



Traditional Martial Arts

As Intangible Cultural Heritage



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*From Olympic Sport
to UNESCO Intangible
Cultural Heritage:
Okinawa Karate Between
Local, National, and
International Identities
in Contemporary Japan*

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03

INTRODUCTION

Karate is commonly regarded as a traditional Japanese martial art, which was developed on the island of Okinawa. Okinawa belonged to the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429–1879)—an independent state that held diplomatic, cultural, and economic relations with Japan, China, Korea, and other Asian countries. The Ryūkyū Kingdom had a highly transactional culture with a history of cultural exchange in East and Southeast Asia. Karate, generally known as *tī/te* (hand) or *tōdī/tōde* (China-hand), blended the indigenous fighting systems of Okinawa with influences from Chinese and most likely other Asian martial arts, worldviews, and folk spiritualities into a cultural practice that became rooted in Okinawan society. Today, karate is a weaponless martial art in which punches and kicks are utilized. Due to its history and social as well as cultural relevance, the prefectural government of Okinawa has, since the 1990s, been actively seeking to inscribe Okinawa karate on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity. However, karate will also make its debut as an exhibition sport at the rescheduled Olympic Games due to be held in Tokyo in 2021. According to the World Karate Federation (WKF), about 100 million people practice karate around the world (WKF, 2014). With a transcendence that goes far beyond its sportive side, karate, as a cultural icon both of modernity and “tradition,” has become a Japanese cultural export incorporated into the global sporting culture.

SPORTIFICATION AND MILITARIZATION OF KARATE

During the early 20th century, karate was introduced to Japan from Okinawa, which became a Japanese prefecture in 1879, by Funakoshi Gichin (1868–1957), the founder of Shōtōkan-style karate. After Funakoshi had already presented karate at the Butokuden (Hall of Martial Virtues) in Kyoto 1916, he was invited to demonstrate the art at the first Physical Education Exhibition (*Daiichi taiiku tenrankai*) in Tokyo in 1922. In the following years Funakoshi succeeded in popularizing karate, especially in the schools and universities of mainland Japan (Bittmann, 1999, pp. 96–105). When imported to Japan, however, karate underwent a process of sportification and militarization—in line with other modernized and sportified Japanese martial arts, especially judo and kendo (Nakatani *et al.*, 2008). This process can also be described as Japanization, as the practice and philosophy of karate was acculturated into the political, cultural, and ideological frame of early 20th-century mainland Japan. Martial arts (*budō*) as well as sport and physical education during the late 1920s and 1930s were systematically appropriated by the state and utilized within the policy of a nationwide *Gleichschaltung*, and were redefined as tools to educate loyal and patriotic citizens, to develop fighting spirit, and prepare the male population for military service (Abe *et al.*, 1992; Bennett, 2013).

Karate practice, which formerly focused on *kata* (pattern exercise), increasingly focused on competitive sparring (*kumite*). The performance was ritualized and formalized by introducing a ranking and gradation system, meditation before practice, and a white training uniform that replaced daily clothes worn for practice in Okinawa. The reading of

dōjō rules before practice became common and individual exercise was replaced by group exercise in formation and on command (Nakatani *et al.*, 2007; Johnson, 2012; Tan, 2004). Techniques were standardized and those deemed potentially harmful to the practitioners were eliminated to create a sport fit for physical education curricula in schools and universities. Karate was eventually introduced into the school curriculum in Okinawa in 1901.

In the late 1920s Funakoshi Gichin suggested a change to the characters for karate from “China-hand” (*tōde*, *karate* 唐手) to “empty hand” (*karate* 空手) and adding *dō* (道, “way”), although the term “empty hand” was most likely used for the first time by Hanashiro Chōmo in his *Karate kumite* (1905). This denomination further integrated karate into the reinvented modern Japanese martial art “traditions.” It described the main technical characteristic of karate as a weaponless martial art, established a link with Buddhist philosophy, and connected karate to other Japanese art forms whose practice was defined as a “way” (*michi*, *dō*). At the same time, however, substituting the character for “China” 唐 speaks to the political and ideological Zeitgeist and is a reaction to the contemporary anti-China sentiments that hindered the popularization of karate among young Japanese both in Okinawa and on the mainland (*Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 1936; see also Bittmann, 2017). In 1933 the Dai Nippon Butokukai (Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society), which united all Japanese martial arts under its organization after 1895, recognized karate as a Japanese martial art (Gainty, 2013). The Japanization of karate was by no means limited to styles founded in mainland Japan (e.g., Shōtōkan), but in fact, it had a reverse effect and resulted in an acculturation of Okinawan styles; it was also decided in 1936 (the year before the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War) to adopt the term *karatedō*. The Japanization of karate then also served a political end as it helped to integrate an Okinawan cultural practice into the national and cultural framework of a “homogenous” Japanese nation.



