

***JOURNAL OF
CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY***

RESEARCH ARTICLE

VOLUME III

2012

ISSUE 1

**The Japanization of Karate?:
Placing an Intangible Cultural Practice**

Noah C.G. Johnson

Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

The Japanization of Karate?: Placing an Intangible Cultural Practice

Noah C.G. Johnson*

Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

ABSTRACT

Although Okinawa is now under the political administration of Japan, its history has been shaped under the influence of Chinese, Japanese and, most recently, American military domination. Moreover, both Okinawans and the Japanese of the mainland, recognize that Okinawa is differentiated from the rest of Japan by its individual history and distinct cultural practices. One of the most recognizable products of Okinawan culture is karate, at base a martial art but also a cultural practice inscribed with relationships and ideas inherited from wider Okinawan society. At the beginning of the 20th-century this practice was brought to mainland Japan. This paper examines how localized cultural practices, such as karate, might be modified when transitioning to different social contexts, and what such modifications indicate about the nature of cultural practices. Through modification, Okinawans were able to incorporate their martial art into the traditions of the Japanese mainland. In cooperation, the Japanese government sought to assimilate the Okinawan people and enfold karate into their promotion of the imagined homogeneity of Japan. The active agency of both parties reveals that this interaction was a negotiation between the samurai core-subculture of Japan and the karate practitioners of Okinawa, rather than simply a one-sided assimilation.

* I would like to acknowledge the great help that my advisor, Scott Schnell, has offered to me in comments on this paper and in my academic career.

INTRODUCTION

Karate is popularly held to be a form of unarmed combat that coalesced in Okinawa, (known then as the Ryukyu kingdom,) from influences of Chinese and Japanese origin, which were combined with the Okinawan indigenous art of *te*, or “hand”. This amalgam developed through a “sustained cultural cross-pollination with Japan and China... throughout Ryukyu history” (Mottern 2001: 240) due, in large part, to Okinawa's geographical positioning between China and Japan, and its mercantile trade network that stretched as far as Java (Kerr 2000). Though the finer points of karate's origin are disputed, this encompassing description is the framework that will be employed in examining the history of the art before it became the object of historical record.

In the early part of the 20th-century, karate began to establish itself in mainland Japan, (meaning in this case the islands in the Japanese archipelago aside from the Ryukyu Islands and Hokkaido). It has since that time come to be understood by many outside of Japan as a Japanese martial art, rather than one that is specifically Okinawan. This paper takes up the contested nature of karate among its practitioners, who may variously describe karate as: 1) an Okinawan martial art, 2) a Japanese martial art or 3) a Japanese martial art differentiated by its Okinawan origin. The broad spectrum of interpretations ascribed to karate derives from the art's intersection with the ways that Okinawa and the people of Okinawa are viewed in relation to the Japanese mainland. The following work will seek to untangle some of the historical antecedents for the varied perspectives given to the practice of karate.

Japan is known for its martial arts throughout the world and, as Chan states, “apart from electronics, cars and cuisine, [martial] arts represent the greatest export of Japan and are seen by their practitioners worldwide as not merely emblematic of a culture, but derived directly from that culture's history and spiritual philosophy” (2000: 69). Karate may be positioned within the constellation of Japanese martial arts, but can be represented as such only through the flattening of any difference between Okinawan and Japanese culture or through the modification of the practice itself. In order for karate to be considered a Japanese martial art, a shift of framing from the Okinawan culture and its traditions to those of mainland Japan- a cultural *translation* of the practice- was required. The introduction of elements from the Japanese martial tradition, and a contraction of the perceived difference between the two cultures and their respective populaces, combined to allow karate to establish itself in mainland Japan.

This process was not merely the appropriation of a cultural tradition by an invading and dominating foreign presence in the form of the Japanese government. In fact, this translation was also facilitated through acts of individual agency by Okinawans who willingly adopted Japanese martial traditions and identified themselves as Japanese as well as Okinawan. The interesting dynamic of this negotiation in translating the Okinawan art of karate to Japan, a culture with its own rich martial traditions, can be described as either wildly successful or disquietingly effective.

While some maintain the autonomy and cultural rooting of karate as an indigenous art of Okinawa, those in the Japanese government view karate as a Japanese cultural tradition, as is consistent with their view of Okinawa as part of Japan both legally and culturally. The Japanese government includes karate within the constellation of activities covered under the “cultural visa”, which affords visitors an extended stay in Japan if they are there for cultural studies (Ko & Yang 2008). In doing so, the Japanese government sends the clear signal that karate is Japanese, and can be employed as an entrance for visitors into what it views as quintessential Japanese culture, or as an ambassadorial practice when exported abroad.

For karate to have become emblematic of Japanese culture, even if only to the government of Japan, it follows that either Japanese culture would have to have shifted to align with karate's traditions and ideals (informed by its setting in Okinawan culture), or vice versa. Through an examination of the historical relationship between Okinawa and Japan, and specifically that of karate in the early part of the 20th-century, we can elaborate on the practices adapted, removed or adopted in the translation of karate from Okinawa to Japan. Furthermore, we can ask what the ramifications of such changes would be upon the cultural practice itself and how such ramifications may affect the placement of karate within a cultural context.

A CONTESTED ESSENCE: THE NATURE OF KARATE

Though often viewed as a only a system of physical sequences, for many practitioners karate is not only a bodied practice but also, “exists within a framework of ideas, knowledges, beliefs, and practices drawn from the cultures in which it appears” (Krug 2001: 395; see also Donohue 1993; Friman 1996; and Ashkenazi 2002). To many, the practice of karate is not merely the acquisition of physical skill and ability but also a path to self-improvement and an identification to a cultural and symbolic practice as a component of their self-identity (Donohue 1993).

