



A History of Our Okinawan Martial Arts Weapons

Preface: A Continuity of Generations

At the start of my martial arts journey, I felt something that I couldn't quite put into words at the time. It was as if I were joining a brotherhood of mankind that not only spanned geographic barriers, but also the barrier of time itself.

I had no knowledge of martial arts history in those early days, but I sensed a continuity of generations, as if the martial artists of centuries past were practicing alongside me. I wondered how many had come before me and learned these same forms, practiced these same techniques.

It was probably this perception of continuity that spawned my interest in the history of the forms and techniques that we practice within our Moo Duk Kwan Taekwondo association. What I found during my research is that this subject is apparently of interest to many others as well. Several excellent documents have been published on this subject, both within our association and elsewhere. One of the most complete texts I've found is Dan Segarra's ["Untold History of Tang Soo Do" Version 2](#), which is available as a PDF download on Facebook.

Because so much had already been written on the history of the Moo Duk Kwan, Taekwondo, and Tang Soo Do, I decided that my paper should take a less travelled route. Instead, I have focused on the history of the weapons practiced by our association. Although, it should be noted that any attempt to trace the history of our weapons is going to be somewhat speculative, because there isn't much hard evidence to document their history. I have attempted to cut through the fantasy and stick with the reality of what we can reasonably believe to be true. My conclusions are based on what documentation is available, along with commonly accepted anecdotal evidence, yet I admit that my conclusions could certainly be wrong.

THE PDF VERSION OF THIS TEXT CONTAINS MANY LINKS, MOST OF WHICH POINT TO VIDEOS DEMONSTRATING THE WEAPONS. BE SURE TO CLICK AND WATCH TO UNDERSTAND THE FULL STORY!

Introducing Weapons to the Moo Duk Kwan

In the amazing video “[Moo Duk Kwan Tang Soo Do History](#)”, we see most of the Tang Soo Do forms and techniques being demonstrated by some of the Moo Duk Kwan’s earliest black belts. However, you may notice that weapons are conspicuously absent from this demonstration. It turns out that weapons training was not originally part of our art. However, masters and grandmasters of years since have incorporated weapons into our program to provide a more complete training experience.

Although our martial arts system bears heavy Korean influence, the weapons we train with, and their forms, are derived from other regions beyond Korea. Korea’s primary weapon, and source of national pride, is archery. Some Korean martial arts even train in archery, such as the art of Kook Sol Won.

The Okinawan Weapons

Many of our weapons and their techniques originate from the small island-nation of Okinawa, which is south of Japan and east of China. This is also where the martial art of Karate first took root. The Okinawans practice a form of weapons training called Kobudo, which is often taught alongside Karate and Aikido.

Kobudo is believed to have gained prominence during the rise of the Ryukyu kingdom. In the 1400s, Okinawa’s three warring kingdoms were united into a single kingdom called Ryukyu. King Sho Shin passed a law forbidding Okinawans from possessing weapons, and collected all weapons for storage at the capital. There are several theories as to why this was done. Perhaps it was an attempt to prevent citizens of the former warring kingdoms from rekindling their hostilities, or perhaps the Okinawan ruler wanted to accumulate all weapons into one storage location for military use.

After being relieved of their weapons, the farming people of Okinawa began to notice that some of their implements could serve double duty as secret weapons. This wasn’t always by coincidence, as some of their farming implements either resembled or were directly derived from ancient Buddhist symbols that had been utilized for many purposes over the centuries, including use as defensive weapons.

Therefore, although we can trace many of our martial arts weapons to Okinawa, these weapons existed in some form long before the Ryukyu era. Some even come from other regions outside of East Asia, particularly India and even Ancient Rome.

In the following pages, we’ll trace the history of each of our Okinawan weapons back to their earliest known roots. We’ll also dissect each weapon into its individual components, discuss ways to effectively use them in combat, and examine our forms in comparison to those of other arts.

The Sai

The Sai is a short, blunt metallic weapon which is found throughout much of Asia in several different shapes. The Sai is believed to have evolved from the Trishula, which is an Indian trident and important Buddhist symbol dating to at least 300 BC. We know this because Indian coins have survived from that era which contain the image of the Trishula. Its significance in Buddhism probably explains how variations on the design made their way into many Asian cultures, eventually making its way to Okinawa.



