

Okinawa Kenpo utilizes the Seisan Dachi (front stance) as its dominant stancing method as does most of the other Shorin-ryu and Isshin-ryu systems. The unique aspect however, is in our use of Zen Kutsu for distancing combined with two-foot movement. Most other systems of Okinawan and Japanese Karate employ what we call one-foot movement methods when transition from one stance to another.

In moving from one front stance to another, the karate-ka moves what was the rear foot forward or backward using a c-step transition movement to arrive at another front stance. In this transition, only one foot actually moves. In Okinawa Kenpo the practitioner is taught that in order to move forward or backward, we actually step out (or back) into a length that would be needed to move into a Zen Kutsu Dachi (long front stance) and then drag up the rear foot when moving forward, or drag the front foot back when moving back. Thus, if we align an Okinawa Kenpo practitioner along side of a Shotokan practitioner and had both of the individuals move forward from one front stance to another, both

individuals would be traversing Zen Kutsu distance, just that the ending stances would be different – the Okinawa Kenpo student in a Seisan Dachi and the Shotokan student in a Zen Kutsu Dachi.

It is important to note that those systems that do not use two-foot movement, do however have a advanced concept taught to the upper level Yudansha called step sliding. This is taught to introduce the student to the concept of Tai Sabaki (body change) which permits the student to “cut an angle” on an opponent to minimize their defensive zone while maximizing the opponents vulnerability. In the Okinawa Kenpo system, this movement concept is taught from the beginning with our emphasis on two-foot movement which is the basis for all body change adjustments. Our use of two-foot movement in our execution of kata is done along a straight line direction, while the students are taught to cut angles in various basis drills. The use of this movement concept is a key component for the student to be able to apply the various jitsu techniques found within our traditional katas.

### ***Mixture of Shuri and Naha Turning:***

A unique aspect of Okinawa Kenpo is the use of both shuri and naha turning movements in the katas. In most Shorin-ryu systems the predominant turning method is the shuri turn. This is a turning movement where the individual turns into the turning direction to close the distance to the opponent. In contrast the naha turning method which sees extensive use in Goju-ryu or naha-te based systems, has the individual increasing the distance to the opponent during the turning movement. Based on the fact that Nakamura first started his training at the Ichu Middle School at a karate program that was taught by both Chomo Hanashiro and Kentsu Yabu under the direction of Kanryo Higashiona. Both Hanashiro and Yabu were Shuri-te stylists while Higashiona was a Naha-te stylist. As result the katas Nakamura learned had a mixture of both shuri and naha turning movements. We also see a predominance of naha turning movement in our kobudo katas as increasing the distance to an opponent can in most cases be an advantage during a turn. Another unique signature of the turning movements used in Okinawa Kenpo is the concept of “on-line turns”. The concept of an on-line turn is that when one turns into an opponent (offensive on-line turn / shuri turn) or away from (defensive on-line turn / naha turn) you do not cross the centerline of your opponent. An example of an offensive on-line turn would be against an opponent who is kicking, you turn closing the distance but not crossing the centerline so you can jam him on the inside and catch his kicking leg putting you in an excellent position for a sweep of his other leg for a takedown.

### ***Use of the Shuri Fist:***

Most modern day practitioners of most styles of karate make their fist in the same manner, that is by rolling all of the fingers into the palm of the hand and covering the first and second finger with their thumb. In Okinawa Kenpo, as well as other older non-sport based systems, the shuri fist is used. This is made by keeping the

bottom half of the first finger extended when rolling up the other fingers into the palm of the hand. The thumb then covers as normal. This produces a tighter fist and one that aligns the same way each time it is made. It also permits the practitioner to relax the hand somewhat when in an on-guard or transitional movement only to tighten prior to impact. The use of the shuri fist also can be useful to those of us who have over the years sustained injuries to their fingers and are not able to make a regular tight fist.

### ***Zone and One-half Blocking / Hard and Soft Execution:***

Blocks in karate are designed to protect three distinct blocking zones: upper, middle and lower body levels. In the early levels of training, the students are taught to execute their blocks to adequately cover each of the designated blocking level (i.e.: upward forearm block – upper level; inside forearm, outside forearm and inside knife hand blocks – mid level; and downward forearm block – lower level). As the student progresses in their experience and especially by the time they reach Yudansha grading, the individual's execution of the prescribed block should cover a zone and one-half. Thus the upper forearm block would cover the upper level and the top half of the mid level zone. The three mid level blocks should also cover the lower half of the upper level. And finally the downward forearm block will cover the bottom half of the mid level as well as the full lower level. In this manner one only needs to identify if the attack is above the waist or below.

