



# The History of Karate Belts and Ranks

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## Introduction

Modern-day students of karate generally assume that the ranking system of *kyu* (color belt) and *dan* (black belt) levels, and the various titles that high-ranking black belts hold, are, like the katas, a part of karate tradition extending back centuries. However, despite the fact that karate is indeed very old, the ranking system itself dates back only to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A look at the history and development of the current rank system will help us to put our own belt ranks in proper historical perspective.

## Japanese Martial Culture

Japanese culture tends to be highly regimented and structured. Virtually any traditional art that you might wish to study in Japan, from flower arranging (*ikebana*) to calligraphy (*shodo*), comes with its own progressive series of formal ranks. So it is also with the martial arts.

Some early Japanese martial arts utilized a three-rank system which involved the awarding of certificates. The first, *shodan*, signified a beginner; the second, *chudan*, indicated middle rank; and the third, *jodan*, or upper rank, allowed the student to enter into the *okuden*, or secret traditions, of his school or style.

Another early system utilized a series of licenses called *menkyo*. The first rank, *kirikami*, was usually awarded after one to three years of training, and signified that the student had been accepted by his school as a serious practitioner. After three to five more years the student was presented with a *mokuroku*, or written catalog of the system's techniques. After two to ten more years the student finally received his *menkyo*, or license to teach. The *menkyo* might also specify one of several different possible titles indicating his position with the system's organizational structure. The ultimate certificate was the *menkyo kaiden*, awarded to students who had mastered every aspect of the system. Some system headmasters awarded only a single *menkyo kaiden* in their lifetime, to the person they chose as their successor.

## Okinawan Martial Culture

Karate, however, is of Okinawan origin rather than Japanese. The early Okinawans had existed for centuries under Chinese hegemony, gradually assimilating aspects of

Chinese hard-style *kung fu* into their indigenous fighting style (called simply *te*, or “hand” fighting). Chinese empty-hand fighting had evolved as part of the Buddhist monastic tradition. Karate in Okinawa was passed on privately within families, from father to son, and was taught to members of the aristocracy and the police force to help guarantee control over the general populace.

Oftentimes, especially under Japanese occupation when the teaching of martial skills was prohibited, the training was carried out in secret, after dark, in enclosed private courtyards. Masters would select only a few students to teach, and charged no fee. A student’s progress was measured not by an assigned rank but by how many years he had studied, how much he had learned, and how well his character had developed. Nothing more.

### **Origin of the Color-Belt System**

Speculative tradition proposes that belt colors (as indicators of rank) originated in a peculiar habit of washing all of one’s training clothes *except* the cloth belt. Thus as training progressed the initially white belt would first turn a dingy yellow, then a greenish yellow-brown, then a really dirty brown, and finally a repulsively filthy black. Eventually, so they say, this progression was formalized as the white, yellow, green, brown and black belt ranks. Well, it’s a nice story, but probably not true. Even so, some modern karate practitioners do not wash their belts, hoping to achieve a worn and rugged look as evidence of their years of hard training. Others *overwash* their belts to get them looking worn-out sooner. And still others prefer to wear a new-looking belt at all times. It’s a matter of personal preference. In some rare cases a master will present his old and frayed black belt to his favorite student or successor, who will preserve it as a treasured memento and wear it as an emblem of pride and honor to his teacher. Although not traditional in Shuri-ryu, some schools encourage black belt holders to have their name (and perhaps also the name of their style) embroidered in gold Japanese characters on the end-lengths of their belt.

The kyu/dan system of rankings was actually devised around the turn of the century by a Japanese martial artist, Jigoro Kano (1860-1938). Kano had taken the samurai battlefield art of *jujitsu* or *aikijutsu* and modified it heavily so as to eliminate the really dangerous aspects and make it safe for practice as a sport. This new sport, *judo*, he introduced into Japanese grade schools and colleges. With so many new students, all in the highly structured public school environment, he decided that a grading and ranking system would help to encourage them, and would allow them to gauge their own progress.