Even when Keenan remarks that “Martial arts can easily be taken out of their East Asian context, shorn of all spiritual or humanistic value, and practiced merely for athletic prowess or street-smart fighting” (1989: 285), he does so with the implication that something is lost in the process. Such a shift is not merely a slight modification of practice, but a change so dramatic and fundamental that it transforms the entire enterprise- divorcing it from its antecedent irrevocably, and creating something different. This poses the question “what can be changed in a cultural practice before it is no longer a variant, but rather an entirely different practice all together?”

If, as Donohue contends, “Martial arts organizations are... essentially symbolic vehicles in that they enmesh participants in a constellation of actions and ideas which create a sense of identity and community” (1992: 88), then we are faced with the possibility that though remarkably able to adapt to new cultural surroundings, such a symbolically intermeshed practice runs the risk of quite easily becoming ungrounded in its 'original' culture. The central importance of such symbolic, structural and procedural practices, as they relate to this paper, are predicated upon the understanding that karate is the expression of cultural ideals that typify Okinawan culture. To inspect this claim requires a properly framed understanding of the proposed origins of karate, and the historical setting in which the practice arose.

Cosmogony: Origins of Karate

The origins of the art known as karate were not recorded in detail, but we are offered some information through oral tradition and occasional written references. From the fragments gathered, an official, though contested, narrative has emerged:

Karate is a creole of practices that were combined together on the island of Okinawa. Originally referred to as *te*, karate combined indigenous fighting techniques with knowledge and practices from China, Japan and possibly from Thailand, the Philippines and other countries in the area. However, the major influence was Chinese. (Krug 2001: 396)

According to this most inclusive of theories (including the possibility of influences from India, Korea and other countries as well as those listed by name), karate is an amalgamation of practices and techniques, from all corners of Asia, that were incorporated into the Okinawan art of *te*. In contrast, Mottern contends, “Karate should not be confused with *te*. The original name for karate was *Toudi*, or *Tote* (Tang hand), denoting its roots in the Chinese martial arts” (2001: 366). Though the connection of *Toudi* with Chinese martial arts is well established, it is believed by some commentators that *te* had a distinct cosmogony, springing from interactions between the Okinawan ruling class and feudal Japan (Mottern 2001).

Toudi and *te* may have shared the islands of Okinawa, while remaining distinct, stratified and separately connected to China or Japan respectively. Alternatively, they may have been sister disciplines that borrowed from the same sources and intermingled as they co-developed in the Ryukyu Islands. Though the definitive lineage of the art that became karate is contested, the interaction and cross-pollination of combat practices in the region is one phenomenon that almost all commentators agree led to the coalescence of karate (Donohue 1993; Krug 2001; Mottern 2001; Madis 2003). It should be remembered that there was trade and travel between all three kingdoms (Ryukyu, China, and Japan) and that, in such interactions, cultural practices were shared in addition to trade goods.

From its outset, karate was not merely the product of one nation or one culture, but rather the outcome of interactions in East Asia between groups sharing frequent and prolonged contact. Though this suggests that karate is a practice separate from culture, such an assumption would be a mistake. That karate was drawn from many sources does not diminish the importance of *place* when we speak of the formation of karate. An intangible cultural item like karate is not created by a certain culture (in this case the Okinawans) out of whole cloth, but is rather drawn from sources both in that culture's history and in the exposure that particular culture has to other ways of doing.

Though karate did not spring wholly formed on the Ryukyu Islands, it is not necessary for it to have done so to be considered an Okinawan cultural practice. The question of ultimate genesis misplaces the importance of a cultural practice on its *origin* rather than on its *relation* to the society and culture in which it is practiced. Through whatever channels it traveled, karate became an Okinawan cultural practice when it was recognized by that culture as indicative of their group identity- when it could successfully bear, transmit and embody their conceptions of shared identity.

It is this relation to Okinawan society, rather than its origin within that society, that makes karate an important piece of Okinawa's intangible cultural heritage. This relationship is constituted by the overlaying of cultural beliefs and process onto the apparatus of the practice (i.e. the human body), and its limitations (Csordas 1990). This combination of objective parameters and subjective motivations creates meanings and purposes within karate that are unique to Okinawa. But this does not foreclose the possibility of other ways of conducting the practice in different cultural settings.

Historical Setting: Okinawa

The Ryukyu Kingdom was not a nation apart, but rather a participant in cultural exchange with its neighbors, most notably the Japanese and Chinese. If Okinawa was able to maintain a relative autonomy even though it was the site of exogenous cultural influences combining or playing off of the host community, then is it any surprise if karate, as a practice, defies attempts to be classified as simply Japanese, Chinese or Okinawan in descent? Krug's positioning of

Okinawa eloquently stresses the ideas of exchange and flux, but he ascribes all agency to the foreign influences on Okinawa:

Caught in the middle of the turbulent history of Sino-Japanese relationships, invaded during the Japanese civil wars and in 1945 by the Allied Forces, Okinawa has been constantly transformed and its cultural practices threatened by the waves of different cultures that washed over the island. Thus, from its inception, karate was never a single thing but an evolving set of practices linked to local knowledge as well as prevailing cultural beliefs. It was, as well, actively evolving in many directions and idiolects or styles (Krug 2001: 396).

The syncretic nature of karate (Donohue 1993) is in large part linked to the different periods of intense cultural interaction (an academic euphemism for invasion and occupation and/or domination in this context), between Ryukyu and China, or Ryukyu and Japan at different times. These interactions became more regularized, following the consolidation of mainland Japan by Ieyasu Tokugawa.

At this time, Japan and China both viewed Ryukyu as one of their vassal kingdoms (Kerr 2000), and in the years directly following the consolidation of mainland Japan in 1603, the Satsuma clan of Kyushu launched an offensive upon the Ryukyu Kingdom in the name of the Tokugawa Shogunate. In 1609, the Satsuma clan invaded the Ryukyu islands and captured Shuri Castle on the island of Okinawa in May of the same year (Friman 1998). This military action and the beginning of formal oversight by the Japanese mitigated the influence that China had previously exerted upon the Ryukyu Kingdom. Mottern contends that following this conquest, there were many routes for Japanese martial practice and implements to enter the Okinawan culture and lead to the development of *te*, perhaps through Ryukyu vassal lords traveling to Kyushu to acquire military training by the Satsuma (2001: 288).

