

What's In a Name?

By Master William Scott Shamblin

Kata is the heart of all Okinawan martial arts. As most practitioners know, kata are the formal exercises of karate and can be defined as a set of prearranged movements of attack and defense against imaginary opponents. While the word kata itself has been referred to as form, the actual translation means "How one behaves." Kata is always singular, never plural; in other words one would say "I know eight kata", rather than "I know eight katas".

Most systems of karate use kata as the primary method of training. We need to always remember that the techniques handed down to us in kata were developed from actual fighting situations. That being said, kata may be considered, in essence, as the ritualized re-enactments of former battles. More importantly kata serve as the encyclopedia, if you will, of fighting techniques which have been tested in combat. The kata give us not only fighting techniques but strategies for combat as well. Many kata are very graceful and beautiful to watch, almost dance-like. But they are not dances. It is interesting to note however, that many traditional Okinawan folk dances do appear to have many of the same movements as the karate kata.

The reason is that the traditional folk dances tell stories, and some of these stories are re-enactments of battles. That is why they sometimes appear so similar to the kata of karate and kobujutsu. Kata tell stories as well. Sometimes they tell of techniques used by a certain individual in a particular combat situation. Sometimes they tell of a particular master's most tried and trusted personal strategies for combat. Some kata are the combined efforts of an entire village, bearing record of how members of that particular village were able to protect themselves from invaders. Each kata has its own story to tell, and if we will listen, it will bring us one step closer to a deeper understanding and mastery.

Kata should be viewed as living pieces of history, because as long as we practice them properly, the creators of them will never die. Some kata, however, have been lost in antiquity. A good example of this is the Okinawan set of kata known as Chanan 1 and 2. These kata are no longer around, but legend has it that Bushi Matsumura either developed these kata, or they came from an older set of Chinese kata learned by

Matsumura. There are many others, but the point is that as long as we continue to practice and teach, and more importantly, interpret these kata, we are keeping the history of our martial arts ancestors alive. As martial artists, I believe we have an obligation to learn as much as we can about where our arts came from and about the ancient proponents of these arts. What are their creators trying to tell us? What do the names of these kata mean in relation to how they should be interpreted? Listed below are by no means all the kata of Okinawa, but here are some of the more well known. Some names are literal translations of the way they are written in kanji. Some are what we might consider nicknames, with the literal meaning lost in time. Some are named for individuals and places, some for concepts, and some simply have a numerical (directional or even spiritual) meaning.

It is also interesting to note that many are written in various combinations of Chinese, Japanese and hogen (varying, local Okinawan dialects) languages. According to legend and oral traditions, this was done primarily to confuse the Japanese reading and speaking Satsuma invaders. Seisan is a great example of this; Sei refers to 10 in Chinese while San is 3 in Japanese (13). Whether fact or myth, it is true that the Chinese language was spoken on Okinawa long before the Japanese arrived. It is natural that there would be a blending of Chinese and the native language of the Ryukyu Islands. Many names are obvious, many are not. I think that you will find that all are fascinating.

Shuri-te Kata

<u>Name</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Pinan Shodan	peaceful mind level one
Pinan Nidan	peaceful mind level two
Pinan Sandan	peaceful mind level three
Pinan Yondan	peaceful mind level four
Pinan Godan	peaceful mind level five
Naihanchi Shodan*	fighting holding your ground level one
Naihanchi Nidan*	fighting holding your ground level two
Naihanchi Sandan*	fighting holding your ground level three

Some have noted that the Naihanchi kata is very similar to an ancient Chinese form dating back to the Ming Dynasty known as “Dai-Po-Chin”. It is thought that Naihanchi or Naihanchin is the Okinawan name for the kata Naifuanchi introduced to Okinawa by a Chinese Master named Ason. “Nai-Fuan-Chi” was the way it was pronounced in China. Regardless, there is more than one possible meaning for the word Naihanchi. The particle “Nai” means “inner” or “inside”. “Fuan” means “uneasy. “Chi / Chin” means “soil or foundation”. Chi / Chin” can also mean “battle” as it does in Sanchin (“Three battles”). Therefore, it could mean “fighting inside of an uneasy ground.”

