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The Masters who Made Shoshin Nagamine

Introduction

Who created Shoshin Nagamine? It is not a question that one ponders often, but it is an essential question all the same. Everyone who studies Matsubayashi-Ryu knows that he's the founder of our style, that he studied karate diligently throughout his life and that he played a pivotal role in its conveyance to the United States. But how did he become such a great karateka? Who helped to foster his teachings and shape him into the grandmaster that we all remember? The answer lies in three men: Chotoku Kyan, Choki Motobu, and Ankichi Arakaki. Each a great karateman in his own right, all three of these senseis possessed something unique to pass on to Shoshin Nagamine. In order to fully appreciate what they taught him, however, we need to appreciate them as people. We need to understand who they were and how they impacted Nagamine, and once we've done that, we will be able to better understand karate as a whole.

Chotoku Kyan's Background

Chotoku Kyan was born during December of 1870, in a settlement called Gibo village. His family was very well-off. Their status as distant relatives of Shoshi-O, the Ryukyu kingdom's fourth king, earned them a place among the *kemochi*, the aristocratic families of Okinawa. Because of the Kyans' high position in Okinawan society, Chofu Kyan, Chotoku's father, was charged with keeping the Ryukyu king's official seal, the *hanko*, safe. This important appointment led Chofu and a twelve-year-old Chotoku to Tokyo, where they resided for four

years. Here, the younger Kyan studied karate, jujutsu, and kangaku, which was the study of Chinese culture and thought.

Years after returning to Okinawa, the *haihanchiken* prefectures began to replace the established feudal domains. As a result, the aristocratic power, position, and stipend that had rightfully belonged to the Kyans were lost, and the family became nearly destitute as a result. This forced Chotoku, who was around thirty at the time, to leave his home in Naha's Takaraguchi district and move to Makihara, a place in Yomitan Village where, as a descendant of the Sho family, Kyan was able to acquire a small plot of land that had been passed down through his family for generations. After saving up enough money through cart hauling and silkworm cultivating, Kyan managed to build his own house near the Hijabashi bridge, where he spent most of his remaining life. He went on to train many students in karate, some in places such as Kadena, and others in his own front yard in Makihara. Unfortunately, the devastating effects of World War II forced Kyan to leave his home once again and move to another place, this time Ishikawa city. Chotoku Kyan passed away on September 20, 1945, at the age of seventy-six.

Chotoku Kyan's Fighting Style

When it came to actually employing karate, Kyan was no easy challenge. Although he was a very small man, he didn't let his stature stop him from being a great karateman. Relying on his intelligence and competitive spirit, he chose to work around his obstacle, and focused on perfecting his footwork, or *ashi-sabaki*, so that he could outmaneuver his opponents by shifting his body and obtaining a superior position. This led him to develop several effective techniques, the most popular of which consisted of him moving side to side when backed against a wall,

embodying the aforementioned principles. In addition to developing these techniques, Chotoku was a diligent practitioner of kata. His favorites were said to be *Passai, Chinto,* and *Kusanku,* and Kyan mastered their applications as well as the applications of other kata in order to overcome his weakness.

Chotoku Kyan's Teachings

Kyan's teachings combine ethical ideals with practicality. He stated that, before anyone pursued karate, they must first, "achieve inner-stability, if [they] are to ever truly embrace karate throughout [their] entire [lives]. [They must] Find an occupation suitable for [their] character, and one which will provide [them] with the opportunity to pursue karate" (Nagamine 86). Kyan was no stranger to the fact that many people cannot financially afford to pursue karate and karate alone, probably due to his family's fall from grace. As such, his statement not only accounts for the mental well-being of the karateman, encouraging one to pursue a career that they will enjoy, but is also complementary with today's modern world, where joining the workforce and earning money is crucial in providing for one's self and one's family.