In contrast to this view- in what Tessa Morris-Suzuki calls 'the maintenance of difference'- the Japanese overlords instructed their Ryukyu subjects to wear their "distinctive brocade robes, strange headgear" and carry their "Chinese weaponry" so that they could not "be mistaken for Japanese" (1996: 84) when visiting the royal court. Clearly, if the Okinawans had "Chinese Weaponry", and were known for having such weaponry, then this casts some suspicion on the claims that the weapons system within *te* comes from distinctively Japanese origins. On the other hand and in support of Mottern's contentions, the Ryukyu emissaries from Okinawa had to be instructed to bring their distinctive clothing and weapons. For some reason, the members of the Shogunate felt they must take deliberate steps to prevent the Okinawans from showing up with Japanese weapons and in Japanese clothing, thus challenging the whole demarcation between superior and subordinate cultures. This would suggest that, even at this time, the difference between *Japanese* and *Okinawan* was negotiable.

Culture and nations are often envisioned as monolithic, enduring, structural entities that socialize and normalize their participants. Anthropologists have brought this understanding of structural entities into question (Featherstone 1990; Appadurai 1990), arguing that such structural entities are, upon closer inspection, shown to be items in flux. When such constructs are viewed as malleable frameworks the way that participants make use of these frameworks, adapting and modifying them to their own ends, comes into focus.

CULTURAL FRAMING: KARATE IN OKINAWA

Regardless of whether one adopts a stratified view of *te* versus *Toudi*, or otherwise, during the 19th-century the diverse variants of martial practice in Okinawa coalesced into two main schools of karate. Conventionally, these two styles were referred to as Shorin-ryu and Shorei-ryu respectively (Mottern 2001). At this time these practices were not seen as karate but rather still as *Toudi*, and the term karate was only circulated in Japan after a demonstration in 1916 by the Okinawan karate master, Funakoshi Gichin (Mottern 2001).

From this perspective, the art of “karate” is taken to be quite clearly a creation of the 20th-century and suggests that karate is a relatively modern invention rather than an ancient martial art (Chan 2000). On the other hand, what has become known as karate may only have been *recognized* under that name in the 20th-century, whereas before, the 'same' practice went under the name of *Toudi* or *te*. Regardless of the name, the physical sequences of karate set it apart from the martial practices of Japan, making it a foreign martial art to the Japanese of the mainland. More importantly, it was the structural and procedural differences that karate, as a cultural practice developed in an Okinawan context, would have to overcome to successfully spread to Japan:

Karate on Okinawa was taught in an informal manner. Students were assigned tokuigata (individual forms) at the discretion of the instructor. No ranking system existed, so there were no established criteria for advancement. Students were either sempai (senior) or kohai (junior). No recognizable uniform (gi) was used. Karate was indiscriminately referred to as di, bu (martial arts), or Toudi. This individualism was alien to the Japanese concept of wa (harmony). Japanese martial arts were structured around the ryûha system propagated by the Dainippon Butokukai. A ryûha included an historical continuity, methodological transmission, and pedagogical style. (Mottern 2001: 235)

Here we see clearly some of the ways that Okinawan culture should not be historically equated to Japanese culture. Though the Japanese government has put considerable effort into conforming the Okinawan people to the ideals of the Japanese mainland (Morris-Suzuki 1996; Amdur 2001; Madis 2003), the two populations historically belonged to separate political entities with distinct cultural heritages.

It is true that today Okinawans share many beliefs, ideals and practices with the mainland Japanese, but at the beginning of the 20th-century, before many of the Japanese assimilation programs had been established, the Okinawan culture and the practice of karate would have appeared alien to the Japanese from the mainland. As Ko & Yang have remarked upon the transmission of Asian martial arts to the West, “In collectivist cultures, the self is construed in interdependent terms as a connected, relational entity that is expected to fit in by maintaining interpersonal relationships and group harmony. On the other hand, in individualistic cultures, the self is construed as an independent entity” (2008: 14).

Due to proximity and cultural exchange, it would be a mistake to assume that Okinawa was an “individualistic culture” in the same sense that Ko & Yang are using to describe Western cultures of the present day. Still, the intimate, pragmatic practices of Okinawan karate required fundamental changes to transition to Japan where they were ritualized, formalized and militarized. These modifications were not always carried out at the direct order of the Japanese government. Often, they were in response to the observations of individual Okinawan masters

who felt that changes were necessary for the further dissemination of the art, including recognition of karate's legitimacy by the populations of mainland Japan (Mottern 2001).

Itosu Anko and Miyagi Chojun were influential in the simplification of the system and its dissemination through the development of their series of *Pinan* and *Gekesai dai* kata, respectively. In 1901, Itosu introduced karate into the physical education program at the Shuri Jinjo Shôgakkô (Elementary School). "His continued efforts on behalf of karate eventually led to its being established as a part of the physical education curriculum throughout the Okinawan school system" (Mottern 2001:245). Though examples such as Itosu and Chojun illustrate the role of individual agency in modifying karate, the structural setting that the Okinawan art found itself in *vis-a-vis* the government and culture of mainland Japan should not be neglected.

STRUCTURE: KARATE AND THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT

According to Amdur, "During the 1870's... Language, Religion and especially education were brought under the control of the [Japanese] government, and the newly created public school system became a great propaganda machine" (2001: 699). Part of this approach to child development included the belief that students should be taught the martial arts. It was the government's position that martial arts instruction would lead to healthier students that would make better citizens. Moreover, such training would instill in them a martial spirit- making them ideal conscripts for military service (Amdur 2001; Madis 2003).