A karate demonstration at Shuri Castle in 1937 by male and female students of the Shuri City Elementary School
© Karate Dō Taikan- 空手道大観" (A Broad View of Karatedō), 1938. Nakasone Genwa

THE GLOBALIZATION OF KARATE

The globalization of karate to the West during the 20th century was initiated by Japanese immigrants to Hawaii and South America and driven after the Second World War mainly by American soldiers. Prior to the war, renowned Okinawan karate masters like Yabu Kentsū (1866–1937), Miyagi Chōjun (1888–1953), and Kyan Chōtoku (1870–1945) traveled overseas to perform demonstrations and provide instruction (Okinawan Prefectural Government, 2017, pp. 123, 147; Orr and Amae, 2016, p. 6). Nonetheless, the globalization of karate as an institutionalized practice occurred after the Second World War. In South Korea,

karate training had already begun in the 1940s thanks to returned nationals who had been studying at Japanese universities. Many schools appeared with karate being pronounced in Korean, *tangsoodo* (“the China-hand way”) or *kongsoodo* (“the empty-hand way”), both direct predecessors of taekwondo (“the way of the foot and fist”), which was created in 1959 when the major karate organizations in the country decided to establish a non-Japanese name for Korean karate and formed the Korean Taekwondo Association (Madis, 2003, p. 202; Moenig and Kim, 2016). In Taiwan, karate had acquired significant popularity by the mid-1960s, and in 1973 the Chinese Taipei Karate-do Federation was established (Orr and Amae, 2016, p. 8). Karate was officially established in Australia also around the 1960s. Karate arrived in Africa and the Middle East in the late 1950s, with the first organization formed in 1965 by the Japan Karate Association (JKA). In Europe, karate proliferated mainly thanks to the efforts of Henry Plée (1923–2014) with his Le Karaté Club de France (1955), and the foundation of the European Karate Union in 1965. As for the American continent, the institutional spread of karate began equally during the 1960s, covering countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, mainly with the Shitō-ryū and Shōtōkan styles.

For its part, the United States, via military personnel stationed in Okinawa and Japan, would go on to be the major force in the popularization of karate. In 1961 Nishiyama Hidetaka (1928–2008), co-founder of the JKA, after a few years of instructing American soldiers, settled in California and became one of the leading promoters of karate outside of Japan (Benesch, 2020, p. 18). Likewise, in Okinawa, under U.S. occupation, direct contact between military personnel and Okinawan masters encouraged the propagation of karate.

In Japan, after the war, martial arts “participation was banned for the most part by the Occupation authorities” (Bennett, 2013, p. 82), as such practices were seen as tools that, through their practice and ideology/philosophy, actively contributed to the spreading of a fascist ideology and the militarization of Japanese society. When training of martial arts, including karate, began again in the late 1940s, those martial arts renounced their militaristic past and reinvented themselves as sports. This reinvention formed the basis for the globalization of karate, which after the war picked up its prewar past and further developed along the lines of modern combat sports.

One effect of globalization on cultural practices like karate is homogenization: local or national structures are losing ownership and control of the definition and performance of a given cultural practice and being replaced by international institutions that will create global homogeneity in terms of performance, philosophy, grading, hierarchies, and so on. Nowadays, organizations like the WKF and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) globally define what knowledge and practice in karate are. Another effect of the described homogenization process is also simplification and exclusion. When the IOC executive board announced in 2016 that karate would be included as an Olympic discipline for the Tokyo 2020 Games, it accepted a form of karate practiced within the WKF. Exclusion is made evident by the fact that the WKF only recognizes *kata* from 4 styles—Gōjū-ryū, Shitō-ryū, Shōtōkan, and Wadō-ryū—while karate today counts over 20 different registered styles in Japan and Okinawa.

Processes of globalization, paradoxically, not only result in homogeneity, but also simultaneously lead to fragmentation and localization (Bowman, 2010). Globalization

provokes claims of ownership, belonging, and identity, and processes of acculturation, appropriation, and globalized cultural practices are often intertwined with economic interests on global, national, regional, and even local levels. While witnessing the development toward being an international sport that dissociated itself from earlier forms of karate, the advanced globalization, sportification, and commodification in the 1980s ultimately resulted in a counterreaction that prompted a turn toward a form of karate that could serve the modern longing and search for a spiritual and “authentic” experience, which was found in Okinawa. This movement is in essence nostalgic as it aims to reconstruct, find, and experience karate in a form that is perceived to be more authentic than modern versions.

