

Yamanni-Ryu Kata

The Shuri-ryu system, strictly speaking, contains only a single required weapons kata: the *Tsuesho* bo kata. Shuri-ryu founder Robert Trias considered the study of weapons (*kobudo*) to be a field separate from karate and not necessary for the attainment of black belt rank. However, for the most dedicated karate students who wished to broaden their martial arts background, he did offer an extensive program in kobudo which carried its own separate ranking system. The requirements for rank in kobudo were fairly strict: the candidate needed a black belt in karate and at least 8 years training in the martial arts, and had to be at least 17 years old. Of course there were also performance and knowledge requirements.

Trias listed and described six bo katas in his master textbook, *The Pinnacle of Karate*. These are: (1) **Tsuesho**, originally composed by Tode Sakugawa (1733-1815) and later improved by Chogun Suekata around 1765, (2) **Tokumine-no-kon**, composed by Peichin Tokumine from the southern Okinawa island of Yaeyama, and transmitted through Chotoku Kyan, (3) **Sakugawa-no-kon**, perhaps the oldest Okinawan bo kata, brought back from China by Tode Sakugawa, (4) **Sakugawa-no-kon Dai**, derived from Sakugawa-no-kon, (5) **Chatanyara-no-kon**, an old, very complex kata associated with Chatan Yara (1740-1812), a contemporary of Sakugawa and said to have been a student of the legendary Chinese emissary Kushanku, and (6) **Shushi-no-kon**, an old kata which exists today in dozens of variations. No one is sure from whom Trias acquired his versions of these katas—he studied with so many different masters, and was inclined to make changes (intentional or inadvertent) in his katas. None, however, are the Yamanni-ryu versions to be discussed here.

[NOTE: Robert Trias apparently did not realize that *kon* or *kun* means “staff” in Chinese, just as *bo* means “staff” in Japanese. Consequently he gave kata names redundantly, such as “Tokumine nokon bo” and “Sakugawa nokon bo.” These names are incorrect, and should not include the word “bo.” The same error occurs occasionally in other systems; it has been suggested that this originated as a parenthetical translation, e.g. “Tokumine-no-kon (Bo).” The word “no” is simply a possessive indicator, like “’s” in English. *Kata Tokumine-no-kon* therefore translates as “Tokumine’s bo kata.”]

Over the years Trias and his various successors have added a substantial number of additional bo katas to that original list. In 1994, however, a number of bo katas from the Yamanni-ryu system were acquired by the KoSho Shuri-ryu schools in Arizona and California. These came via a visiting instructor, Shihan Timothy L. Unisa, a half-Okinawan, half-Filipino master who had studied under Toshihiro Oshiro, Chief Instructor for the Ryukyu Bujutsu Kenkyu Doyukai in the U.S., and a 7th dan in Yamanni-Chinen-ryu bojutsu. Consequently the details of the origin and practice of Yamanni-ryu have special interest to many Shuri-ryu practitioners. Let’s take a look:

Okinawan kobudo stems from five major kobudo systems: (1) Honshin-ryu kobudo, (2) Uhuchiku kobudo, (3) Ryukyu kobudo, (4) Matayoshi kobudo, and (5) Yamanni-Chinen-ryu kobudo. Of these, Yamanni-ryu stands out as the most graceful and elegant.

Yamanni-ryu was formalized as a specific style by Masami Chinen (1898-1976), who taught kobudo privately at his home in Shuri. He named the style after his father and

bojutsu teacher, Sanda “Yamanni” Chinen (1852-1925), who in turn had learned from *his* father, Yamagusuku Chinen (1797-1881) and also from another relative, Shichiyataka Chinen (born ca. 1800). Yamagusuku Chinen had been a student of the famous Tode Sakugawa (1733-1815), whose katas came from China. Shichiyataka Chinen was a student of Yoshiyuki Soeishi (1762-1826), himself a student of Chatan Yara (1740-1812).



Toshihiro Oshiro, Chief Instructor for the Ryukyu Bujutsu Kenkyu Doyukai in the U.S., and a 7th dan in Yamanni-Chinen-ryu bojutsu.

Masami Chinen was, by profession, a policeman; he spent the Second World War in Taiwan with relatives, where he learned more Chinese kobudo utilizing a variety of traditional weapons. His principle students included Shugoro Nakazato of Shorin-ryu, and Seitoku Higa of the Bugeikan, both of whom have helped to preserve the katas of Yamanni-ryu. However, it was another student, Chogi Kishaba (born 1934), of Goju-ryu lineage, who has continued to teach unadulterated Yamanni-ryu bojutsu and is perpetuating the system in Okinawa.

Yamanni-ryu techniques involve rapid strikes, sometimes also striking the side of the performer to create sharp stops. Chinen is said to have had a large callus on his left side caused by constant daily practice. His heavy staff would quiver noticeably during the brief freezes following strikes. Yamanni-ryu also incorporates rapid figure-8 blocks, high poking strikes aimed at attackers on horseback, and other interesting techniques; once, when Chinen was giving a demonstration with a spear (no staff being handy), he twirled the weapon so fast that the metal tip came flying off and stuck in a wooden post just above the head of a surprised spectator.

