

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRIAS SHOREI-RYU KARATE-DO

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In the end of the first half of the past century an American was exposed to a little known martial art called karate. He was one of the first westerners to bring this art to the Occident (1946) and his name was Robert A. Trias.

Trias was a fine observer and a methodic practitioner. He learned the essence and the essentials of this art in a time when it kept most of its originality. In his country (USA) he also met some Eastern masters and shared knowledge. The insatiable Trias learned all that he was exposed to and selected the best according his personal conception about martial arts. When we study his system we may notice that he had an inner knowledge about the principles and logic of karate that we find only in the true masters, and this was his natural gift.

Origin of the word Shorei

Shorei-ryu was the name given by Higashinna Kanryo (1853-1915) to his karate system at the turn of the 19th Century. Shorei was the name of a Shaolin Temple in the Southern China, Fujien Province, near of Fuzhou. This name is registered also in the Okinawan Bubishi, the secret book that has established the foundations of the Naha-te and most of the Higashinna karate. Itosu Ankoh (1832-1915) used this name together with Shorin to differentiate the two main streams of Okinawan karate styles: “Shorin”, to designate the karate developed in Shuri city by the imperial guard of the king, and “Shorei” to designate the karate developed in Naha city from Chinese kempo.

Origin of the Shorei-ryu of Trias

Trias has named his karate as Shorei-ryu style apparently because it was a combination of Okinawa karate and Chinese kempo. According to Trias, one of his masters, T'ung Gee Hsing, was the one who taught him this style: “Hsing spent many years furthering his knowledge of kempo, Shuri-de and Kosho while continuing to improve the Hsing-Yi system. From these combined Chinese-Okinawa forms originated the system (...) later called Shorei by the Japanese” [2]. So, this system was a blend of karate and Hsing-Yi (the influence of Hsing-Yi in the Trias system can be appreciate in its “animal forms”, a terminology shared with the Hsing-Yi).

Now, the “Kosho” that Trias was refering in the above citation is the Kosho-ryu, a kempo style brought from Kyusho, Japan, by James Mitose in 1936 [1]. Mitose opened a dojo called “Official Self-Defense Club” (Honolulu, Hawaii) which taught kempo during the WW II and has published a book (What Is Self-defense/Kempo Ju-jutsu) in 1953.

According to Trias, apparently master Hsing also was initiated in this family style. Some of Kosho-ryu can be seen in the Trias pre-arranged kumite, method of punching, the crest of his association and its spiritual orientation. However, other old Okinawan karate styles had similar techniques, but not that crest.

The original karate of Trias could have been Kosho-ryu kempo. Its basic technical program, some kata and the crest draws our attention to this. However, Trias has introduced new forms as he was being exposed to them from other styles of karate (Goju and Shotokan). This evolution would be reflected in the new design of the original crest, that was renamed “Kondo-no-Sho-ryu” [5], that is, the “New Pine Tree School”, while the Kosho-ryu meant “Old Pine Tree School.”

When we study the original Kosho-ryu we find clear “footprints” of Choki Motobu (or some other master with the same or similar fighting method), whose method was based almost totally in makiwara training and pre-arranged kumite techniques. However, this is not more evident in the actual Trias system, but may have been in the forties or early fifties. On the other hand, despite the fact that Mitose has said that his kempo was not Okinawan [1], the method (makiwara and two man drills) deny emphatically his words, that it is, Kosho-ryu kempo is totally Okinawan in the historical paradigm of the karate (apparently, Mitose has based on phylosophical and religious considerations the differences between the fighting spirit of karate and kempo).

In his book, there was reproduced a photo of Choki Motobu and of Kamesuke Higaonna (these masters, including Mizuho Mutsu, went from Japan to teach karate in Hawaii in 1932 and 1933, respectively, but Motobu was detained by Immigration officials in Hawaii and denied entry; he stayed about one month in a Honolulu detention center before returning to Japan again, however, he probably taught some enthusiasts there). After the Hsing Shorei, that would have been a combination of Kosho-ryu, Shuri-te and Hsing-Yi, Trias was exposed to Yamaguchi Gojukai and Funakoshi Shotokan. He learned the best of these systems and added some of both to improve his original Shorei.

The Structure of the Trias Shorei-ryu

The Trias Shorei-ryu is a complete system of karate, a typical “ryu-ha” with a strong social and spiritual foundation. The system is divided in physical, moral and self-defense objectives. Technical achievement (basics, ippon-kumite, taezu naru, formal exercises with empty-hands and with Okinawan feudal weapons, self defense, sparring and competition) are the core of the system, however, it is predicated upon the moral and ethical conduct of the individuals in the dojo as in their social group. The body as the center for the physical and spiritual manifestations is the core of the pedagogy of the system: body alignment, correct breathing with saika tanden, the rational use of force by the understanding of the biomechanics, etc, are the groundwork of this Shorei-ryu. Spiritual exercises using breath control and movements from yoga take an important part in the Trias concerns about the use of the karate as a toning tool for the will and temper of both men and women.

Table I represents an attempt to establish the origins of the Shorei kata syllabus using information from Trias' texts [2, 3, 5].

Table 1: Possible origins of the kata syllabus of the Trias Shorei-ryu (until the level shodan black belt).