A guide for the student to use is that all mid level blocks when executed will end up with the elbow one fist distance from the chest for the mid level. For the half level up, the fist is moved up under the armpit. The range of motion demonstrates the range cover by the block to cover its zone and one-half during the blocking movement. An additional benefit when executing the blocking movement is that from the higher level pull back to the lower level, the blocking movement provides a “pull back” movement which assists in deflecting the attack. In order to execute the “extended range” blocking techniques it is necessary for the practitioner to execute in a relaxed (soft) manner with focus (hard) at the end of the technique. Thus the speed of the technique with the correct bone alignment and technical execution will provide the power for the technique. Additionally, this same movement easily converts into a “soft” (or jitsu) application by replacing as an example, a knife hand block with a back hand parry / scooping block movement permitting one to execute an inside or outside circle wrist technique on the punching arm.

### ***No Stances in Kobudo:***

This was a statement which Odo Sensei made often when instructing. After making the statement he would then spend time correcting the students' stances. On the face of it, it sounds confusing. However, what he meant was that the stancing in kobudo should actually adjust to fit the length of the weapon.

While the Seisan Dachì is the predominant stance in our karate practice, the karate Seisan stance is not used extensively in our kobudo. One must remember that the stance is only the platform for the weapon. In the case of open hand practice, the weapon is the fist, open hand or kick. Thus the distance of the weapon at extension is limited by the length of our arms or legs.

In kobudo, the “weapon” is the end of the particular weapon that is being used by the practitioner. Our weapons range from short range: tekko; mid range: sai, tunfa, nunchaku, and kama; to long range: bo, eiku, yari, nunte bo and naginata. Standing for a short range weapon such as the tekko would be similar to our normal Seisan Dachì used in karate practice. When using mid range weapons the front stance becomes a little less wide, and with the long range weapons the front stance narrows, lengthens and the hip position opens. In all cases the adjustment of the stance is to permit the weapon to be able to control centerline in a natural relaxed position so that the maximum power can be developed by the practitioner.

### ***Full Range of Bo Usage:***

In the Taira Kobudo Lineage, most of the bo techniques are executed holding the bo is what is called “thirds”. This is not to mean three equal parts, but rather in three distinct parts with the distance for the center part established by the width of the participant's own body. In the Odo Kobudo lineage, we primarily work the full range of the bo. Use of the full range of the bo provides the maximum reach available to the bo user over using the bo in thirds. Use of the full range of the bo requires the student to develop skill in various hand changes including, palming, sliding and replacement transitions or the combination of the above. The ability of the bo practitioner to work the full range of the weapon becomes significant particularly when working such weapons as the yari, nunte bo or naginata which are one sided weapons as compared to a two-sided bo.

Use of the full range of the bo permits the practitioner to generate increased speed and power with the weapon which results in a need for a change of arm position for bo striking techniques discussed below.

### ***Bo Chamber to the Outside of the Arm:***

As noted above the use of full range bo techniques necessitates a change or adjustment to the “chamber position” when using the bo. In Taira Lineage Kobudo, the bo is chambered under the rear arm against the body. This method works quite well when using the bo in thirds.

When working the full range of the bo as in the Odo Lineage, the practitioner is taught to chamber the bo along the outside of the rear forearm using a “soft” control with the rear fingers and not a hard control (tight grip). This is done for two reasons. First, it provides a cushion to absorb the force of the bo swing rather than having the end of the bo strike the ribs of the practitioner. Second, it provides a stronger base for control of the weapon which has increased in its

length (range). This enhanced control position establishes the rear hand in an oppositional position to the front hand thus making it easy to pull the bo to the body and providing three points of control for the weapon. It is in many ways like pulling a bow when shooting an arrow (where the two opposing directions “pull” the bow to full extension prior to releasing the arrow). The typical Taira underarm grip keeps both hands in the same forward facing position and relies on the strength of the practitioner's bicep muscles to maintain control of the weapon.

The chambering of the bo to the outside of the rear forearm is a unique signature to Odo, Matayoshi and Yamani Kobudo Lineages.

### ***Normal Weapon Chambering on Hip:***

With the use of the mid range weapons such as the tunfa, kama and nunchaku the practitioner of the Odo Lineage chambers the weapon on the hip in the same manner (horizontal chamber) as they do for their normal karate punch. The sai is the only exception to this rule as we use a vertical chamber due to safety concern over the prongs of the weapon in proximity to the body.

In the Taira Lineage, the tunfa is chambered from a vertical fist position as typically done for the sai. Chambering for the kama and nunchaku are the same as in the Odo Lineage.