OKINAWA KARATE AS UNESCO ICH

National and local governments have long realized that cultural practices such as martial arts can function as sources of soft power to unite citizens behind the idea of a shared cultural heritage and to transmit a positive image of a nation and culture to the world. The government of Okinawa not only supports karate but even has a policy to get Okinawa karate registered with UNESCO as a unique example of ICH. These efforts are not a bottom-up movement of local (karate) communities, but a top-down political act to promote a unique Okinawan culture within the prefecture, both domestically in Japan and



The “100 kata for Karate Day,” a privately organized yearly event, celebrating its 2016 edition in Churasun Beach, Tomigusuku, Okinawa © Chris Willson

internationally. At the national level the complex promotion plan in respect of Okinawa karate is administratively coordinated within the Japanese government by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and cabinet policies. Karate is also part of the “Cool Japan” branding strategy applied to Japanese intellectual property (Daliot-Bul, 2009; Valaskivi, 2013).

The national government and the prefecture realize the economic potential of karate and encourage Okinawa, with support of local businesses, to be recognized as the “holy land of karate” (*karate no seichi*) and as an attractive destination for Japanese as well as foreign karate tourists. According to data from 2016 there were a total of 1,188 karate tourists registered in Okinawa—38.2% American, 21.1% Australian, and 17.1% French. Among the Okinawa dōjōs, 31.5% have a branch outside of Japan and 37.4% foreign members (Okinawa-ken, 2019, p. 2). Karate is therefore also integrated into a broader tourism policy in which Okinawa heritage connects to the image of a subtropical island, a Hawaii-like beach resort (see Figal, 2010).

A first step toward having karate officially recognized as ICH was taken in 1997 when the prefecture recognized karate and *kobujutsu* as “intangible cultural property” (*mukei bunkazai*), in line with the Japanese law on national heritage. That year, three karate masters—Nagamine Shōshin (1907–97) of Matsubayashi-ryū, Yagi Meitoku (1912–2003) of Gōjū-ryū, and Itokazu Seiki (1915–2006) of Uechi-ryū—were appointed as the first “Intangible Cultural Properties in the Field of Karate and Kobudō.” In 2000, when several assets of the

Okinawan landscape like Shuri Castle or the Shikina-en Gardens, which are closely associated with karate history and the reconstruction of karate as Okinawan heritage, became UNESCO World Heritage Sites, six more masters were distinguished as intangible cultural properties.

Since then, the government has supported the establishment of a centralized infrastructure by founding several organizations with the aim of preserving, promoting, and disseminating an official and authoritative vision of Okinawa karate. Thus, in 2005, October 25 was designated as “Karate Day” (*Karate no hi*); the date was chosen as on October 25, 1936, six renowned karate masters from Okinawa revealed that they would adopt the term *karatedō* (*Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 1936). Designating calendar days to special occasions in karate history draws public attention, creates awareness of a joint history and a sense of identity, while serving to popularize karate and attract tourists.

On Karate Day in 2014, the Okinawa government announced the intention to develop karate’s candidature to UNESCO for formal recognition as ICH. With this goal in mind, two further institutions materialized in 2016: the Okinawa Prefecture Designated Intangible Cultural Asset



A new Guinness World Record is established by 3973 karateka at Kokusai dori in Naha performing kata, October 23, 2016. The record has since been superseded
© Chris Willson

“Okinawa Karate and Kobujutsu” Preservation Society, and the Okinawa Prefecture Karate Promotion Division, a policy planning bureau that also coordinates the local karate network. The latter organization was given the task of “promoting Okinawa karate to be listed with UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage” (*Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 2016). The definitive emblem for karate candidature was going to be the Okinawa Karate Kaikan (Okinawa Karate Institute), an iconic site that opened its doors in 2017, incorporating a museum and the Okinawa Karate Information Center (OKIC). The institute—expected to attract the attention of the karate community worldwide and serving also as a “pilgrimage” center—describes its main function as: “to preserve, inherit and develop Okinawan Karate as a unique culture whilst informing people both in and outside Japan that ‘Okinawa is the birthplace of Karate,’ and to be a facility that can be used as a place to learn the essence of Karate” (Okinawa Karate Kaikan, n.d.). At the same time the Kaikan must drive “karate’s listing as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage” (*Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 2017).