Problematic for education officials was the possibility that the classical disciplines of Japanese martial arts were not suitable for instruction in the public school setting, due to their demands of loyalty to the discipline itself rather than to the Emperor (Amdur 2001). For mainland Japan it was not until 1911 that "judo and kendo, both Meiji creations were introduced into boys' schools" (Amdur 2001:699). On Okinawa, the introduction of martial arts into the school system happened much earlier (1901). Despite the importance of karate in Okinawan culture, which eased its incorporation into the educational system a decade ahead of the mainland, here too, simplification and modification of the art was required. Interestingly, due no doubt to the political climate of Japanese territories at the time, "Itosu Anko... embraced the promotion of karate as a means of developing Japanese spirit (*yamato damashi*)" (Madis 2003: 187).

Itosu's endeavors should be set against the politico-cultural background of a Japan that, though it did not view Okinawans as fully Japanese (Friman 1998; Hudson 1999), was compelled by its imperialist aspirations (Befu 1993). Though previously viewed as subordinate and differentiated from the Japanese of the mainland, in the build-up to war, it became more important to the Japanese government to incorporate or assimilate the Okinawan people via nationalist programs. Following the extension of universal conscription to Okinawa in 1898, a Japanese physician examining Okinawan army conscripts "saw evidence of the positive physical benefits of practicing *te*, [and] it was made part of the local school curriculum" (Donohue 1993: 108). Friman reports that this step "was followed in the early 1910's by the introduction of a broader socialization program aimed at encouraging greater Okinawan support for Japan, and a relaxation of the use of physical requirements that had limited the number of Okinawan conscripts" (1998: 14).

In this conversation between government policy and Okinawan tradition, karate underwent changes that some felt were necessary for the survival and dissemination of the art. Others may have been troubled by the way that karate was seeming to get swept up into Japanese ideas of nationalism- ideas that they may not have identified with, not identifying as

Japanese at all, but rather as Okinawans. Yet, individuals are not absolutely powerless within the structures of their society. Changes can as easily come from the motivations and actions of participants making use of the frameworks provided to them by the structure, as from the structure itself.

AGENCY: OKINAWAN MASTERS AND THE TRANSLATION OF KARATE

Though it is certain that some Japanese people had already been exposed to karate, the demonstrations in 1916 of Okinawan karate master, Funakoshi Gichin in Tokyo, and his decision to stay in Japan in the early 1920's (Mottern 2001), signal the opening of the period when most Japanese would become familiar with karate for the first time. By 1922 Funakoshi Gichin was teaching karate at the Okinawan dormitory of Japan University in Tokyo. By 1935 he had established more than 30 *dojo*, or training halls, mostly aligned with educational institutions (Madis 2003: 187). He was also instrumental in convincing the government to make karate part of the curriculum in Japanese schools in 1927, as it had been in Okinawa for over two decades (Krug 2001). As Itosu and Miyagi had simplified the system in order to make it more appropriate for introduction into public schools in Okinawa, so too did Funakoshi:

“At this time, numerous techniques and teachings of karate were systematically removed from the *bunkai* (explanations) of kata and from the *kihon waza* (basic techniques). The system was reduced to punches, blocks, kicks, and weapons, while advanced techniques were considered unsuitable for school children or the general public. This deskilled karate became the public face of the art” (Krug 2001: 397).

These changes should not be characterized as simply a process of subtraction as techniques were pared away. As Moening states, “With the introduction from Okinawa to Japan, karate developed by incorporating new ideas from young Japanese students. The university clubs, which were often Shotokan schools of Funakoshi, played an especially important role in karate's rapid development” (2011: 10). One of Funakoshi's students, Nakayma Masatoshi, reported, “My seniors... knew only kata; it was the only thing Master Funakoshi taught them... [But] all of us had studied judo and kendo... [which] were centered around combat... So, the idea of combat was deeply ingrained in us... and we all really needed the combative aspect that karate lacked” (Hassell 2007: 43).

In response to his students requests, Funakoshi introduced *jiyu-kumite*, or sparring, into the practice of karate in Japan (Krug 2001). This represented a departure from the *kata* centric, or pattern-practice focused, nature of karate as performed in Okinawa until that time. This change also opened the art up for sportification and competition, and it is credited for greatly increasing the popularity of karate in Japan (Krug 2001; Friman 1996).

Funakoshi was quite aware of the judo and kendo sport culture that his Japanese students had grown up in and were motivated by in their requests for live competition. From judo he adopted the ranking system of colored belts and degrees of black belts, as well as the basic uniform or *gi* (Mottern 2001). Before adopting uniforms, karate practitioners in Okinawa simply practiced in their everyday clothes. In many cases they practiced in nothing other than their underwear because of the oppressive heat and humidity of their tropical island home (Madis 2003). As Donohue points out, the significance of the uniform is of a highly symbolic nature, in that it is, “a statement of individual conformity and identification with the group” (1993: 113).

Perhaps no one else at this time understood the importance of the connection between the uniform, group identity and physical exertion better than Yabu Kentsu:

“A former officer in the Japanese army, Yabu [Kentsu] introduced many procedures still practiced in karate schools worldwide... These innovations included... bowing upon entering the training hall, lining up students in order of rank, seated meditation (a Buddhist practice), sequenced training, answering the instructor with loud acknowledgment, closing class with formalities similar to opening class. Most of these procedures already had been implemented in judo and kendo training and reflect a blending of European militarism and physical culture with Japanese neo-Confucianism, militarism and physical culture. However, these procedures did not exist in China, or in Okinawan karate before Yabu” (Madis 2003: 189).