### ***Wristing (or Rotation) in Karate and Weapons Work:***

The term “wristing” refers to the rotational aspect that occurs near the end of the execution of a punching technique. We are taught in executing a punch to keep the elbow rubbing the body and not to initiate a turning (rotation) of the fist until the elbow has passed the body. This rotational movement during the final phase of the punch is where the power is generated and correct bone alignment is achieved. Here is where the concepts of “striking point” and “focal point” come into play. Striking point is the point on the opponent where you make contact with the punch, strike or kick. The focal point is the theoretical point through the body at which your power is directed. The key to develop power is to have the rotational component of the punch begin at the point of contact and extend into the target via a rotational movement to completion (focal point). The line of impact from point of contact through to focal point should have a downward alignment which helps increase the effective power of the punch by “setting” the weight of the opponent thus having his body absorb more of the impact.

Rotational consideration also are part of the execution of any blocking technique as it permits the use of transition from muscle to bone blocking during the contact portion of the blocking technique permitting the practitioner to concentrate their block force at a single contact point of the opponents attack while rotating through from muscle to bone contact on their own blocking arm.

In this manner one can maximize pain to the opponent while minimizing pain to one self.

In weapons work this same “wristing or rotational” component is key to being able to develop power in one’s techniques through speed and focus rather than by pure strength. In the case of the tunfa, in the Odo Lineage we “punch” with the tunfa the same way as we execute a normal open hand punch, rather than the vertical punching motion utilized in the Taira Lineage. This same “punching” movement is also used with the sai and the nunchaku (when holding them together and punching). When executing a bo strike, Odo Sensei would always refer to the movement as a “punch”. What is meant here is that rather than a bludgeoning strike based on power as sometimes seen in the Taira Lineage, we relax the wrist at the point of chamber and then snap and rotate the wrist in a similar manner to a open hand punch to bring the bo to its focus point. The rotational movement also brings more than just power to the table, but also permits use of the bo (weapon) with correct bone alignment (weapon alignment). In the case of a bo strike to the shoulder area of an opponent. The rotational movement permits one to make contact with the “v of the hand” (the palm) in a correct support position opposed to the direction of the attack so pressure can be exerted through the point of contact to the focal point of the strike through the completion of the rotational movement. Thus, one not only “strikes” the opponent, but also “pushes downward and backward” with the striking movement.

With a thrusting or poking strike with the bo, the use of the rotational movement clearly mimics the execution of a “punch”. With a bo thrust, the bo thrust starts from a “chamber position” with the bo pulled back with the lead (front) hand close to the body in a palm up position. As the thrust is executed the lead hand begins to rotate until at full extension the lead hand is in a position similar to a completed straight forefist punch. Here the same technical considerations are at play as with a regular punch. The bo thrust makes contact at the beginning of the rotational movement and the rotational movement continues through to the point of focus which adds a “downward directional impact force” to the technique.

With a poke movement with the bo, here again the rotational component is how we maintain control over the striking end of the bo. In the case of a poke it is the rear hand which does the rotational movement with the front (lead) hand acting as the guide. The rotational movement with the rear hand is similar to that of a “closed punch”, that using a “in to outward body” rotational movement.

Wristing, or rotational movement also plays an important role in the execution of various blocking techniques with the bo such as a downward block across the lower body. In this movement the use of wristing permits the bo to move more in a “S-movement” rather than straight across vertically. By wristing one can maintain a relaxed body position until the last part of the technique when the ending rotation is applied to the focal point.

### **Control of Centerline:**

This last concept is exhibited in both our karate and kobudo practice. While not unique to just Okinawa Kenpo, it is critical to being able to make the transition from “martial science” to “self-protection art” that is the key to the practice of the old Okinawan ways. Typically the “control hand” is the one that covers centerline while the block or punch is being executed. In open hand application the “prep hand” actually becomes the block and the “block” becomes the strike or grappling technique. All of our application of our jitsu techniques requires the practitioner to be in control of centerline.

In our kobudo work, our control of center line has to be adjusted for some of the weapons due to safety considerations. Typically when using the tunfa, sai, nunchaku and kama one uses a “half control hand” position. In application in many cases the “control hand” is used as a means of blocking and grabbing the attacking bo (as an example) while striking the opponent with the other weapon (tunfa, sai, nunchaku, kama or tekko).

### **Summary:**

In conclusion, the Odo Lineage of Karate and Kobudo as taught by Hanshi Heilman under the IKKF Program exhibits a number of unique signatures as well as standard but important basic movement principles that permit the practitioner to move in a relaxed but powerful manner. The beauty of what Master Odo perfected in his martial arts practice gives the lineage practitioner the ability to have a common set of basic movement principles which work with minor adjustments over the full range of activities from basics, kata, kobudo, self-defense and sparring. In short – IT JUST WORKS AND WORKS WELL.