



A Performance Theory Analysis of the Practice of Kata in Karate-Do: Self Resolving Contradictions of Ritual, Spontaneity, Violence, and Morality

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At the heart of Karate is the performance of kata, pre choreographed self contained ritual sequences of fighting techniques. Kata is all at once the primary means of training, a library of technique, a cultural heritage, a form of moving meditation, and a graceful expression of the art itself. This study will focus specifically on the performance of kata within the Matsubayashi Shorin-Ryu system of Okinawan Karate.

The Okinawan tradition of Karate-Do has been part of the culture of the United States since roughly the end of World War II. American students of this physical discipline absorb simultaneously a system of movements relating both to physical violence and nonviolent meditation, transplanted aspects of Asian cultures. And in order to make sense of the rest, hybrid traditions are born out of the cultural bridges that are built by teachers and students in order to assimilate the transplanted system.

Matsubayashi Shorin-Ryu is a designation of a specific Karate tradition. "Shorin-Ryu," means "small pine forest style" and is also a Japanese language rendering of Shaolin, the name of the Chinese temple to which many of Asia's fighting forms trace their lineage. Shorin-Ryu is an umbrella term used to describe one of the two main branches of Okinawan Karate, the other being called Goju-Ryu. "Matsubayashi" is the name chosen by the systems founder, Shoshin Nagamine, to pay tribute to Bushi Matsumora Sokon Okina and Matsumora Kosaku Okina, two legendary masters and teachers to which the system traces its lineage. This is the short version of the context of the art in Okinawa. [1]

Karate-Do translates literally into "Way of the Empty Hand." The suffix "Do," translating as "Way," or "path," marks it as a spiritual discipline rather than as a purely fighting form, though its historical roots are far less spiritual and more violent than its current incarnation. The metaphor of the path is apt, as the practice of Karate is a process as much as it is anything else, and (at least in the Matsubayashi tradition) is closely tied with the practice of Zen. Karate-Do, as a process, is a means of shaping the bodies and minds of students. This occurs on several planes simultaneously; physically, mentally, and spiritually. To examine a process, especially a living tradition, one must understand that the object of examination is a living thing in a state of constant flux. So it is with Karate. In his study of Kalarippayattu, Philip Zarrilli points out the circumstances of studying a practice,

Because practices are not things, but an active, embodied doing, they are intersections where personal, social, and cosmological experiences and realities are negotiated. To examine a practice is to examine these multiple sets of relationships and experiences. A practice is not a history, but practices always exist within and simultaneously create histories. Likewise, a practice is not a discourse, but implicit in any practice are one or more discourses and perhaps paradigms through which the experience of practice might be reflected upon and possibly explained.

Martial arts, like other overt techniques of disciplining the body including aerobics, weight training, contact



improvisation, etc. are “incorporating practices” through which the body, and therefore experience and meaning are “culturally shaped in its actual practices and behaviors” (Connerton 1989: 104). These are “technologies” [of the body] in Foucault’s sense, i.e. practices through which “humans develop knowledge about themselves” (1988:18). Psycho physiological techniques are practiced in order for the practitioner to be transformed to attain a certain normative and idealized relationship between the “self,” “agency,” “power,” and behavior. (5)

This study will to a certain degree place Karate in Zarrilli’s definition of a “practice.” In doing so I hope to clarify the practice of kata as a transformative tool and examine it as a performative practice.

Karate was first brought to the United States by soldiers who served in the Pacific during WWII. Later, in the interest of spreading their art and representing their culture, several Okinawans were sent to the United States with the task of being missionaries of Karate-Do. There was a feeling that the Westerners who brought back martial arts misrepresented the forms, Sensei Omine states in a letter to the Mayor and Town Zoning Board of East Northport, NY dated April 25, 1973,

Those foreigners who carried bits and pieces of the art out of Okinawa spread idea that Karate was a fighting art for the purpose of violence; at worst street fighting, at best sportlike competition and tournaments. Karate is neither.

Inherent in our art is an ancient traditional wisdom. The Karate student is one who ardently searches and strives to build his character into the finest example of human morality at the same time as he trains his body.

In an effort to bring this true tradition of Karate to Western culture, I was sent here by the All-Okinawa Karate-do Association in 1968. Mine is a missionary’s task. (Budokan Karate Dojo, 1989)

Omine Sensei was my teacher’s teacher. To some degree I was brought up on stories about him, just as when I teach, my students are told stories of my teacher. In this way, history and lineage are an informal but essential part of the pedagogy; students are expected to have not just technical proficiency, but knowledge of the tradition from which they draw their physical prowess. Teachers of Karate, as repositories of the orature, exist through their pedagogic work as the continuation of physical and spiritual traditions.

