

Tobin Threadgill: The Meaning of 'Kata' in Wado Ryu Karate

Wadoka unfamiliar with Nihon koryu often associate the word kata with Okinawan budo. Consequently, "kata" is considered predominantly as a solo pursuit where specific movements are connected into a long series of cohesive movements.

This is why teachers like me, familiar with Japanese koryu see Wado ryu as an art utterly separate from Okinawan Te and look askance at a wadoka who mentions bunkai. From our perspective bunkai does not really belong in Wado ryu because the pedagogy is completely different [...from that of Okinawan te]. We are not concerned with bunkai because all kata are paired so bunkai are irrelevant. Wado appears confusing because from the outside it appears that solo kata incorporated directly from Okinawan budo are part of the curriculum. What most wadoka do not realize or were never taught is that the "guts" of the Okinawan solo kata studied in Wado were altered to reflect a pedagogy closer to that of Nihon koryu. Hence kaisetsu and not bunkai.

Similar exercises to Okinawan solo kata are very rare if nonexistent in most Nihon koryu, but when present do not include bunkai because their purpose is related to body mechanics, not combat. Alluding to and confusing this is the fact that another kanji is used to represent these solo exercises in koryu that is more frequently pronounced "gyo" (as in "ningyo" meaning doll and literally translated as "human form") but can also be pronounced "kata". Those unfamiliar with Japanese do not discern the difference between kata and kata, whereas a Japanese reading the differing kanji will understand that Gyo/Kata 形 (in Nihon koryu) implies shape, form or appearance, while "Kei/Kata" 型 implies a more comprehensive tool defined as model, template or prototype.

So.....When someone starts saying tantodori or idori are not really kata but bunkai or application, it tells me that they are Okinawa-fying their understanding of Wado. Specifically, they are defining "kata" in the manner of Okinawan Te, not Nihon Koryu, which should be the case in Wado.

The Gyo/Kata in Shindo Yoshin Ryu are deep studies in body mechanics and movement. The Kai/Kata are all paired and very deep studies of technique, mindset and tactics. Both are much deeper than most people ever come to realize or appreciate. As a koryu budoka, I can say without reservation that the Kihon Kumite in Wado are most definitely NOT applications but Kei/Kata created in the manner of Nihon koryu pedagogy.

Source: Church Stretton Wado Ryu Karate Kai, 14.09.2015