Donohue points to “the ritual of the bow and the recitation of *dojo kun* (the precepts of the *dojo* normally recited at the end of a training session)” (1993: 113) as key markers of a ritualized behavior that serves to create a privileged space in the *dojo*. These practices also signal a distinct shift from the karate practiced on Okinawa as described earlier (Friman 1996, Krug 2001, Mottern 2001) and mark the beginning of what is thought of as 'karate' today. Through the adoption of the sport and militaristic elements, as well as the spiritual philosophies of Japanese martial culture, karate was able to find a place in the culture of mainland Japan. Often supported by and disseminated through the government, these adaptations of the practice found their way back to Okinawa and were largely embraced both by masters and students. To this day, in Okinawa as well as Japan, students wear the *gi* and colored belts, line up in order of rank and drill in precise lines.

In the 1920's, “Funakoshi Gichin suggested to the karate research group at Keio University that the character for “Tang/China”, be replaced with that of “empty””(Mottern 2001: 241), but at that time he had found little support. In 1936, a collection of karate instructors who had followed Funakoshi's lead and had emigrated to the mainland, gathered together to discuss karate's future at the invitation of Ota Chofu of the Ryukyu Shinpo (Ryukyu Press). A decade or so after Funakoshi's suggestion, they determined that it would be best to change the characters used to write “karate” from “Tang Hand/China Hand” to “Empty Hand” (Mottern 2001).

This move was largely precipitated by and in recognition of Japanese animosity and contempt for China at the time. In addition, by changing one character, “The term *karate* was thus elevated to the metaphysical realm by embracing reference not only to unarmed combative applications, but to Buddhist and Daoist concepts of transcendent spirituality as well” (Mottern 2001: 242). Central to the continuation and success of karate was this decision to align the art more appropriately with Japanese ideologies, particularly those of a spiritual nature. Without such concatenation of elements karate may never have found purchase in mainland Japan.

TRANSLATION OF A CULTURAL PRACTICE: KARATE IN JAPAN

The adoption of uniforms and standard ranking, the development of militaristic and sporting practices, and a purposeful effacement of the art's origin (Krug 2001), were all programs aimed at making karate popular with the Japanese. In doing so, those Okinawan masters responsible for such changes sought to make the art something more in line with the Japanese martial art tradition, or *budo*. The acceptance of these changes by practitioners in Okinawa (both instructors and students), who were not themselves engaged in training with Japanese from the

mainland, signals their own role in such modifications of the art. Either as actors with their own agency who found value in these changes, or as the victims of structural forces that capitulated to the assimilation programs of the Japanese government, these practitioners modified their practice to align with the ideologies of mainland Japan.

Despite these efforts and compromises, karate was viewed as a foreign martial art, largely because the Japanese government (as well as many Japanese people) still did not consider Okinawans to be fully Japanese (Friman 1998). This foreign connotation was not merely a neutral, geographic marker to the Japanese of the mainland, but was also wrapped up in the stereotypes applied everywhere to a minority culture. As Donohue notes, “Karate had often been thought to be the art of thugs and the lower class- as a “foreign” art with none of the pedigree of kendo or even judo” (1993: 109).

As outlined above, the course of action that proved most successful was to adapt the philosophy and the practice of the art into a more “Japanese” format that would be recognizable both to state authorities and to prospective students. “Another part of the molding process involved in making karate a Japanese system was when the Japanese instilled their own martial ethics into the newly formed karate-do systems, ones that were, in part, drawn from traditional forms of the samurai along with the Bushido code. This was done to inject what could be considered more of a Japanese spirit into karate-do” (Rosenbaum, 2002: 14).

The traditional forms of the samurai class were held to be of great antiquity, having a history into the early part of the millennium- but such a characterization is an oversimplification (Goodman 2005). It is true there was a samurai culture for centuries in Japan and that it powerfully shaped and influenced life and culture in certain ways (Nakane 1981). Importantly, the influence of the samurai class in Tokugawa Japan owes more to the status of the samurai class as what Sugimoto calls, a “core subculture”, than to the ubiquity of the samurai lifestyle (2003:12).

Due to the power of their position politically and economically, core subcultures, such as the samurai of the Tokugawa Era, are able to project their idealized version of what society should be into the everyday world, where society is constituted. Through a near monopoly of legal and legislative powers, media channels, and even military force, a core subculture is able to frame the cultural discussion and shape it to their own desires or beliefs. (Sugimoto 2003). The extent to which core subcultures are able to accomplish such a task is connected to their ability to minimize those subcultures within their society- either through compliance or capitulation- that do not come from the same cultural traditions or perspectives (Goodman 2005).

Thus, though the samurai class was the most dominant subculture both politically and culturally in Tokugawa Japan, the samurai lifestyle was lived by only a few (Sugimoto 2003). Interestingly the core subculture of the samurai class obtained its widest currency not when its political power was ascendant, but rather when it was on the decline and the very class identity of the samurai verged on extinction (Ueno 1987). It was not until the Meiji Restoration, when the Tokugawa regime was seemingly dismantled, that the samurai class was able to effectively project their ideological influence further afield than ever before by offering a viable way to the other subcultures of Japan to adopt the samurai lifestyle. As Ueno so elegantly puts it, “Democratization meant not the “commoner-zation “ of the samurai class, but the “samuraization” of the commoners” (Ueno 1987: S78).

The samurai class was abolished, as were the other classes that ordered Tokugawa Japan, but the samurai class, not willing to give up their ethos, opted instead to share it. Rather than allowing democratization to make all Japanese people into commoners they opened the way for

all Japanese people to become warriors. Many commoners seeing the benefit of adopting the mores and norms of the former ruling class as a way to increase their own cultural status, embraced these changes (Ueno 1987). So it became possible for “the samurai spirit, kamikaze vigor, and the soul of the Yamato race... [to be] promoted as representing Japan's national culture” (Sugimoto 2003: 12).