Another of Kyan's teachings has to do with the *makiwara,* a padded post karatemen use to practice their strikes and toughen their hands and knuckles. When asked about its importance to karate training, Kyan said that, "If one trains every day, one can actually break boards or tiles effortlessly. However, by the same token, if one discontinues *makiwara* training, one's fist will lose its conditioning" (Tales 86). He goes on further to say that the same is true for karate. If a person trains with diligence and discipline, they will achieve remarkable results. If they don't give much effort or overestimate their physicality, however, their abilities will diminish. As

Kyan further said, “Superior conditioning can only be built on relentless effort. The size of one’s body is irrelevant” (Nagamine 86).

How Chotoku Kyan Impacted Shoshin Nagamine

Shoshin Nagamine first met Kyan while the latter was teaching at the Kadena police station, where Nagamine worked as a police officer. Having wanted to train under Kyan for some time, Nagamine made a point to learn the master’s aforementioned favorite kata (*Passai*, *Chinto*, and *Kusanku*, respectively) from his *senpai*, Taro Shimabuku, and another one of his own teachers, Ankichi Arakaki. Nagamine grew very close with his master as they trained together, and Kyan was very supportive of his law-enforcing student. In May of 1942, when Nagamine opened his very own dojo in Naha’s Sogenji district, a seventy-three year old Chotoku Kyan journeyed all the way from Yomitan village with his assistant, Ansei Arakaki (Ankichi Arakaki’s brother), in order to attend the dojo’s grand opening. Demonstrating both *kata* and *bo* techniques for those in attendance, Kyan’s display moved Shoshin to tears, leaving Nagamine feeling beyond honored that his master had undertaken such a difficult journey in his old age so that he could come support him.

Chotoku Kyan’s teaching greatly impacted how Shoshin Nagamine shaped Matsubayashi-Ryu. The first and most obvious effect is in the form of our rising punch, *jodan tsuki*. Our interpretation of it has come directly from Kyan, who spent hours upon hours working to perfect it, and as such, Nagamine never changed the format. The second effect that Kyan has had on karate is that his interpretation of *Kusanku*, now known as *Yara no Kusanku*, has become the definitive version of the kata in our style, and has been highly regarded by students and senseis alike. Finally, the third and most significant effect that Kyan has had on Matsubayashi-

Ryu is that Shoshin Nagamine's training motto is based directly off of the former's teachings, being:

1. We are all children of God [It is uncertain which deity he spoke of].
2. The boundaries of human achievement lie only in the mind.
3. Seek to always improve the intensity of your training.
4. If he practices five times, I'll do it seven or ten times.
5. Never depend on others. Miyamoto Musashi said "Respect the gods and Buddha too, but never depend on them."
6. Believe in yourself, and embrace the *shingitai* principles.
7. Karate teaches that the real enemy lies within. Get interested in the pursuit not just the possession, the race not just the goal. Effort is everything.
8. Learn to live in harmony with nature and your fellow man, rather than frivolously trying to destroy or dominate them. Travel the middle path.

While some of these concepts have changed and evolved over the years, it is amazing to think what an impact Kyan had on Nagamine and Matsubayashi-Ryu as a whole. Our style would definitely be much different without Kyan's influence, and his training would lead Nagamine to do great things.

Choki Motobu's Background

The third son of Udon Chomo Motobu, Choki Motobu was born in Akahira village during February 1871. Like Chotoku Kyan, Motobu's family was listed among the *kemochi*, and were said to have held a powerful position in the Ryukyu kingdom of old. Unlike Chotoku Kyan, however, whose status as his father's first-born earned him a very substantial childhood, Choki

was practically ignored. All of the parental attention, proper education, and martial arts training were given not to him, but to his oldest brother, Choyu. Despite not receiving martial arts training from his father, however, Motobu grew quite talented physically. As he came to realize this, his bodily ambition grew, and as time went on, he developed a desire to become the strongest man in Okinawa.

Motobu's lack of parental affection led him to develop quite a fierce temper. In his younger days, he was described as being violent, cocky, and temperamental. In Naha's *Tsuji* district (meaning red-light district) he challenged troublemakers after closing hours in an attempt to train himself in the martial arts, never overtly initiating a fight, but never walking away from one either. (Nagamine 94) Due to his exploits, he soon became known as a karate fanatic, and earned himself the nickname "Motobu no Saru" (or "Motobu the Monkey") based on his penchant for the martial arts, his considerable strength, and his unique ability to swing from a tree (Nagamine 94).