The root of the pedagogic process is the practice of kata. There is a fair amount of work by the masters themselves in print and in translation on the nature and purpose of kata, none of which I can hope to equal in this study. What I intend to do however, is to focus the lens of performance theory on this particular behavioral phenomenon. Kata is an exemplary case of what Richard Schechner terms “restored behavior.” Schechner writes,

Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original “truth” or “source” of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed. How the strip of behavior was made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated, distorted by myth and tradition. Originating as a process, used in the process of rehearsal to make a new process, a performance, the strips of behavior are not themselves process but things, items, “material.” Restored behavior can be of long duration as in some dramas and rituals or of short duration as in some gestures, dances, and mantras. (Between Theatre & Anthropology, 35).

Each kata is a self-contained ritual that is transmitted from the body of the teacher and restored into the body of the student. No detail is ignored. There is no room for personal interpretation. Every aspect from rhythm and timing to physical placement of the body in space within fractions of an inch to use of breath is pre set by the tradition.

By repetition, the forms of the various kata are inscribed on the psychophysical apparatus of the student. Once form is developed, speed and power will follow. In the case of a punch for instance, the sequence of movements is: first the foot moves and is placed on the ground, then the hip is activated, and the power generated from the center is unleashed to the fist itself. During any solo exercise, the exact ending points of any given technique are measured to the dimensions of the practitioner’s own body; therefore, a chest punch is aimed at where one’s own chest would be if it



were in front of oneself and so on. Once students are capable of being precise within their own physical dimensions, the next task is to adapt the techniques outside those dimensions.

Beginning students often cannot even walk naturally when they begin training, let alone target accurately. It is common for them to try to move their hands and feet simultaneously while hunching their shoulders, very bad form. If they should make contact with anything with such a strike, they would most likely knock themselves over. As only one foot is on the ground and their center of gravity is far from stable; the “equal and opposite reaction” of Newtonian mechanics would knock their center backwards and the rest of the body would follow. Since the movements are essentially based on natural walking, this stage must pass before fine-tuning begins.

Fine-tuning is an essential part of the training. Sensei Carbonara would tell students, “talk to your body,” in an effort to develop body awareness. The fine-tuning process gets more extreme as students move up in ability; not long before my black belt examination, I was once corrected from across a room because my punch was a fraction of an inch away from where it should have been. The correction was silent; Sensei looked down the line, made eye contact with me, looked at my fist, and gestured with his fingers that I should move my hand slightly to the left. I made the correction that untrained eyes would not even notice and he nodded and counted the next movement.

The explanation of the importance of such precision was both informal and mathematical. To paraphrase Sensei Carbonara, “You say that’s only half an inch, but if you’re trying to hit the moon and you’re half an inch off, you miss by a thousand miles.” The same fine-tuning is applied to all movements, and exemplified in kata training.

Students usually begin their training in kata within the first month of study, after they have sufficient skill in the basic techniques to begin stringing them together. New kata are introduced as the student progresses, while the previously learned kata are constantly refined. All kata begin and end in the same spatial position. The patterns are designed to always close themselves. Each kata or sequence of kata have their own “attention” position with which the beginning and end is marked. The practice of kata is detailed down to the position of the eyes.

The ritual embodies violence, the actions within the ritual mimic and condense behavior that create, along with the rest of the training, what Eugenio Barba refers to as a “decided body” (17-18). A decided body is one which has the extra-daily movements of a performance system inscribed so as to become second nature. This acculturation is visible in all types of performers from ballet dancers to sumo wrestlers.

In Matsubayashi Ryu, the acculturation of the body is achieved through very specific restored behavior, the kata. Kata are practiced in a way not only to shape the body but to affect the mind as well. The link between mind and body is of primary importance in the acquisition of knowledge. It is not just by learning the various kata, but by repeatedly experiencing oneself performing them that a student advances in skill and understanding. Karl F. Friday offers an explanation of the effectiveness of kata,

In emphasizing ritualized pattern practice and minimalizing analytical explanation, bugei masters blend ideas and techniques from the two educational models most familiar to medieval and early modern Japanese warriors, Confucianism and Zen.