This “samurai spirit” is not only emblematic of the Japanese, but has been presented as one characteristic amongst many that are both unique and universal to all Japanese. Such a position constitutes a form of discourse known as *Nihonjinron*, meaning “discussions about the Japanese” (Befu 1993). *Nihonjinron* is an ethnocentric ideology that celebrates the indicative qualities of Japanese culture as imagined by its proponents. It is important to note that this is only the most recent name for a cultural tradition that extends at least into the Tokugawa era, then known as *kokugaku*, or “native studies”. In its varied guises this cultural discourse has been the major vehicle through which the core subcultures of Japan have broadcast their ideologies. The earlier tradition of *kokugaku*, “often in the form of unqualified ethnocentrism, extolling Japan's cultural genius continued until it reached... its peak during World War II, only to come to a halt on August 15, 1945” (Befu 1993: 124). Following the surrender of Imperial Japan to the Allied Forces, this cultural discourse suffered a major setback in defeat, unable to explain why the uniquely potent Japanese could not overcome their foes. In time, the discourse was resumed under the title of *Nihonjinron* (Befu 1993). Though perhaps less rooted in the mythological origins of the Japanese people and the Imperial Family, this later discourse still referred to the superiority and uniqueness of what its commentators conceived of as the Japanese people (Befu 1993). The framework of these arguments relied heavily upon the ethos of the samurai core subculture of the Tokugawa period (Sugimoto 2003; Ueno 1987).

The discourse of *Nihonjinron* offers comparative and normative models. Though the purported aim of many authors on *Nihonjinron* is to simply describe what the nature, or essence of the Japanese people may be, “it behooves Japanese to act and think as described to achieve the idealized state of affairs... Not to behave as prescribed is not only unusual or strange: it is “un-Japanese” (Befu 1993: 116). In this light, the unique nature of the Japanese way of doing things and the inherent superiority of these models are the very framework that all ventures must adopt or risk being labeled “un-Japanese” and, therefore, of lesser quality. As such, karate came to mainland Japan at the same time that this cultural discourse held its greatest sway. In the years directly preceding World War II, the structural pressures created by the ethnocentric discourse of Imperial Japan cannot be overstated. In those instances where Okinawan karate masters exhibited personal agency in the modification and adaptation of karate during this time, it should be remembered that such structural pressures limited the choices available to them.

Despite such pressures and the work of Okinawan masters in Japan to conform to Japanese ideals, the practice of karate was not fully assimilated into the culture of Japan by the time that the Allied Forces took control of the government. Due to karate's history as a “foreign” martial art it was not considered by either the conquered Japanese or the triumphant Allied Forces to be a traditional Japanese martial art and, therefore, a threat to Allied governance (Donohue 1993). Unlike the other contemporary martial arts practiced in Japan (most notably kendo and judo) karate practitioners were able to remain comparatively undisturbed in the dissemination of their art. With the closure of other avenues to study martial arts, karate experienced greater interest from the Japanese people as well as the Allied service personnel stationed in Japan (Donohue 1993).

Leading up to and throughout the Allied occupation of mainland Japan, the practice of

karate was still seen as a foreign martial art by the Japanese people- even associated with criminality (Donohue 1993). In its favor, it was also uniquely positioned as a sort of “last-man-standing” in a Japan under the military governance of a foreign power and was, thus, able to reposition itself *vis-a-vis* its popular image. “Due to the political climate in which *karateka* [practitioners of karate] found themselves in the post-war years, karate came to be interpreted as an art of self-defense, and as a moral vehicle for the perfection of character rather than a pure combat art... Due to the integration of karate practice with classical Japanese philosophical thinking, karate gradually lost its unsavory connotations for many Japanese” (Donohue 1993: 109). Through the normative discourse practices of *Nihonjinron* in post-war Japan, karate could be incorporated into the Japanese cultural awareness.

This incorporation of an Okinawan martial art was made possible when the separation between the Japanese people and the Okinawan people was minimized to satisfy the needs of the Japanese core subculture's preparations for war. Specifically, this was accomplished through the reconfiguration of the conceptual models of cultural bounding. In the late Meiji period the term *jinshu*, or race, became overshadowed by *minzoku*, which most ably translates into 'folk' or the 'folk' (Morris-Suzuki 1996). According to Morris-Suzuki, *minzoku* “was not a matter of biology but of culture and above all ideology: The acceptance of a set of beliefs and institutions which made one 'truly Japanese'... it offered to the people of Japan's expanding empire, among them the people of the frontier regions [Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands], the possibility of acceptance as 'Japanese', but only at the cost of their total submission to a prescribed set of cultural, linguistic and ideological norms” (1996: 89).

Karate successfully applied this rubric to its advantage in the years surrounding World War II to be adopted by Japanese culture and promoted by the Japanese government. Chan argues that karate “reveals most radically the lengths it is possible to go to acquire respectability in Japan... It is an art that has grown by integration, and is the least pure of all the martial arts in Japan today” (Chan 2000: 73). It should be noted that kendo and judo- both martial arts from mainland Japan- could also be considered invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992). Both of these martial arts were only formalized in the years following the Meiji Restoration, though they are held to be of ancient origin (Chan 2000).

Following the dissolution of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japanese society rapidly underwent a program aimed at industrializing and modernizing the country (Befu 1993). For the martial arts of Japan, this meant the adoption of standardized curriculum, ranking and uniforms. In most cases these martial arts underwent the same changes as karate a mere handful of decades earlier (Madis 2003). Thus, the adaptation of karate in Japan should not only be seen as a cultural translation from Okinawa to Japan, each with their own cultural traditions, but also as the product of a localized culture translating to a rapidly industrializing culture.

This 'modernizing' of practices was not a limited enterprise, but touched all parts of Japanese society, culture, and economy. “The rigours of industrial production were married to the codified reliabilities of only a slightly earlier era [The Meiji Restoration and the Tokugawa Period]. Martial arts in Japan represent this fusion” (Chan 2000:72). The hallmark of the Japanese modernization programs was to combine elements from the traditions of the core subculture and marry them to exogenous advances in technology and organization.