A distinctively Okinawan *kameko-baka* (“turtle-back”) tomb preserved at the Karate Kaikan grounds as a sign of the respect for families and ancestors prevalent in Okinawan culture
© Eduardo González de la Fuente

The prefectural institutional plan stresses the importance of local masters and traditions. It also aims to articulate and unify objectives within Okinawa karate, which is considerably divided into different schools and styles. Currently, the Okinawan Government acknowledges 3 major traditions of karate—the Shuri-Tomari-te system (*Shōrin-ryū*),

the Naha-te system (*Gōjū-ryū*), and the *Uechi-ryū* system—along with 11 other minor ones, plus the *kobudō* styles. From these main lines stem 105 *ryūha* and *kaiha* (“schools” and “branches”) totaling between 350 and 400 *dōjōs* in Okinawa alone (OKIC, n.d., 2020). These numerous karate styles and schools have different rules, techniques, *kata*, and they compete among each other and with styles and schools from the Japanese mainland, in terms of legitimacy and authenticity. Yet in order to submit a successful UNESCO application, Okinawan and Japanese karate stakeholders must reach a consensus to define what “traditional” karate is and secure inscription for it on the Japanese government’s national list of intangible heritage. Local definitions, understandings, and politics of karate to a certain degree differ with and are in conflict with those on the national level, where karate is promoted as part of a homogeneous Japanese tradition, in which Okinawa is culturally and historically identical with mainland Japan. The initiative by the prefecture, which is also supported by the JKA, clearly distinguishes between Okinawa and Japanese karate. Nakahara Nobuyuki, former chairman of the JKA, in his speech “Okinawa dentō karate no UNESCO tōroku ni mukete” (“Toward the registration of traditional Okinawa karate with UNESCO”) at a conference held at the Kaikan in 2017, argued that while Okinawa karate developed in the specific cultural and historic context of Okinawa, traditional Japanese karate developed within the tradition of *bushidō* (OKIC, 2017). This approach to Japanese karate as rooted in the *bushidō* ideology mirrors tendencies on the national level to firmly base karate in the “martial art tradition” of Japan, not only in terms of practice but also in terms of ideology.

At the same conference, Matsuura Kōichirō, also former executive of the JKA and UNESCO’s Director-General between 1999 and 2009, emphasized the necessity for Okinawan karate stakeholders to work together with the Japanese government and national experts in ICH for a successful application. Matsuura remembered that the 2003 ICH Convention was fostered and approved during his mandate, manifesting how Japan has largely influenced the UNESCO discourse on ICH (Akagawa, 2016). Regarding karate, Matsuura expressed the urgent necessity to: i) demonstrate how traditional Okinawa karate

is different than sports karate and worldwide practices; and to ii) build verifiable historical evidence confirming that Okinawa is karate’s place of origin.

Uniting the Okinawan and Japanese karate worlds and increasing the understanding of the Okinawan origins of karate in the public sphere are both crucial goals in successfully applying for official ICH recognition from UNESCO. According to the 2018 vision text produced by Okinawa Prefecture, only 34% of mainland Japanese recognize Okinawa as the birthplace of karate, in contrast to 96% of the residents of Okinawa Prefecture itself (Okinawa-ken, 2018, p. 14). Still, an article published in *Japan Times* (May 11, 2018) entitled “Okinawa citizens urged to get behind bid to put prefecture’s style of karate on UNESCO map” suggests that while the people of the Okinawan prefecture have a clear cognizance of the



Young *karateka* performing at an Okinawan street festival
© Miguel Ángel Regalado Expósito

Okinawan origins of karate, they may not yet appreciate the necessity of preserving and promoting it.

The UNESCO convention states that ICH must be recognized by communities and groups “as part of their cultural heritage,” providing “them with a sense of identity and continuity” (UNESCO, 2018). Hence, the struggle to secure the support of the Okinawan population regarding the official recognition of karate represents a significant issue, especially as the plan to have karate inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List is targeting the domain of “social practices, rituals and festive events,” since there is currently no category covering specifically martial arts. Thus, a committee of karate experts, founded in 2019, announced “ritual” (*gishiki*) as the main keyword, and the phrase “The spirit of peace; tying the ritual of Okinawa Karate to the UNESCO ring” as the slogan for the candidature (*Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 2019). This “ritual karate” must be embedded very particularly into the Okinawan cultural sphere, expressing and disseminating it. From this perspective, the practice of reifying karate as an inextricable component of Okinawan traditional rituals and festivities will expand the reach of its intangible heritage. Performed often on the occasion of folk festivities such as the tug-of-war, boat races, and lion dances, and at spiritual spaces including tombs and monuments, karate capitalizes other sources of the Okinawan material and intangible culture beyond its specific subfield.



