

## Reflections about kata – Part II

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First, I would like to make it clear that this article (and especially this second part) is based on my understanding and reflections on Shinto Muso Ryu ryu. My views emanate from a particular Riai (the logic behind an action) as was transmitted to me mainly by the late Nishioka Tsuneo sensei (of whom I was honored to be a direct student of for the last fifteen years of his life).

The following is meant to be just a superficial overview of the most traditional series of kata in the system, those created before 1868 and therefore considered koryu.<sup>1</sup>

### Kata in Shinto Muso Ryu Jo

According to our tradition the founder Muso Gonnosuke spent many years wandering around the country learning and dueling after having “mastered” Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto Ryu and the Ichi no tachi of the Kashima tradition. At one point it looks like he fought a swordsman called Miyamoto Musashi and lost. He then decided to retire to mount Homan (in nowadays Fukuoka province, Kyushu island) to undergo further austerities and reflect. Eventually he received the revelation from which he set the foundations of our ryu and that was concreted in, of course, the form of kata.



The reality is that we can only guess what the original teachings were like since the earliest extant documents we have access to so far date from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> a hundred years after the creation of our school. But one thing we know for sure; when comparing the extant documents and through the experience in practice we can see or sense that some additions and modifications took place during the history of

<sup>1</sup> For that reason neither the Kihon nor Gohon no midare will be discuss here.

<sup>2</sup> David Hall in his “Encyclopedia of Japanes Martial Arts” (in the entry for Gokui) states that according to Steve Bellamy who was a student of Kuroda Ichitaro (Menkyo kaiden under Shimizu Takaji shihan), among the archives of his there was an early densho passed from Okubi Magozaemon (second headmaster of Shinto Muso Ryu) to Matsuzaki Kin’emon (third headmaster of the school) where the names of all five gokui are included. This seems to contradict the research of people like Matsui Kenji.

our ryu. It appears that Samidare series was included sometime during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ran ai was added in the Bakumatsu period (1853 – 1867). Other parts such as Gohon no midare, some of the kata included in Seitei jo (Suigetsu and Shamen) and the actual Kihon waza are examples of additions as late as the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Also there have been even in the “traditional curriculum” some other additions, modifications or alterations in the order of the kata transmitted, some of them very recent. Presumably though, there is still plenty of traditional transmission preserved from the beginning.

There were no Kihon as we know them in the old times. According to Nishioka sensei, the format of training in his early days (he started in 1938, before the Kihon as we know them<sup>4</sup> or Seitei jo were established by Shimizu sensei and before some other modifications and additions took place) was as follows: «We did suburi<sup>5</sup> and uchikomi,<sup>6</sup> then sensei would have us to practice moves taken out of the kata and did proper kata for the rest of the keiko. There was little explanation or conceptualization of the different techniques or series. It was all about copying sensei the best you could and repeating what you got».

Much of the way the majority of people train nowadays is very recent, thought for the teaching of larger groups and this has consequences. That is why I think is important to know, especially for advanced practitioners at least, what part of the curriculum is kind of “new” and when it was added.

Accordingly, in SMR we can recognize the four types of kata I described earlier:

Gokui, also called Gomuso no jo or Hiden, would be from the first type, Omote and Kage for example can be of the second, Seitei kata belongs to the third and the Kihon sotai to the fourth type.

Despite of all these changes our ryu has managed to survive. Even more, it has done so by being used in a practical way, like its use by the Japanese police forces (Tokyo riot police) shows. This is remarkable when one thinks that the school was founded more than 400 years ago.

The ryu is well structured, but not in the way one might expect: it is not like you learn the simplest kata first and then you go advancing in complexity from the technical point of view; the kata in Omote are not simpler than the Kage series. Instead you advance differently.

What was the primordial message? «Maruki o motte suigetsu o shire» (holding a rounded stick get to know the suigetsu). So is all about truly understanding “Suigetsu”... and being able to apply its manifestations in at least crucial situations. The system then was created as to facilitate this.

Of course the next question then is «What is Suigetsu?».

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<sup>3</sup> All of it being the creation of Shimizu Takaji shihan.