While he was determined to become the strongest man in Okinawa, Motobu didn't take karate seriously until his brawl with a man named Itarashiki. Having been five or six years Motobu's senior, Itarashiki easily defeated the cocky monkey, inspiring Choki to devote himself more passionately to karate. Not long afterwards, Motobu apprenticed himself to Kosaku Matsumora. While wary of Motobu's violent nature, as most senseis were at that time, the monkey's unwavering determination caused Kosaku to relent, and he began to teach the man almost every other day. After many years of training with Matsumora, Motobu became the first person to teach karate in the Kansai district and Tokyo's Hongo Dai-machi district, both located on mainland Japan. He returned to Okinawa for a time to study kata and *kobudo* (ancient weapons form), took one final trip to Japan, and then arrived home for the final time in the spring

of 1939. Sensei Motobu peacefully passed away in August 1944, having lived to the age of seventy-four.

Choki Motobu's Fighting Style

While Motobu had amazing talent, what really made his technique devastating was practical experience. His rather unorthodox self-tutoring in the *Tsuji* district helped him become accustomed to street fights and threatening situations not normally encountered within a regular dojo. His training with Matsumora sharpened these skills, and over time, his technique grew very unique and distinct. A notable aspect of Motobu's technique was that he would always chamber his fists around the level of his nipples and right beside his lungs, reminiscent of Chinese boxing. He stated that this was for better defense and attitude. He was also known to position his hands quite high while blocking and striking, which was contrary to other particular styles at the time.

It was from Matsumora that Motobu first learned and gained a respect for kata. The older master taught him the *Naihanchi* katas, as well as *Passai*. As they trained together, Motobu realized something very important: the principles of kata never change. While a strike or block might age and change with time, the applications of that technique do not, a fact that Motobu was very serious about when he trained Shoshin Nagamine. Speaking of applications, one of Motobu's favorite techniques was the *keikoken-zuki*, or forefinger-knuckle punch. To make it as powerful as he could, Motobu would relentlessly hit the *makiwara* again and again. He would also lift the *chishi*, the Okinawan predecessor to a dumbbell, made out of rock and stone, in order to improve his own physical strength.

Choki Motobu's Teachings

Unlike Gichin Funakoshi, who sought to develop karate as an art form, Motobu promoted martial arts as a self-defense tool that was both practical and effective. Probably due to his extensive physical training, Choki understood that everything in karate has its limits. For example, while discussing the concept of kata, he stated that despite their usefulness in training, there is never any time, place, or circumstance where a student should use kata against a professionally-trained fighter (Nagamine 96). This is because katas are, by definition, simulated fighting sequences. Their techniques are intended for the training of an individual in karate, and when those kata techniques are used against another professional karateman, that person will see the sequence for what it is and will have no difficulty in overwhelming that person. It should be noted, however, that Motobu did make an exception for certain street fights, stating that kata could be very effective, "against someone who had no idea of the strategy being used to counter their aggressive behavior" (Nagamine 96).

Another limit Motobu understood was that of height. Like Gichin Funakoshi, Motobu saw that a person's body type could easily determine the outcome of a battle. If a shorter man was pitted against a taller man, for instance, the taller one could use his long limbs to keep the shorter one at a distance and deliver some powerful blows without the risk of being hit. By the same token, the shorter man could use his smaller stature to evade the taller man's strikes, and by getting close to the taller man, could deliver multiple jabs and punches before stepping out, as the taller man's long arms and legs would make it difficult for him to repel the smaller man at such a close distance. Ultimately, the success of both scenarios boils down to technique, strategy, and *maai* (engagement distance). As Motobu himself stated, "Not being able to place oneself in a position superior to the opponent would unquestionably make any subsequent technique virtually ineffective. The utmost attention must be placed on learning to position oneself correctly, and

make the best use of the space or interval created by moving one's body in an effort to effectively subjugate the opponent" (Nagamine 101). Every person has different physical strengths and advantages. Whether or not that person wins depends on them using those advantages correctly.