Indian Trishula Coin

Parts of the Sai



The Sai

Monouchi: The long “blade”

Yoku: The prongs

Tsume: Pointed ends of the yoku

Moto: Center area between the yoku, an important grasping point

Tsuka: The handle

Tsukagashira: the base end of the handle

Saki: The end of the “blade”

Rumors abound as to the original use of the Sai in Okinawa, the most well-known of which is the idea that it was a farmer’s tool for planting rice. But there seems to be no credible account of the Sai ever being used for farming. So, does that mean that the rice-planting interpretation is wrong?

Remember that owning weapons was forbidden in Okinawa. When the Sai made their way to Okinawa from other Asian countries, farmers may have deceived authorities, explaining to them how these were used as planting tools. The deception may have worked so well that today we are unable to separate the reality from the fiction.

In later years, it has been documented that Sai were used by Okinawan police beginning around the 1600’s. The yoku served as a tool for wrist entrapment during arrests. The blunt design helped to identify this weapon as a non-lethal device, although lethal methods of attack do exist.

Originally though, the yoku were not designed for wrists or arrests. The intention was that they could be used to trap a weapon. Their design could trap a sword or a Bo with relative ease and disarm the opponent, possibly breaking the opposing weapon in the process. Try it yourself using a pair of Sai against a Bo. See how easy it is to catch the Bo in the yoku using both Sai in a cross block, then lock the Sai together and pull to yank the Bo out of the opponent’s hand. This movement actually looks similar to a move from Sai form 2, although we use “cutting the net” as a mnemonic.

In our modern practice with this weapon, we don't throw the Sai, but it is believed that this was a technique used in the past. Traditionally, we believe that Sai practitioners carried three rather than the two we use today. The third was stored in the belt and put into service after one of the Sai was thrown. Despite its bluntness, the Saki (blunt tip) could pierce a foot if thrown downward with a powerful wrist snap.

Other methods of usage are easier to recognize in our forms: We hold the Sai in a way that reinforces our blocks. The spins are excellent for skull/temple strikes. And the stabs are lethal when attacking the eyes or neck with the yoku rather than the saki.

Likely Form Inspiration

Many of our level one weapon forms, including Sai One, are adaptations of Ech Chan Cho Bu. Each level one form focuses on techniques specific to that weapon, while maintaining the familiar basic form structure as much as possible, so that the student can let go of extraneous issues such as stance and positioning. By the time our students begin training weapons, these issues should be committed to muscle memory, allowing the student to focus on the techniques specific to the weapon.

Our Sai One form combines basic Sai handling techniques with Ech Chan Cho Bu. It is very similar to a Kobudo form called [ShimabukuroNo Sai Ichi](#).

Sai Two, however, is far more advanced, and requires a basic understanding of certain Karate stances, which differ from those of the Moo Duk Kwan. Although we do certain parts of the form differently, our version is probably derived from the very similar Kobudo form [Nicho Sai](#).

Modern Appearances

The design of the Sai lends itself to excite the imagination, and as a result it appears in pop culture. The Sai is the weapon of choice for [Marvel's Elektra](#), appearing in comic books since 1981 and in the more recent movies Daredevil and Elektra. It's also the weapon of [Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Rafael](#). For dramatic effect, some pop culture appearances erroneously depict the Sai as having a sharpened saki.



The Tonfa

The history of the Tonfa very closely mirrors that of the Sai, in that it is also considered to be one of Okinawa's farmer's weapons. A weapon from Thailand called the "Mai Sok San" is believed to have made its way to Okinawa, where farmers noticed the resemblance to the handles used to turn their grindstones. This made the Tonfa's true purpose quite easy to conceal. So, just like the Sai, the likely progression is that they were introduced as weapons and kept secret by disguising them as farm implements.



Tonfa were originally made from oak and are traditionally used as a pair. The simple design means there are only three ways of holding the Tonfa:

- Honte-mochi is the normal grip with a fist around the handle and the long arm positioned to reinforce blocks (like the blocking position of the Sai).
- Gyakute-mochi is the extended version of this, when swung out for striking.
- Tokushu-mochi is the less frequently used grip from the long arm, which looks like you're wielding a hammer.

The most common tonfa strike is to begin in honte-mochi and swing the tonfa with a snap of the wrist. This can be done horizontally as in our Tonfa 1 form, or vertically. Many Kobudo forms contain a succession of vertical strikes in a figure 8 pattern. Tonfa can also be used to add reach to a punch in the gyakute-mochi position or can add blunt force to a punching motion in honte-mochi. In tokushu-mochi, Tonfa can be used to hook other weapons, or the neck or limb of an opponent.