Shorei-ryu Kata	Origin
Junipo	Kosho-ryu?
Omote series	Shotokan
Taikyoku series	Shotokan
Pinan series	Shotokan
Gekisai	Gojukai
Neko Buto*	Unknown
Kururunfa**	Unknown
Naifuanchin	Kosho-ryu?
Empi Sho	Shotokan
Passai	Kosho-ryu?
Sanchin	Gojukai
Tensho	Gojukai
Seipai	Gojukai
Gopei Sho	Kosho-ryu?
Nandan Sho	Kosho-ryu?
Kanku Sho	Shotokan
Tsue Sho (bo kata)	Unknown
Te-Gatana (sai kata)	Unknown
Forms added later:	
Wansu	Shorin-ryu
Anaku	Shorin-ryu
Dan Enn sho	Chinese Kempo
Shudo sho	

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*This would represent a series of about four kata supposedly devised by G. Yamaguchi [3] to be the Goju equivalent of Pinan series, however, there are no memories of these forms in Gojukai.

**This is not the Miyagi kata, but a variant of Neko Buto.

In the kata syllabus of Trias Shorei we find some them carrying the suffix “Sho.” According Trias, “...the Sho katas date back to the 1400’s to Sho Hashio of Chuzan in Okinawa; the Naifun-chin and Bassai date back to 1900 to Anko Itosu and Choki Motobu” (4). Well, here we have an important thing. Usually it is taught the “sho” and “dai” are suffixes to classify kata in “short” and “long” forms, but, we need to pay attention to the observation of Trias. In fact, the “sho” kata that he introduced in his system are probably old Okinawan kata that date back to the age of the Ryukyu kingdom (the Sho dynasty), probably from the first half of the 19th century. The kanji of the “sho” kata of Trias can not be the same kanji used to appoint the “sho” as meaning “short”, but probably the kanji for the “Sho” dynasty of Ryukyu old kingdom. Another hypothesis will be that this “Sho” is a reference to the “Pine Tree” symbol (Koshoryu?).

The Evolution of Trias Shorei-ryu

Examining the syllabus of Trias Karate in the 60’s [3], 70’s [2] and 80’s [5] we notice a change oin the kata syllabus without significant modifications in the technical syllabus or in the moral philosophy of the system. Two of them are “Shorei” and the last was renamed “Shuri-ryu.” I will call the two versions of Shorei as “original Shorei” and “revised Shorei,” respectively. Basically, all these versions retain their technical and philosophical structure with modifications occuring only in its kata syllabus. Table 2 shows this kata syllabus:

Table 2: Kata syllabus to the level shodan black belt of the original Shorei and Revised Shorei (see text).

Level	Original Shorei-ryu	Revised Shorei-ryu	Shuri-ryu
7-kyu (Yellow)	Taikyoku Pinan I Omote (10 series)	Taikyoku Wunsu	Taikyoku Wunsu
6-kyu (Blue)	Pinan II	Anaku Naifuanchin I	Anaku Naifuanchin I
5-kyu (Green)	Pinan III, IV	Sanchin	Sanchin
4-kyu (Purple)	Pinan V Gekisai	Empi Sho	Empi Sho
3-kyu (Brown)	Junipo Neko Buto, Kururunfa O’Naifuanchin, Sanchin	Tsue-bo Bassai Dai	Tsue Sho Bassai Dai
2-kyu (Brown)	Te-gatana Tensho	Gopei-sho Dan Enn-sho	(nor existent)
1-kyu (Brown)	Gopei-sho Nandan-sho	Naifuanchin II Nandan-sho Kusanku-sho	(not existent)
Shodan (Black)	Seipai Bassai Kusanku-sho (More forms)	Naifuanchin III Te-gatana Tensho (More forms)	Gopei-sho Dan Enn-sho
Nidan (Black)			Naifuanchin II Nandan Sho Kusanku Sho
Sandan (Black)	(More forms)	(More forms)	Te-Gatana Tensho

The original Shorei-ryu syllabus shows a progressive kata program with clear pedagogic objectives. The Taikyoku and Omote series forms a basic system for learning of beginners with the necessity of nothing more. Karate self-defense techniques are introduced through the Pinan kata series and Gekisai, together the pre-arranged kumite and taezu naru exercises. These elements contain the essentials of all karate. The sankyu student will learn more basics as a complement of the preceding forms. Later the student will be introduced to advanced forms where they will learn the complex aspects of the old Okinawan karate.

This method, based on a progressive kata syllabus, was typical of the karate that was intensely practiced in Japan until the WWII. In those times there were no definitive styles and the schools frequently shared knowledge and forms. The Pinan series, for example, were also practised in most Goju dojo during those times.

The revised Shorei-ryu and the final Shuri-ryu seems to me an adaptation of Trias to the new tendencies of the karate in the American society, with the introduction of new “compact” systems like Isshin-ryu, Okinawa Kempo and some Shorin-ryu brought back from Okinawa by American armed forces veterans. However, it is my opinion, that the original Trias Shorei system represents the most complete method of karate and the better pedagogy when we compare it with the other versions. The knowledge of Shorin, Goju and Kempo forms and its principles are necessary for all students who wish to attain the Pinnacle of Karate.

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All opinions and mistakes that can be found in this article are of my entire responsibility.

References:

- (1) Haynes, Bruce A. Karate's History and Traditions. Tuttle, 1981, pp. 126-131.
- (2) Trias, Robert A. Beginning Manual Yellow Belts, Trias International Karate Shorei-ryu, no date.
- (3) Trias, Robert A. Karate is My Life, Trias International Institute of Karate, Arizona, 1963, p. 31.
- (4) Trias, Robert A. The Hand Is My Sword, Tuttle, 1973, p. 141.
- (5) Trias, Robert A. The Pinnacle of Karate, author edition, 1980, p. 31.