How Choki Motobu Impacted Shoshin Nagamine

When Shoshin Nagamine first met Choki Motobu, the former was in the middle of a six month study-session at the Metropolitan Police Department in Tokyo. Having learned of Motobu's presence within the city, Nagamine located the master and trained with him at Motobu's dojo in Hongo Dai-machi. Initially, Nagamine found Choki's lessons to be somewhat odd and provocative. Over time, though, he grew to appreciate what Motobu had to teach him. In fact, Shoshin Nagamine developed our style's seven *yakusoku kumite* katas based on the understanding of Shorin-ryu that Motobu had imparted.

During those six months in Tokyo, Nagamine described Choki as being both happy and sad. He stated that while Motobu was delighted at the widespread popularity and practice that karate had achieved, he was disappointed that Tokyo's own kata practice had been almost entirely deformed, diminished, or dissolved. While the city's karate students were learning the katas, they did not truly understand them. They had forgotten the principles behind those katas, and as such, their variants were stiff and lacking technique. Motobu went so far as to claim that the katas in Tokyo had effectively become lifeless, and if a kata lacks life and principle, what purpose does it have?

The ways in which Motobu lived out karate profoundly impacted Nagamine's own life with karate. The two became very close in Motobu's later years, and the latter taught him all of

his favorite techniques. Nagamine even rented his teacher a house in Naha's Sogenji district, where Motobu lived for the rest of his life. Ultimately, our style would not be what it is today without Motobu's influence. His reinterpretation of karate's core principles gave Nagamine a new perspective on karate, and his innovative methods of teaching shaped Shoshin into the grandmaster he became.

Ankichi Arakaki's Background

The third of Nagamine's masters, Ankichi Arakaki, was born in the Shuri district's Akata village in November 1899. His family was quite wealthy, having made a sizeable income as successful liquor merchants, and their monetary prosperity allowed them settle in the village of Tori-hori. It was in Tori-hori that Arakaki would meet his first three senseis: Shinpan Gusukuma, also his primary school teacher; Chomo Hanashiro, also his junior high school teacher; and Choshin Chibana, a young man who lived quite close to Ankichi. Out of the three men, Shoshin Nagamine credited Chibana as the one who made the most impact on Arakaki's young life. Chibana developed the young man's talent, helping him grow in strength, playing a part in Arakaki's future love affair with athletics.

The oldest of eleven children, Arakaki was regarded as quiet, but intelligent. He rose to the top of his class, and was quite bright for his age. Unfortunately, his growing love for physical sports led him to disregard his education as time went on. The more energy he put into sports such swimming, wrestling, and judo, the less effort he put into scholarly pursuits. His ambitions eventually led him to drop out of school in the ninth grade, and with his family's emotional and financial support, he completely dedicated himself to his athletic development. Undertaking even more physical activities—such as cross-country, tree-climbing, mountain-hiking on his toes, and

relentlessly practicing various jump-kicks—Arakaki sought to make his legs muscular and strong. Thanks to his determination, he accomplished this goal, becoming famous for his toe-kick, the *tsumasaki-geri*, and forging for himself, in Nagamine's own words, "toes of steel!" (Nagamine 105)

Arakaki's life following his high-school drop-out was short, but far from dull. Once, when drinking with his friends at a teahouse in *Tsuji*, a twenty-year-old Arakaki accidentally bumped into a far larger man who immediately picked a fight with him. Pushing Ankichi down the stairs, the man leapt at him, grabbing his arm in an attempt to punch him in the face. Having avoided major injury due to his physical condition, Arakaki grabbed the man's own arm, and just as his opponent attempted to strike, Arakaki drove his toes straight into the man's armpit. His aggressor collapsed to the ground unconscious, and six months later Arakaki discovered that the same man had died, reportedly due to the wound that Ankichi had inflicted upon him. Arakaki never went into to that teahouse again. (Nagamine 106)

Despite this incident, Arakaki's life continued on. In 1920, he participated in a song and dance performance hosted by the Shuri Fire Fund Association. When a certain piece of the production, *A Child of Morikawa*, came around, Arakaki performed the monkey *kumi-odori*, or monkey-folk dance. His presentation was brilliant, and became the favorite of his era. He was said to have imitated a monkey so perfectly that he actually took a puff from a lit cigarette after plucking it from an audience member's mouth with his toes.