Likely Form Inspiration

Our Tonfa form once again uses Ech Chan Cho Bu as a vehicle to focus on basic weapon handling. There doesn't seem to be a Kobudo form that directly correlates, but the forms [ChatanYaraNo Tonfa](#) and [YaraguwaNo Tonfa](#) appear to use some of the same techniques. In fact, ChatanYaraNo Tonfa seems to make its way into another weapon form, which we'll discuss later.

Modern Appearances

While the Sai has mostly been relegated to movies and folklore, the use of the Tonfa as a weapon lives on. The Tonfa is the ancestor of the modern police side-handle baton.

The Kama

The Kama is the next of the Okinawan farmer's weapons. The Kama was imported into Okinawa, most likely from Malaysia or other South East Asian countries, where it is used as a tool for harvesting rice, wheat, and sugar cane. This means that unlike the Sai and Tonfa, the Kama truly is a proven farmer's tool!



Traditional Farmer's Sickle

The Kama is nothing more than the Asian evolution of the sickle, which is one of mankind's earliest tools. Examples have been found dating to around 8,000 B.C., although modern versions didn't appear until the iron age around 1,200 B.C.



Modern Weapon Kama

Since Kama are maintained in razor sharp condition for harvesting purposes, technically any Kama would make an effective weapon. However, the Okinawans made a subtle change to the design of some Kama to increase their versatility as a weapon. Where the blade meets the handle, the Okinawans added a notch or depression that could be used to trap a Bo. This trapping technique is very apparent in our Kama 1 form. Compare the farmer's Kama design above with the weapon Kama to the left.

Likely Form Inspiration

The Kama form, oddly enough, appears to use some techniques from the previously mentioned [ChatanYaraNo Tonfa](#) form. The rest of our form uses techniques that are demonstrated in most other beginner Kama forms.

Modern Appearances

To this day, the Kama is still used as a farmer's sickle due to its low cost and simplicity. However, the much longer scythe is often used in its place, because the scythe can be used while standing upright, whereas a sickle requires the farmer to be in a squatting or bent position: [Harvesting Demonstration with Sickle](#)

The Bo and Jo

As ancient as the Kama's roots may be, certainly one of the earliest human tools and weapons would be the staff. A stick is probably the simplest, cheapest, and most plentiful weapon you could imagine. It was inevitable that over time, the staff would evolve from a simple stick to swing around, into an actual martial fighting methodology. And many of these methodologies developed over the years, with each standardizing on staves of widely varying composition, diameter, and length. For most staff fighting systems, the staff is not merely an object, but an extension of the limbs. This is reflected in the way that it is handled.

In the earliest days, hardwood such as Oak was preferred for Bo construction, as its extra weight helps develop striking momentum and can make spins easier and more fluid. This was sometimes taken to extremes, often incorporating iron and spikes, creating a weapon that was deadly but mostly impractical.

Some fighting systems preferred the readily available rattan or bamboo woods for staff construction, as the flex of these materials made for a lightweight but nearly unbreakable weapon.



Japanese Kanabo

Softwoods such as pine are less desirable because they can shatter upon impact, often rebounding back onto the weapon holder. For this reason, pine staves or dowel rods should not be struck together, but are fine for practicing forms.

The Bo gained early martial prominence around the 6th century, as the combination walking staff and weapon of Shaolin Monks. Later, in Okinawa, peasants had been using a tool called a tenbin to carry water using two buckets, one balanced on each end of a 6-foot-long pole. This was a necessary implement that could not be confiscated as a weapon, so it was only natural for formal Kobudo techniques to develop around it.

Since the Bo had already been in use in China for nearly a millennium, as well as feudal Japan, the Okinawans didn't have to figure out Bo fighting techniques from scratch. Zen Buddhist disciples had developed a complex Bojutsu fighting system, developing techniques for many different lengths of staff. One of the most unusual is the [Tai Chi Long Pole](#), which both requires and develops super-human wrist strength.

The Jo, by comparison, is shorter than the Bo, around 4.2 feet. In our training we often use the Bo and Jo interchangeably depending on what the student has access to. But if we dive into the details, there are subtle differences in how each is used. The Jo is often used in a manner similar to the Japanese sword called the Katana, and is also used to practice and extend Aikido techniques. The Jo is considered a shorter range weapon while the Bo is long-range. This can be

a critical distinction when attempting to stay out of reach of an opponent.

The first usage of the Jo as a weapon is a matter of legend, and is attributed to Muso Katsuyoshi around the year 1610. In the legend, it is recorded that Katsuyoshi suffered defeat after defeat in competition with other Okinawan weapon artists. After a period of 40 days meditation, he envisioned a short staff, which he created and used to defeat the famous swordsman Musashi.