<sup>4</sup> Initially there were 15 techniques that became 12 later on. In a book titled “Jodo kyohan” written by Shimizu sensei and published in July 1940, those fifteen basic techniques are described.

<sup>5</sup> A drill in which we swing the weapon repetitively in the air while imagining that we are striking an opponent.

<sup>6</sup> A drill in which we practice the different strikes and cuts by hitting Uchidachi’s sword.

Suigetsu is originally a Buddhist term and has many different interpretations depending on which field you want to apply its concept to. Within the Budo/Bujutsu world also has different meanings according to the various traditions that use it. Furthermore, different teachers within the very same tradition might have different interpretations of the concept. This debate transcends the intention of this article and anyways I firmly believe that there are many things in Budo/Bujutsu that have to be acquired instead of given.<sup>7</sup> For the moment I will just mention the keys that in my opinion can help you to reach that understanding. To me, if forced to choose, I would say that from the martial point of view the concept of Suigetsu cannot be understood without timing and ma-ai. But, as it is probably the case in all of life's endeavors, knowing the concept and being able to make use of it are two completely different things.

Nowadays we start with kihon, the basics; first alone and then with a partner. Then you move on through the different series:

In Omote the practitioner gets in acquaintance with basic aspects such as ma-ai, hyoshi, shisei, tai sabaki, etc. and the timing is mostly go no sen. Then you gain dexterity and go faster although still one is doing kihon... this is Chudan. Some techniques get more realistic and sen no sen takes over after a while. In Ran ai you finish learning the kihon, still concentrated in the physical, pushing your body to go as fast as possible in this long kata devised to build stamina. In Kage you include the psychological aspect, ma-ai is closer and therefore shorter is the time to react. You learn the proper way of breathing (that originating in your lower abdomen) and we often break the rhythm, creating moments of tension followed by relaxed ones. This forces the practitioner to maintain the zanshin at all times. In Samidare we go back to fast motion, we deepen in the study of ma-ai and timing for we both advance towards each other in every kata, and we create a chance to improve further our breathing and kiai. In Oku we put all the previous together in a very strange and eclectic series that contain the basic and characteristic movements of the ryu. Hiden is the last piece of the puzzle and is needed to fully understand the school from the technical point of view.

## **OMOTE – The surface**

In the old times, practitioners started with this series right away, probably preceded and accompanied by the practice of movements decided by the instructor according to his students' needs, so it can be considered the beginner's level. The rhythm is regular and predictable, performed at a pace easily followed by inexperienced people. We use the whole length of the Jo, I mean, we constantly slide our hands along the entire length of it and doing big movements in order to get to know the weapon and the bio-mechanics behind the actions. It is done in a way that allows the pupil to learn the proper way of handling the weapon and begin the training of ma-ai and timing in a very safe environment. Main emphasis is placed on go no sen, defending or avoiding the attack first before countering.

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<sup>7</sup> Things like skills or understandings cannot be taught, but acquired by each individual. The teacher can only guide you in the right direction.

## CHUDAN – The middle level

Although the first kata commences with sen no sen, kind of following the last kata in omote, still until we complete this series, we focus on go no sen attitude. Then we shift and “re-start” as we include aiuchi (mutual and simultaneous strike) in our training and we are introduced to the concept and practice of kiriotoshi.<sup>8</sup> Certain techniques evolve and start showing the real way of applying them in combat like in tai atari or hikiotoshi uchi (so far we, in Seiryukai, have performed this technique by bringing feet together when striking to help focusing on the ki ken tai itchi; this changes from Yokogiridome).

Still in general (exception made at one point in Midaredome, for example) we use the whole length of the Jo. Movements are still predictable for the rhythm is still regular although faster than in Omote so as to gain confidence and dexterity. The focus is on conditioning the body the right way.

Interestingly the first and last kata begin with Honte ni kamae (hidari and migi) applied to combat. One becomes conscious of the concept of kobo itchi (attack and defense are one) and that sen no sen is one aspect of it.<sup>9</sup>

## RAN AI – Harmonizing chaos

Here you are supposed to be at your peak in terms of physical performance. It is a very fast series and the longest in the system (among the koryu series), probably devised mainly to build up stamina. At the same time, technically speaking these kata are probably the most complex and difficult series. All of the kihon are seen when one gets to this level; from now on you just have to master them...