In 1921, he took up residence in the Kadena district, located in Chatan village. It was in that same year that he met and trained under Chotoku Kyan, who was fifty-five years old at the time. Kyan was a diligent teacher to Arakaki, and Arakaki gave 110% while studying under him.

Arakaki continued to live life to the fullest, until his family's liquor business slumped after World War I. Although he tried to keep it from going bankrupt, the stress ultimately proved too much for him. Ankichi Arakaki died December 28, 1929, at thirty-one years old, of stomach ulcers.

Ankichi Arakaki's Fighting Style

Unlike Kyan and Motobu, Arakaki was far from small, being of average height and weight. His physique was excellent, with Nagamine describing him as, "an Olympic athlete, possess[ing] great coordination," (Nagamine 104). Many Okinawans considered Arakaki to be on-par with the *yokozuna*, the grand champions of the island. While taking part in a sumo tournament at age 19, he proved these Okinawans correct when he defeated Kamiya of Yomitan village, a massive man in his own right, by outmaneuvering his opponent with his strong, limber legs. In fact, Arakaki's strong legs actually played a large part in his rise to fame. As previously mentioned, he was known throughout the island for his *tsumasaki-geri* toe-kick, which could penetrate even the strongest of defenses. Once, when his younger brother Ansuke was pressed for money, he offered Ankichi the chance to kick him for a price of ten yen, which, in those days, was enough for a spending spree in *Tsuji's* red-light district. Although he believed his brother's kick wouldn't harm him, Ankichi's *tsumasaki-geri* devastated the younger Arakaki's right thigh. Despite restraining the power of his kick, Arakaki left Ansuke with a painful bruise, which led to a fever that landed Ansuke in the hospital. Many years later, when Ansuke was eighty years old, he still bore the scar of his brother's kick, a testament to Ankichi's strength, talent, and skill.

Ankichi Arakaki's Teachings

Despite his physical prowess, Arakaki was, by nature, an entertainer. In addition to being a skilled karateman and sportsman, he was adept in Ryukyu music, dance, calligraphy, and poetry. This earned him a reputation of being a man of great culture, and his interest in the arts caused those arts to bleed into his karate teachings. As Arakaki grew more cultured, he came to believe that a true karateman must develop a balance between his physical and mental attributes if he was to succeed. If they focused too much on the physical side of karate, their personality would be lifeless and barren, and they themselves would be unbalanced. Concerning those who focus too much on bodily strength, he is quoted as saying, "Sadly enough, they often become gluttons and/or drunks. Embracing martial arts means cultivating alternative pursuits as well. This refers to establishing a balance between the physical and the mental. Cultivating such pursuits prevents one from becoming a drunkard and helps develop a fertile personality" (Nagamine 110).

While Arakaki himself had many alternative interests (most of which have been mentioned here), his primary cultural pursuit was dance. He was very proficient in it, and was dedicated to the art almost as much as he was to karate. Blending the two together once again, the qualities of diligence and commitment that made Arakaki such a great karateman were only bolstered by the tremendous resilience that dance required. Once, three days before the August 15th water-pot festival was supposed to begin, Arakaki came to Master Ansei Misato and asked if he would teach him *shudon* dance so that he could perform it for the audience in attendance. Misato thought that such an endeavor was impossible, given that there were only three days left until the festival. Nevertheless, Arakaki insisted, and so the two trained together in preparation for the event. Not only did Arakaki learn the steps, but he actually mastered them in a span of only five hours! He continued to train for much of the next day, and when it came time for him

to perform, he executed the dance exquisitely. This further demonstrates the dedication that Arakaki possessed, and shows students that just as karate can enhance peoples' lives, the pursuits that people make in life can enhance their karate.