The Bo and Jo are normally held by thirds, with the hands equally distanced from the ends and from each other. Like the Tonfa, there is both a Honte-Mochi (normal) and Gyakute-mochi (reversed) grasping position. In the normal Honte-mochi, the palms face reverse directions, whereas in Gyakute-mochi the palms face the same direction. When learning our Bo Technicals, it is a good idea to practice both Honte-mochi and Gyakute-mochi.

Although there are some moves where the staff is held from the end, most of the time the staff is held in this thirds position, where the close end of the staff should reinforce the forearm during strikes, similar to the blocking position of the Sai and Tonfa. The close hand pulls to swing the staff, generating striking power. The far hand guides the end of the staff to its target.

About Our Staff Forms

Our two staff forms are each designed to highlight techniques that are most appropriate for either the Bo or Jo. Our first staff form is meant to be performed with the Bo, while our second form is best performed with the Jo. Hence we have arrived at the names Bo One and Jo Two for our staff forms. You will clearly see that Jo Two emphasizes the speed and dexterity inherent to a smaller weapon, while Bo One showcases the power and reach that is possible with the longer staff.

Modern Appearances



Today, the Jo is a popular training tool in the martial art of Aikido. It is also carried by some Japanese Police officers to this day.

The Bo and Jo probably tie with Nunchaku as the most popular weapons for sport martial art forms. Creative Bo and Jo forms can be seen at any XMA tournament.

The Bo has made appearances in some modern movies, such as [The Matrix Reloaded](#), and in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles as Donatello's weapon.



Other Weapons

In our system, we also train with other weapons that are not of Okinawan origin. Perhaps I will describe those weapons in detail at another time, but for now I wanted to keep this first installment focused on the Okinawan farmer's weapons for the sake of brevity. I can however, provide a quick synopsis:

Among our other weapons, the Fan and Katana (with its associated training Bokken) have deep Japanese roots. In fact, although we use the wooden Bokken for safe training, it actually has a weapon's heritage all its own, owing to the fact that metal swords were an expensive commodity reserved for the wealthy in Japan's past.

This observation regarding the cost of weapons extends itself to the great question of all martial arts training in both Japan and Okinawa: Did farmers even have martial arts training, or was the entirety of their daily life focused on hard labor?

Remember that Japan had (and one might surmise still has) a strong class hierarchy. One theory suggests that all martial arts training, empty-hand or with weapons, was purely reserved for the upper classes, who had the leisure time and disposable income to tackle such pursuits. This could certainly prove true for complex empty-hand training, as well as expensive weapons such as the Katana.

However, there is evidence suggesting that even the poorest classes wished to be able to defend their families and property against invaders from upper classes, wars with other countries, or even from each other. It is from this desire that the Okinawan weapons achieve their greatest relevance. All of them share the common traits of being easy to use, inexpensive, and relatively easy to conceal.

We also train with weapons that do not come from the Japan/Okinawa region. For instance, the cane has well documented weapon roots dating to Europe's Victorian era, a time when carrying swords was falling out of fashion but weapons were still a necessity.

Escrima sticks, on the other hand, have their origins in the Philippines. During this country's Spanish occupation, three regional martial arts known as Arnis, Kali, and Escrima eventually merged into a single fighting style. This style focuses on stick fighting, knives, and the use of short sticks as a training tool to master empty-hand techniques.

The Future of Martial Arts Weapons

It's tempting to come to the conclusion, in an era of guns and explosives, that traditional weapons training has lost its place. Indeed, some of our weapons are more relevant in modern society than others.

In our system, training with weapons provides us with a more complete traditional martial arts experience. More practically, the process of learning and mastering weapon techniques comes full circle in reinforcing our empty-hand skills as well. Personally, I found that after learning Sai One, my blocks became more refined and stronger. I was also able to let go of my stances because I was now concentrating on my weapon.

Moreover, the fascination with these traditional means of defense lives on as sport. For instance, XMA (Xtreme Martial Arts) emphasizes the use of creative weapon forms for competition, with an emphasis on showmanship rather than practicality. Wushu, a modern Chinese sport adaptation of traditional Kung Fu, also features competitive weapon forms. Although the weapon usage in these creative forms is not necessarily practical, I would still recommend that you attend one of these styles of competition if you get the chance, as the gymnastic talent of their top competitors is rather incredible.

[XMA Bo Demo](#) [XMA Kama Demo](#) [Wushu Weapons](#)

The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) hosts regional and national tournaments throughout the year, which include two different weapon divisions: Traditional Weapon Forms and Creative Weapon Forms. These tournaments are open to everyone with the proper weapon training, including students from our schools!