Introduced to the system around the mid-1800 they are said to be representative of its time; this is the end of the Bakufu period (Bakumatsu), chaotic times full of violence in a country divided between the new and the old.

## KAGE – Shadow

Equivalent to Ura in other arts or schools, here one understands that there is always another possibility, the plan B (or A, depending on your skills and opportunity).

When you wait too long, purposely or not, you get more time to see the attack but also have less time to react... it is very tricky and dangerous. In this new situation one needs to have mastered certain aspects which emanate from the confidence in your physical moves that you got training in the previous series, as well as from a better understanding of ma-ai and timing. Except for Hoson michi you let your opponent coming to you while you wait. This translates directly in preserving your energy, and gives you more margin

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<sup>8</sup> With Nishioka sensei, until completing Ran ai, we did the “Kyushu version” in kata like Midaredome or Yokogiridome where you defend by blocking the opponent’s strike first instead of going for aiuchi.

<sup>9</sup> For me, a good example of the kobo itchi concept is found when performing the first part of the “kuri” techniques where we defend by attacking our opponent’s kote.

in the physical and mental aspects. This margin (yoyu) and confidence help in turn to maintain the mental calmness necessary to cope with any attack.

You remain cool even in the hottest moments, but when you react you do that at hundred per cent, with explosive accurate movements preceded and followed by relaxation. Poker face at all times that make your intentions unreadable for the opponent. One discovers the importance of the psychological aspect in real combat. Not showing emotions or giving unnecessary information about our intentions confuses the opponent and might create a fissure in his physical and/or mental attitude.

But watch out, for Uchidachi is also unpredictable; I mean, you know what his action is going to be (being this katageiko) but not exactly when is going to be launched since he is constantly breaking the rhythm and he never stops, especially mentally. Your zanshin has to be “on” and “tuned in” at all times.

This series deepens the study of proper breathing. Kiai emanates now from your tandem in what is called “Fukimi kiai” therefore bringing forward the last aspect of the “Ki ken tai itchi” concept... or the very first? This is ki, at least in the tangible sense of being able to concentrate your energy in a decided point. And you do this while using a tool (your weapon) as an extension of yourself.

“Entering” in the attack becomes the main choice when it is clear that a critical situation is developing. In other words, go no sen attitude but sen no sen mentality is put into practice, while still from a “comfortable” position since we wait and let our opponent to close in with us and initiate the hostilities.



### **SAMIDARE – Early summer rain**

This are composed of six kata that can be reduced in essence to four (Jumonji and Mijin go being understood as variations of their preceding kata) and they are performed in a very dynamic fashion, with both Shidachi and Uchidachi approaching each other, committed to get “there” before the other does. Ma-ai and timing therefore get even more complicated. Breathing can be taken to a higher, different level since the first three kata are advised to be performed in a single exhalation in the form of kiai. This allows you to investigate about the use of kiai depending on whether it is emitted before, during or after the action... or in its different combinations.

All the kata are sen no sen and about self-sacrifice (sutemi) following the spirit briefly experienced in Shin shin (in Chudan) and Hoso michi (from Kage). Of course, by now you have learned and acquired all what is needed in terms of physical skills and mental control but ... Running into the attack!!?? Yes, that is what you do in every single kata of

this series so the spirit of shinken shobu should be understood when you complete this series.

### **SHIAIKUCHI (Okuden) – Points of entrance for matches (Innermost transmission)**

Often we just hear “Oku” instead of Okuden for Japanese like to shorten words and it just means deep, interior, highest, innermost, etc. The “Den” of Okuden means transmission.