How Ankichi Arakaki Impacted Shoshin Nagamine

Nagamine's tenure as Arakaki's student was brief, but impactful. They first met when the former was twenty and the latter was twenty-eight, having been introduced to one another by Taro Shimabuku. Nagamine regarded Arakaki's lessons as the "modern approach to teaching karate" (Nagamine 108). During his time as Nagamine's teacher, Arakaki helped Shoshin to comprehend his methods by using scientific explanations to explain their practicality. He also quoted many historical facts, and shared several martial arts stories in order to get his points across.

Despite only studying Arakaki for a year, Nagamine made a point to memorize his sensei's three theses of karate, which are summarized as follows:

1. Establish financial security first before you dedicate your life to karate-do.
2. Mental resilience is just as important as physical mastery in karate, and is vital to the mastery of the form.
3. Dance and karate are similar, but not the same. Dance is simply an art form; karate arose from man's need to defend himself.

These theses helped shape the more philosophical side of Matsubayashi-Ryu, as well as the methods in which a person should mentally approach martial arts. As stated previously, most people do not possess the funds to make karate the one-and-only center of their life. Similar to

dance and acting, it does not make for an easy career, with the future being difficult to decipher and arduous to navigate. If one is to dedicate themselves to karate's "enormous legacy" (Nagamine 108), as Arakaki put it, they must make sure that they have the finances to proceed, as well as the funds to bounce back from any mishaps that occur.

As for the mental resilience stated in the second thesis, the necessity for it can best be described in Arakaki's own words, recalled by Nagamine himself: "Arakaki Sensei said that people who look down on, or ridicule, [Okinawan] culture as being somewhat backward by nature…such people have called our local (folk) musicians *utaguwaa narayun*, or people who waste their time studying unimportant music; calligraphers have been labeled *jiiguwaa narayun*, or people who waste their time studying unimportant writing. Hence, it is with this in mind that I believe one needs to establish more than just a physical mastery of karate-do. If one is to understand, and bear this common prejudice, an inner fortitude becomes a necessary perquisite" (Nagamine 108). Essentially, there are always going to be people who will mock karate and those who practice it. It is an inevitability. In order to become a successful karate student, one must keep this in mind, and make an effort to do their very best without surrendering to the negative opinions and voices around them.

Finally, concerning dance and karate, Arakaki knew better than anyone that their similarities did not make them the same. It is true that both require many of the same qualities. Skill, technique, determination, resilience, and an open mind are all what make both a dancer and a karateman great. However, their natures and reasons for being are vastly different. Dance must be clean and crisp in order to be beautiful; it exists to display that beauty, and to tell a story. Karate must be clean in order to defend; crisp in order to protect. Beauty and presentation are secondary compared to speed, efficiency, and precision. In short, it is not wrong for karate to

look artful, but artfulness must never eclipse the purpose of self-defense that karate was created for.

Nagamine regarded Arakaki's methods as the modern approach to teaching karate-do. He persevered in his own style, and came to employ them himself. Ankichi's routines helped Nagamine to create a bridge between the old way of karate and the new, allowing it to evolve without sacrificing its necessities. His experience in the arts also helped to bring about a balance between the efficiency and the inherent artfulness of karate, promoting it as a way of life without sacrificing its strengths. His impact on karate was great, and his impact on Nagamine helped the latter to fully embrace karate, as well as life itself.

Conclusion

Now that we've grasped their lives, teachings and impacts, we can understand karate better as a whole. Chotoku Kyan was born to a wealthy family, fell into poverty, and rose from it to become a teacher and mentor for karate students throughout his village. He inspired Nagamine's training motto, and his interpretation of *Kusanku* is still employed by our style today. The neglect Choki Motobu experienced in his youth led him to become a street brawler with a violent temper, but his training under Kosaku Matsumora shaped him into a true karateman who helped karate to thrive in Japan. Our seven *yakusoku kumite* were founded upon his understanding of karate. Finally, Ankichi Arakaki was a man of the arts whose diligence and determination made him not only a great karateman, but an excellent dancer as well. He realized that a true karateman requires balance between his mentality and physicality, and his modern approach to teaching karate helped shape the more philosophical aspects of Matsubayashi-Ryu.

Thanks to their impact, Shoshin Nagamine was able to create a style that enhanced the body while also caring for the mind, allowing us all to become great karatemen as a result.

Works Cited

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