Anthropologists have rightfully called into question the appropriateness and accuracy of the term “modernity” and its supposed binary “tradition” (cf. Gusfield 1967), even though the two terms are still given wide currency (Trophagan & Thompson 2006). Today, the idea of a simply unilateral progression from traditional society to modern society (with a clean break in

between) has been shown to be too problematic to defend (Gusfield 1967; Appadurai 1990; Cvetkovich & Kellner 1997). In Meiji Japan though, this worldview of temporality and progress was so endorsed that it carried the weight of reality (Arnason 1990).

If many of the innovations (or perversions) that were incorporated into the practice of karate in Japan had failed to find footing in Okinawa, then it might indicate that the process was merely a geographical and cultural one: as karate moved from Okinawa to Japan, it became more Japanese. The fact is that many of these changes were adopted in Okinawa early on and continue to be maintained to this day. Thus, the translation of karate from Okinawa to Japan (and back to Okinawa) was not only a cultural discourse but a temporal one as well, in the sense that it became wrapped up in the Japanese “project of modernity” (Arnason 1990: 234). In other words, a *conceptualization* of modernity operated in Meiji Japan in a way that had very real effects, and led to a crossroads at which karate shifted from one geographic and cultural setting to another, as both cultures were modernizing to meet the demands of an industrialized era.

Through the adoption of certain traditional and constitutive elements of similar practices already in Japan, karate was able to associate itself with martial arts in this new setting. The adoption of such similarities suggest either an appropriation of an indigenous fighting art by a dominant culture, or a well-timed enmeshing of a traditional practice with the essential hallmarks of *minzoku* as identified by the *Nihonjinron* discourse. In support of the latter proposition, the principles of the *Nihonjinron* discourse suggest that, “it does not matter if the outward forms change; that the forms were codified only recently; that all of society was codified only recently. The idea of a uniform, ageless spiritual content is something that absolves all modernity; and transcends modernity itself” (Chan 2000: 72).

CONCLUSION: ASSIMILATION, INTEGRATION, OR NEGOTIATION?

There is an unusually nasty set of associations linked to the term “assimilation” that make it an inadequate descriptor for the process that karate underwent in transitioning to mainland Japan. On the one hand, assimilation is associated with forced compliance carried out under the might of authority. On the other hand, it is associated with capitulation or the “selling-out” of one's moral, cultural, intellectual or individual dignity. To cast the transition of karate from Okinawa to mainland Japan in such a harsh light would not only be unfair, but, more importantly, would be inaccurate. As Mottern declares, “It is evident from an examination of the major Japanese karate styles that their present state is due to an evolution, rather than a simple transmission, of martial ideas and methodologies... The “traditional” method is one of adaptation, innovation, and progression” (Mottern 2001: 239).

Thus, if we dispense with the term “assimilation”, then we are able to appreciate both structural influences, and the effects of individual and collective agency that shaped the process of karate becoming incorporated into Japanese society. I suggest that this process is better classified as a “negotiation” than an “assimilation”.

All the changes and modifications to karate discussed herein were the product of individual or collective groups of Okinawans responding to the cultural setting and political agendas within which they found themselves enmeshed. The practice of karate was changed and developed not only by Okinawan tradition, the Japanese government or the samurai subculture of Japan alone, but through the interaction of all these structural frameworks, as well as the actions of the individuals involved in the actual practice of karate. Karate was shaped in Japan to fit into the preconceived notions of what a martial art is, as dictated largely by the core subcultures associated with politics and martial arts in Japan (Krug 2001). As well, the Okinawan instructors

who emigrated to Japan, took advantage of the “cultural similarities that provided a “depth of texture” into which karate could be woven” (Krug 2001: 397). In turn these changes were adopted and are maintained by Okinawan practitioners of every rank.

The mutual success of this negotiation can be measured by the continued practice and popularity of karate not only in Okinawa and Japan but in numerous countries worldwide. When many cultural practices associated with minority groups in subcultures throughout the world are now lost to us or on the brink of disappearing, karate enjoys a prestige and participation that continues to grow (Donohue 1993). Though karate could be considered a “success story” in this respect, such success has only come at the cost of modification and adaptation in response to the structure of the cultures to which it has spread. These changes have been directed by the desires of the practitioners to be found in these cultures, as informed by their localized notions about the art. In Japan, for example, karate is today viewed by many as a *Japanese* martial art. It is incorporated into the martial tradition of that country and honored for its contribution to Japanese culture (Mottorn 2001; Chan 2000; Ko & Yang 2008). Is karate then, as it is practiced in Japan, a *Japanese* martial art, rather than an *Okinawan* martial art? If this is so, then can the karate conducted in the United States of America, be considered an *American* martial art? Noting karate's creole past, and the active role of its practitioners to integrate into the world outside of Okinawa, is it even proper to ask “Where does karate belong to, or to whom?”

Though the art has its genesis in Okinawa, it comes from antecedents that could include Chinese, Japanese or Indian martial arts, to name a few. If we accept that at one point karate *became* something identifiable as Okinawan- something separate and different from its heritage- then we must accept that at a certain time, with enough changes or perception of changes, karate can become aligned with another locale. Like any cultural tradition, it can become a practice that is recognized as distinct from its heritage. In large part, such changes will be in the cultural framing that is adopted in the new setting, borrowing from the local traditions as understood by local participants.