Interestingly, in reality the word “oku” doesn’t appear in any of the traditional documents to name this series, but somehow it is the term most used to refer to them.<sup>10</sup>

The order in which we learn it nowadays at least in our lineage (and as described in the Jodo Kyohan) is different from the densho (transmission scroll) and was probably decided by Shimizu sensei.<sup>11</sup>

In my opinion, here you are matching someone of your own level. It starts with Sengachi where you learn the importance of gaining the initiative followed by three “sub-sets” of three kata each, dealing, among other things, with how to get it (the initiative) depending on various conditions, the middle sub-sets also serving to investigate Musashi’s style. Then we have another seemingly unrelated kata: Mikaeri and Aun. Mikaeri is about being able to perceive the sakki (killing spirit) of an opponent and developing intuition. The series close with “Aun”, the alpha and omega, the beginning and end. Interestingly enough, this kata can be seen as closely related to the very first of the kata in the system (Tachiotoshi), kind of closing a circle. From here you should start all over but from a higher level.

But Aun has other meanings. The one most relevant to us refers to synchronization. It is when two people are in the same “wavelength” and therefore their actions match and there is harmony in them. The expression used to describe this in Japanese is “Aun no kokyu”.

By now one is supposed to have developed the capability to transcend duality. Like the reflection of the moon in the water; although the moon and its reflection are different things they behave as one, there is no time gap between them (unlike other phenomena such as the lightning and the thunder, for example).

### **YA TORI ODACHI YO TORI KODACHI (Shinto ryu kenjutsu) – Eight sets for the long sword and four for the short sword**

This series are listed just before Gokui and originally there were no names for them (or at least the actual ones), it seems that they were given sometime by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>10</sup> That is why for the late Nishioka sensei the meaning of the first traditional certificate (Okuirisho) has nothing to do with “entering oku”.

<sup>11</sup> The original order of the Shiaikuchi series as written in the densho is: Sengachi, Hiki sute, Kote garami, Jutte, Uchiwake, Suigetsu, Sayudome, Kotedome, Tsuki dashi, Uchi tsuke, Mikaeri and Aun.

One might as well hear Kasumi Shinto ryu nowadays to refer to this system. There is much speculation concerning the origins of it, but it seems to me correct to assume that it is derived from Gonnosuke's previous experiences. Experts in both SMR and Katori Shinto ryu have assured to me in personal conversations that they can see plenty of influence from the latter in our kenjutsu. Also, I can see elements of the Kashima tradition here and there. Of course this is not surprising because both schools flourished in the same area.

Some people say that the tachi within the Jo kata series is part of this kenjutsu style, although I am not one hundred per cent sure about it since it is clear that at least some of the techniques come from Miyamoto Musashi in what seems to be a proof that their match took place.

By the place it takes in the densho and the kuden (oral transmission) we can know that in older times probably the teaching of our kenjutsu was reserved to high level practitioners and as a curiosity it seems that only people of at least Gomokuroku level took the Uchidachi role. In this way the level of the Shijo (or Shidachi, the one taking the Jo) was guaranteed to be high.

In spite of being only 12 kata, according to the late Nishioka sensei and as corroborated by Pascal Krieger sensei, they contain all the important aspects one needs to know for combat with katana. Being totally honest, I have to admit that fortunately I cannot certify or deny it for real... I choose to believe my teachers.



### **GOKUI (Hiden) – The secrets**

They are the ultimate although in reality, they are the origin. It is assumed that this set is the primordial one directly emanating from the original revelation, what happens is that the process to master the system is reversed ever since the founder started transmitting it. Nowadays Hiden is the last piece of the puzzle that confirms that what you have learned till now is correct and is needed to claim you have received the full knowledge of the school. Then is when one becomes “kaiden”.<sup>12</sup> One might receive the “menkyo”, a teaching license, but only this title with the suffix “menkyo-kaiden” permits one to issue in turn legitimate traditional certifications.

Probably the first generations received a “full picture” and they made a puzzle of it, keeping the central piece that is meant to be given only to trusted people. Following

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<sup>12</sup> Kaiden means “full transmission”. In our school there is not an additional document to certify it, so an individual might hold a menkyo scroll, but know not the Gokui.

generations started getting the puzzle piece by piece (as deduced from the fact that originally there was only one certificate instead of a minimum of four, like nowadays).

At this point one has different options; you can dedicate yourself to transmission of the art, go to learn another school/s and/or even go as far as to create your own tradition.

It goes without saying that creating a “new” old system dealing with archaic weapons would be mismatched to the current world.

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