<u>Name</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Passai Dai	penetrate a fortress (greater)
Passai Sho	penetrate a fortress (lesser)
Seisan	thirteen, thirteen hands, or possibly thirty.
Chinto*	Chinese visitor to Okinawa

It is interesting to note that in Chinese the word “Chin” translates as “seize”. In Okinawa “To”, “Ti” or “Di” are all pronunciations for “Te” or Hand. Thus, “to seize the hand”, or “seizing hand”. There is much legend surrounding Chinto. It has been suggested that he was a shipwrecked Chinese sailor who hid from the authorities and gave instruction to the legendary Bushi Matsumura. In all likely-hood, if this is true, Chinto was more likely a shipwrecked Chinese pirate. At the time pirate ships were constantly plaguing Japanese and Okinawan vessels on the South China Sea. Most of these Chinese pirates were in fact former military men and would have some knowledge of martial arts. However, being a Chinese sailor wasn’t a crime on Okinawa; being a pirate was.

Kusanku Dai*	Chinese gongfu master (greater)
Kusanku Sho*	Chinese gongfu master (lesser)

Kusanku, Kusankun or Koshankun as he was also known, was a Chinese master who apparently traveled to Okinawa with a “few” of his disciples, in 1756. In 1762 Kusankun was apparently on board an Okinawan tribute ship, bound for Satsuma, Japan, when it drifted off course and ended up on Shikoku Island. His name was documented and mentioned in the famous chronicle entitled the Oshima Incident, written by Confucian scholar Tobe Ryoen. In it, Kusankun was described as an expert of kempo, or more specially “kumiai-jutsu”. He is best known as the teacher of the famous “Toudi” (Karate) Sakugawa.

Useishi (Gojushiho)	fifty-four steps
Chinte*	bamboo hands (a concept)

It has been suggested that this nickname refers to the fact that this kata was used for training against the spear (yari). It has been said that the guards at Shuri Castle use to strap bamboo staves to their forearms as a defensive measure. Thus the nickname, “bamboo hands.”

Jitte (Jutte)	ten hands
Jiin	temple ground
Jion	temple sound
Hakutsuru	white crane

Tomari-te Kata

<u>Name</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Wanshu (Wansu)*	Chinese military envoy
Rohai	vision of a crane
Anaku	peace from the south
Wankan	king’s crown

While much of the history of Wansu is purely speculative, it is generally believed that it can be traced back to a Chinese envoy named Wang Ji. The name relates to the tile Wang Sifu, or “teacher Wang.” It is interesting to note that there are two distinct versions of Wansu kata, a Tomari version and a Shuri version. These kata are completely dissimilar to each other.

Naha-te Kata

<u>Name</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Sanchin	three battles or three conflicts
Saifa kanji)	smashing or breaking or tearing (concept based on
Seipai	eighteen
Seiunchin (seienchin)* “war kata”)	walk far to quell and conquer (hence the nickname

This name is a concept based on the modern translation of the literal kanji, and there are more than one! The actual original meaning appears to have been lost to time. However, it is fascinating to note that many Chinese based systems that utilize variations of this form consider it a military exercise as opposed to a civilian based method. The open handed movements inherent in the kata are symbolic of short range, bladed weapons, which seem to suggest close quarter combat strategies for the battle field.

Tensho	change of hand (grip) or elegant hand
Shisochin	fighting in four directions or four battles
Unshu (Unsu)	cloud hand
Sanseiru (Sanjuroku)	thirty-six
Suparempai (Pechurin)	one hundred and eight
Hakutsuru	white crane
Sochin	to move into the battle or to preserve peace
Niseishi (Nijushiho)	twenty-four

Sunsu (Suansu)*
(grandfather)

strong man, son of old man or strong Papa-san

This kata is unique to Isshin-ryu. It has been said that “Suansu” refers to a nickname given to Tatsuo Shimabuku by the mayor of Gushikawa City, after seeing Shimabuku perform Sanchin kata during a demonstration. The name is taken from a large rock that sits out in the bay, which during antiquity, discouraged invaders from reaching the shore by boat, thereby offering a measure of protection to the village. However, it has also been suggested that the name “Suansu” is in reference to the Shimabukuro family folk dance. By tradition, older Okinawan families had folk dances that were unique to that particular family.

So as you can see, the names of many of the kata are as mysterious as they are enlightening. I challenge you to research some of these names on your own. I think that it will give you a much deeper insight into the art that you study. Will the knowledge of any of this make you a better fighter? Probably not. The average karate-ka could care less; but the Master? Well, that would be an entirely different matter...