Toshihiro Oshiro, the current U.S. headmaster of the system, has remarked that

...As the techniques of Yamanni-ryu are very different from those of other schools of bojutsu, experience in another school may not be helpful, and may even be a hindrance. Diligent practice [in Yamanni-ryu] produces the smooth, continuous, fluid movement that is the signature of the school, and the envy of all weapons enthusiasts.

Chinen's katas included, first of all, **Sakugawa-no-kon**, handed down from Tode Sakagawa a hundred years earlier. **Soeishi-no-kon** and **Choun-no-kon** had been devised by Yoshiyuki Soeishi from Ona village in Shuri. Shichiyataka Chinen had been employed by Soeishi as a manservant; his intense interest in martial arts impressed Soeishi, who took him on as a student. Shichiyataka is said to have composed his own kata, now known as **Chinenshichiyataka-no-kon**, around 1889. Masami Chinen is said to have acquired the **Shimajiri bo** kata from an unknown teacher in the Shimajiri district of southern Okinawa. One of Masami Chinen's favorite katas was **Suuji-no-kon**, which he practiced every day, almost until the day he died. Seitoku Higa believed that the **Sushi-no-kon** kata (Shushi = Sushi = Suuji, same Japanese characters) taught in other styles is a lengthened, modified version of Suuji-no-kon that Sanda Chinen composed especially for demonstrations. There are many versions today, in many systems.

Other Yamanni-ryu katas include **Yonegawa-no-kon** and **Shirotaru-no-kon** (both devised by Sanda Chinen), **Tsuken bo** (composed by Hantaka Tsuken, 1829-1898), **Sunakake-no-kon** ("sunakake" being the technique of scooping or flipping sand in an opponent's eyes), and **Sueyoshi-no-kon**, created by a master of that same name. Little is known of Sueyoshi, other than that he was a student of Sokon Matsumaura, and came from a prominent Bushi family that had fallen on hard times during the Meiji Restoration. Not long ago the base-level variations **Choun-no-kon sho** and **Choun-no-kon dai** were developed at the request of the prefectural government of Okinawa by Chogi Kishaba, and are therefore unique to Yamanni-ryu.

It should be remembered that the mainline Sakugawa kobudo lineages, and the Yamanni-ryu and Matayoshi-ryu styles all have somewhat different ways of wielding the staff, even though they share some of the same kata; the kata therefore exist in a variety of style-specific variations today.

The current, most prominent proponent of Yamanni-ryu in the U.S. is the aforementioned Toshihiro Oshiro, a student of Chogi Kishaba, who was himself a student of Masami Chinen. Kishaba is the only active teacher of the pure Yamanni-ryu system still teaching in Okinawa today. As of 1996, Oshiro was teaching Shorin-ryu karate and Yamanni-ryu kobudo at his two dojos in Redwood City and Chico, California, and also conducted seminars throughout the U.S. He has recently issued, through Tsunami Productions, a beginning-level videotape that covers fundamental techniques, training methods, and the entry-level versions of the katas **Suuji-no-kon**, **Choun-no-kon sho**, **Choun-no-kon dai** and **Ryubi-no-kon**. These are not as advanced as the katas which Timothy Unisa passed on to Kosho Shuri-ryu schools, but make a good, basic introduction to the style.

Yamanni-ryu katas currently practiced in Kosho Shuri-ryu include **Suuji-no-kon sho**, **Suuji-no-kon dai**, **Suuji-no-kon** and **Sakugawa-no-kon sho**. A few students also

practice **Chinenshichiyanaka-no-kon** learned from a California student of Unisa. In Phoenix, the dojo of Ted Rabino also includes Yamanni-ryu katas in its curriculum.

Yamanni-ryu katas have proven to be very successful in open tournament competition, and for that purpose have largely replaced the katas of Robert Trias, at least for Kosho competitors. They are taught in escalating levels of difficulty; for example, a particular poke or stabbing move in a kata will be taught to color-belt students in a simpler variation than that taught to black belt students. Consequently, at the highest level of performance, these katas are very impressive and beautiful to see. It becomes clear why Yamanni-ryu is known as the most “aristocratic” of Okinawan weapons arts.

References

- BISHOP, M. (1989) *Okinawan Karate; Teachers, Styles and Secret Techniques*. A. & C. Black, London, 192 p.
- OSHIRO, T., and HAFF, W.H. (1996) Yamanni-Ryu Bo-Jutsu of Okinawa; an interview with Toshihiro Oshiro. *Dragon Times* newspaper, p. 28-29.
- OSHIRO, T. (1996) *Yamanni ryu Okinawan Bo-Jutsu*. [Videotape] Tsunami Productions, Westlake Village, CA.
- SELLS, J. (1995) *Unante, the Secrets of Karate*. W.M. Hawley, Hollywood, 350 p.
- TRIAS, R.A. (1988) *The Pinnacle of Karate*. Privately published, Phoenix, ca. 450 p.
-

©Wendell E. Wilson (2010)

(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

from [Essays on the Martial Arts](#)

Home: <http://www.mineralogicalrecord.com/wilson/karate.asp>