The work presented here is not one that seeks to answer the question of whether karate “belongs” to Okinawa or Japan. Rather it is to elucidate that karate coming to be practiced in Japan was a process of negotiation between organizations and individuals of different cultural settings, with their own traditional backgrounds. From such a negotiation what we think of today as “karate” was shaped and further negotiated to other cultural contexts. To remove karate from its cultural context would be to remove the texture of the practice, thus rendering it something very different from what it was (Keenan 1989; Krug 2001). But to deny that it cannot be so removed is to preclude the possibility for cultural exchange and negotiation. Removing karate from the cultural context of Okinawa for dissemination in Japan required that a new texture be incorporated and this was accomplished through the adoption of philosophy from the samurai traditions of Japan, the militaristic framework of Imperial Japan and the adoption of Western sportification (Krug 2001; Madis 2003).

As I have argued above, any practice- entwined with a specific culture- that then transfers to another cultural setting will change to suit its new participants and cultural setting, creating what Ko and Yang describe as a, “consistency with the local culture and identities of native participants” (2008: 15). Therefore, with enough change incorporated into a practice, it will become more closely aligned to its new host culture than its culture of origin. At such a time, the question that we are once again faced with is whether the practice is still the same practice as before? Does it remain merely a variant of the antecedent, or if it has become something new? Faced with the absolute reality that karate is practiced in many cultural settings,

in often divergent ways, but is still held to be “karate” by these numerous and diverse practitioners, we must accept that karate is not merely a *cultural practice*, but is a *practice* that interacts with *cultures*. Though rooted in Okinawa, as a cultural practice indicative of that context, karate should be recognized as a process that was developing and evolving over time, before it ever crossed over the waves to the Japanese mainland.

REFERENCES

Amdur, Ellis

2001 Women in the Martial Arts: Japan. *In* *Martial Arts of the World*. Thomas Green, ed. Pp. 699-702. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Appadurai, Arjun

1990 Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *In* *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. Mike Featherstone, ed. Pp. 299-310. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Arnason, Johann

1990 Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity. *In* *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. Mike Featherstone ed. Pp. 207-236. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Ashkenazi, Michael

2002 Ritual and the Ideal Society in Karate. *In* *Combat Ritual, and Performance: Anthropology of the Martial Arts*. David Jones, ed. Pp. 99-118. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Befu, Harumi

1993 Nationalism and Nihonjinron. *In* *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia*. Harumi Befu, ed. Pp. 105-135. Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.

Chan, Stephen

2000 The Construction and Export of Culture as Artifact: The Case of Japanese Martial Arts. *Body & Society* 6(1): 69-74.

Csordas, Thomas

1990 Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. *Ethos* 18(1): 5-47.

Cvetkovich, Ann & Kellner, Douglas

1997 Introduction: Thinking Global and Local. *In* *Articulating the Global and the Local*. Ann Cvetkovich & Douglas Kellner, eds. Pp. 1-30. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Donohue, John

1992 Dancing in the Danger Zone: The Martial Arts in America. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 1(1): 86-99.

1993 The Ritual Dimension of Karate-Do. *Journal of Ritual Studies* 7(1): 105-124.

Featherstone, Mike

1990 *Global Culture: An Introduction*. In *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. Mike Featherstone, ed. Pp.1-14. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Friman, Richard

1996 *Blinded by the Light: Politics and Profit in the Martial Arts*. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 5(3): 10-19.

1998 *The Art of Regulation: Martial Arts as Threats to Social Order*. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 7(3): 11-23.

Goodman, Roger

2005 "Making Majority Culture," In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*. Jennifer Robertson, ed. Pp. 59-72. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gusfield, Joseph

1967 *Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change*. *American Journal of Sociology* 72(4): 351-362.

Hassell, Randall

2007 *Shotokan Karate: Its History and Evolution*. Los Angeles, CA: Empire Books.

Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence, eds.

1992 *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hudson, Mark

1999 *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.

Keenan, John

1989 *Spontaneity in Western Martial Arts: A Yogācāra Critique of "Mushin" (No-Mind)*. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 16(4): 285-298.

Kerr, George

2000 *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*. Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing.

Ko, Jong Jae & Yang, Jin Bang

2008 *The Globalization of Martial Arts: The Change of Rules for New Markets*. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 17(4): 8-19.

Krug, Gary

2001 *At the Feet of the Master: Three Stages in the Appropriation of Okinawan Karate Into Anglo-American Culture*. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 1(4): 395-410.

Madis, Eric

2003 The Evolution of Taekwondo From Japanese Karate. *In* *Martial Arts in the Modern World*. Thomas Green & Joseph Svinth, eds. Pp. 185-208. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Moening, Uda

2011 The Evolution of Kicking Techniques in Taekwondo. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 20(1): 9-31.

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa

1996 A Descent into the Past: The Frontier in the Construction of Japanese Identity. *In* *Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern*. Donald Denoon, Mark Hudson, Gavan McCormack, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, eds. Pp. 81-94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mottern, Ron

2001 Karate, Japan. *In* *Martial Arts of the World*. Thomas Green, ed. Pp. 232-240. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Mottern, Ron

2001 Karate, Okinawa. *In* *Martial Arts of the World*. Thomas Green, ed. Pp. 240-249. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Mottern, Ron

2001 Kobudo, Okinawa. *In* *Martial Arts of the World*. Thomas Green, ed. Pp. 286-291. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Mottern, Ron

2001 Okinawa. *In* *Martial Arts of the World*. Thomas Green, ed. Pp. 363-367. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Nakane Chie

1970 *Japanese Society*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Rosenbaum, Michael

2002 *The Fighting Arts: Their Evolution From Secret Societies to Modern Times*. Boston: YMAA Publication Center.

Sugimoto, Yoshio

2003 *An Introduction to Japanese Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Traphagan, John & Thompson, Christopher

2006 The Practice of Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Japan. *In* Thompson & Traphagan, eds. Pp. 2-24. Albany, NY: *Wearing Cultural Styles in Japan: Concepts of Tradition and Modernity in Practice* State University of New York Press.

Ueno, Chizuko

1987 The Position of Japanese Women Reconsidered. Themed Issue, "An Anthropological Profile of Japan," *Current Anthropology* 28(4): S75-S84.