Traditional karate exhibition at the Naha Otsunahiki Matsuri (Naha Giant Tug-of-War Festival)
© Chris Willson

CONCLUSION

The modifications made to karate at the beginning of the 20th century are generally interpreted as Japanization. However, the described development also has to be described from the perspective of modernization. Karate underwent a process of sportification, militarization, and standardization, which meant that karate could be taught to large groups of students in schools, universities, and the military. This in turn had a reverse effect on how karate was trained and defined in Okinawa, a process that is often overlooked. The ideal of “traditional” karate as a self-defense system centered on *kata*—that is, as a kind of ritual performance—gave way to modern sports fighting (*kumite*).

The tension within karate in terms of it being a dual Japanese/Okinawan cultural asset persists at the center of a debate in which historical roots, ramifications, and implications are mobilized again by the application to UNESCO for formal recognition as ICH. Japan needs to acknowledge and support the Okinawa karate tradition to endorse the official strategy of branding the Japanese nation “cool” internationally. Hence, by this complex view, inside karate we find one origin (Okinawa), two “traditions” (Okinawa karate and Japanese karate), and one national heritage (karate as a whole).



International students of Sensei Seikichi Iha Intangible Cultural Asset Holder and 10th-dan Okinawa Shorin-ryu Karate, performing at Shuri Castle to celebrate the master’s “Tōkachi”, a typical Okinawan celebration of longevity for the occasion of the 88th birthday © Chris Willson

If karate wants to succeed in its UNESCO application, revitalization and re-ritualization—that is, strengthening its bond with other characteristic Okinawan rituals—seems to be the only possible way. Despite the ongoing discussions, there is only one possible path to success regarding the UNESCO candidature: acting by way of consensus.

Several actions, institutional, propagational, discursive, and so on have been developed in the last decade to build up the case for karate as ICH. These local activities have already profoundly changed the landscape of Okinawa karate and it remains to be seen how far the long-term vision of the prefectural government will further alter local karate communities, as well the understandings and performance of karate in the future.

Karate is in itself a site of heritage, expressing cultural diversity and circumscribing narratives that transverse temporal, geographical, and political boundaries. The Okinawan martial art still channels contemporary allegations about the past that can be consistent with or contradict normative discourses about the Okinawa–Japan relationship. Nevertheless, the drive for UNESCO acceptance is devised, at least at the governmental level, as an inflection point because of the tremendous symbolic significance for Okinawa that such legitimizing recognition would bring. In addition, the inclusion of cultural assets in the ICH list has been proven to be a factor in expanding support and appreciation on cultural diversity while increasing tourism-related revenue. In the context of globalization, intangible cultures harvest very tangible outcomes for the social and economic spheres. Many actors, both public and private, in Okinawa and Japan, are well aware of the potential karate is yet to develop.

Karate is part of an Okinawan local process of intangible heritage revitalization that at the same time derives from Japanese national policies. In spite of this top-down management, karate represents for Okinawa a valuable asset in maintaining and transmitting a wide communal sense of historical continuity, identity, moral values, self-awareness, and celebration of diversity. This cultural repository of knowledge and skills is manifested not only in the particular practices of Okinawa karate as a martial art, but more importantly by karate as part of a minority group, expressing an encompassing view of its own culture—a culture at the same time dialoguing with other territories through martial arts as ICH.

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LIVING HERITAGE SERIES

For the past several decades, UNESCO has been increasingly championing the importance of culture as a driving force for the proliferation of cultural diversity and the sustainable development of a global society. Sustainable development in this sense, however, is not equated to economic growth alone, but also to a means to achieve an equitable intellectual, emotional, and spiritual existence among the global community.

At the same time, societies around the world have been facing challenges in promoting the values of cultural pluralism. As such, UNESCO has been an advocate for promoting culture and intangible cultural heritage in particular since the 1980s with the Decade for Cultural Development and later with the Living Human Treasures program (UNESCO 142EX/18 and 142EX/48). These promotions and programs culminated with the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Both of these instruments recognize the importance of sharing and promoting intangible cultural heritage to enhance understanding and appreciation of the cultural assets of the humanity.

In 2017, ICHCAP, as a UNESCO category 2 center in the cultural heritage field, started the *Living Heritage Series* to promote cultural diversity and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. In this publication project, ICHCAP teams up with other organizations to share information about heritage beliefs and practices from cultures around the world in the hopes that intangible cultural heritage can be sustained by communities and the broader international society.



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