Associating the bugei and samurai culture in general with Zen has been a time honored habit among both Japanese and Western authors. And to be sure, kata training shares elements in common with the Zen traditions of *ishin-denshin* or “mind-to-mind-transmission” and what Victor Hori terms “teaching without teaching.” The former stresses the importance of a student’s own immediate experience over explicit verbal or written explanation, engaging the deeper layers of a student’s mind and by-passing intellect; the latter describes a learning tool applied in Rinzai monasteries whereby students are assigned jobs and tasks that they are expected to learn and perform expertly with little or no formal explanation. Both force the student to fully invoke his powers of observation, analysis, and imagination in order to comprehend where he is being steered. Both lead to a level of understanding beyond cognition of the specific task or lesson presented. (104-105)

The basic dualities inherent in Zen are present in kata practice. Though any kata is to be practiced so often as to be entirely automatic, each time the kata is performed, it is to be as if it were the first time. The practitioner should relax into the pattern to such a degree that psychological spontaneity becomes part of the film strip of the restored behavior. To do this one must invoke a state of “flow,” as described by Victor Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre*.



Turner's description of flow involves;

- 1) The experience of merging action and awareness.
 - 2) Centering of attention
 - 3) Loss of Ego
 - 4) The experience of being in control of one's actions and environment
 - 5) Non-contradictory demands for action
 - 6) Flow is autotelic, it needs no goals or rewards outside itself
- (56-58)

One does not perform the kata, one becomes the kata. When at the age of 15 I was once asked by my sensei the purpose of kata, I was told, after giving several wrong answers, that kata was for "purifying the mind." The Zen aspect of Karate explains my sensei's answer.

From spirituality, it is a small step to invoking morality. Of course, the concept of a ritual that symbolizes violent acts being a tool for moral development seems contradictory on the surface. But the moral development of the Karate practitioner is not based on the "thou shalt not" of Western religious thought. In *The Future of Ritual*, Schechner theorizes that rituals are a means of catharsis, and furthermore, that their rhythmic actions release endorphins in the body. He further states that all rituals somehow involve violence. Schechner writes,

In both animals and humans rituals arise or are devised around disruptive, turbulent, and ambivalent interactions where faulty communication can lead to violent or even fatal encounters. Rituals, and the behavior arts associated with them, are overdetermined, full of redundancy, repetition, and exaggeration. This metamessage of "You get the message, don't you!?" (a question surrounded by emphasis) says that what a ritual communicates is very important yet problematic. The interactions that rituals surround, contain, and mediate almost always contain hierarchy, territory, and sexuality/mating (an interdependent quadruple). If these interactions are the "real events" rituals enfold, then what are the rituals themselves? They are ambivalent symbolic actions pointing at the real transactions even as they help avoid too direct a confrontation with these events. Thus rituals are also bridges – reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters. It is no accident that many rituals are "rites of passage." (230)

Schechner goes on to cite Rene Girard,

Girard believes (and I agree) that ritual sublimates violence: "The function of ritual is to 'purify violence' violence; that is to 'trick' violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals" (1977:36). All this sounds very much like theatre – especially a theatre that "redirects" violent and erotic energies. (234)

Taking this into account, let us return to kata and the development of character. Rather than, "thou shalt not," in kata, "thou shalt" until the desire to commit any act of violence is cathartically and ritually expelled.

It is through the kata that violence is ritualized and expelled by cathartic release. It is through strenuous ritual enactment of techniques designed to cause serious damage to another human being that desire to perform actual violence is expelled. Perhaps this is why progress in learning the applications is equated with moral growth. By understanding the ways in which the body can be damaged, there is an added dimension to the catharsis.

It is through harnessing such behavior in the form of ritual that it is controlled and banished in the practitioner. The violence of the actions is ritualized in the kata, which are open to several interpretations (bunkai), which become progressively more advanced and therefore more dangerous. At the same time, practitioners learn more advanced kata as they progress in the system, which again ritualize further aspects of violence.

Kata compress and systematize patterns of violence. The more advanced the student, the more advanced the kata in their personal repertoire, and, the deeper the understanding of all the kata in said repertoire. Progressing logically from there, the more advanced the kata, the more potentially violent the application of the movements within it. The greater the potential violence, the greater the catharsis. Through kata, violence is controlled, expressed, and released. The



greater the catharsis, the more content and “at peace” the practitioner. Rather than invoking “thou shalt not,” Karate raises its practitioners above unnecessary acts of aggression through enacting violence in the performance of kata.

[1] My teacher in Karate was Sensei Joseph Carbonara, 9th Dan, Hanshi, under the late Shoshin Nagamine, 10th Dan, Hanshi, and first disciple to the late Chotoku Omine, 8th Dan, Kyoshi. I could not in good faith document the traditions of Karate without acknowledging my teacher and my teacher’s teachers. Since this study is one of dual perspective, both from within as a practitioner and from without as a scholar, I must call attention to and analyze the traditions and courtesies even as I observe them.

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