There had always been interest in Okinawan fighting arts among the Japanese, but the Okinawans had long considered the Japanese to be foreign invaders and were not about to teach them all of their fighting secrets. Finally, however, karate came out of the closet when Anko Itosu (1830-1915) shocked the Okinawan martial arts community by initiating a program to teach karate to children in Okinawan public schools in 1901. Shortly thereafter, an Okinawan master named Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957), a student of Itosu, decided it was time to bring a form of karate to Japan. He merged selected elements and modified selected katas from various Okinawan systems into a new style for “export” which came to be called *shotokan* (his nickname was “Shoto”). His purpose was to provide good exercise and character-building training for the Japanese (I guess he

figured they needed it), *not* to teach them how to beat up Okinawans. So in formulating his new style he altered many of the katas and techniques in terms of their practical fighting value, rendered them more defensive rather than offensive, eliminated entirely the *kyusho-jitsu* or nerve-striking training which Okinawan masters considered most dangerous and secret, and he also eliminated all use of held-held weapons. (Even today, shotokan tournaments have no weapons divisions.)

Funakoshi moved more or less permanently to Japan where he instituted karate training in 1922, and soon it spread to schools as the practice of judo had done. Funakoshi became closely associated with the aristocratic Jigoro Kano, and by the late 1930's he had developed the modern karate uniform or *gi* as a lighter-weight version of Kano's judo *gi*. He eventually decided that it would be appropriate to adopt the color-belt system for bestowing karate ranks on his students; this system was by then well established in Japanese martial arts, under the aegis of the Japanese *Butoku-kai*, the section of the Ministry of Education which was established in 1895 to oversee ranks and standards for kendo and judo. In 1903-1906 the *Butoku-kai* first bestowed the samurai titles of *hanshi* and *kyoshi* (what amounted to instructors' licenses) on several kendo specialists; the title of *renshi* (a training apprentice) was added later.

The belt-rank system devised by Kano and accepted by the *Butoku-kai* consisted of six *kyu* (color-belt) grades, three white and three brown, and ten *dan* (black belt) grades. Funakoshi adopted this same system for karate after 1922, and on April 12, 1924, he awarded the first karate black belts and dan rankings to seven of his students: Hironori Ohtsuka (later the founder of Wado-ryu), Shinken Gima, Ante Tokuda, and four others named Katsuya, Akiba, Shimizu, and Hirose. At the time, Funakoshi himself held *no rank* in any martial art or system.

### **Standardizing Rank Requirements**

In 1938 the *Butoku-kai* called upon all existing karate schools and styles to register for official sanctioning, and an important meeting was called for the purpose of standardizing rank requirements (something that had never been done!). Thus the various Japanese styles (Wado-ryu, Shito-ryu, Kushin-ryu, Japanese Kempo, Shindo-jinen-ryu, Gojo-ryu and Shotokan) were brought together under a single set of grading standards. Ironically, Funakoshi was awarded his *renshi* title by the board of the *Butoku-kai*, on which sat one of his own students, Koyu Konishi (who was Japanese by birth, an advantage the Okinawan Funakoshi did not share). Chojun Miyagi (1888-1953), the Okinawan founder of Gojo-ryu, was the first karate recipient of the title of *kyoshi* (master or "assistant professor") from the *Butoku-kai* in 1937.

### **Post-War Organizations**

World War II caused a major disruption in Japanese and Okinawan martial arts. Many masters had died during the war, the practice of martial arts was forbidden for a time by the American occupying forces, and the *Butoku-kai* was shut down. Each school was on its own, and the surviving leaders had to begin anew. In Okinawa the *kyu/dan* system was not yet well established, although some systems utilized at least the black belt. Following the war it finally became more widely accepted, leaving the problem of developing new sanctioning bodies to legitimize the ranks being awarded.

During the early 1950's certification was accomplished through associations formed by the dojos in each style, including the Goju-kai, Shito-kai, Chito-kai, Shotokai, and the Japan Karate Association. Each formed a board and designated an officer who would have signature authority on rank certificates. Those recipients reaching a high dan ranking often went out and started their own new styles.

These groups usually cited affiliation to some higher authority or granting agency to legitimize their actions; the Japanese Ministry of Education was a favorite. Other new associations sprang up in Japan and Okinawa, becoming the ranking authorities for grantors as the Butoku-kai had been. High officers in these organizations usually assumed a rank for themselves based on criteria they had written. Among the earliest was the All-Japan Karatedo Federation, initiated shortly after World War II by such headmasters as Funakoshi, Tsuyoshi Chitose (born in 1898 and still President as of 1993), Kenwa Mabuni, Gogen Yamaguchi and Kanken Toyama. The International Martial Arts Federation, launched in 1952, included judo and kendo as well as karatedo. It established a system involving ten black belt levels plus the titles of renshi, kyoshi and hanshi; many of the highest ranked modern masters received their ranks through this organization.

In Okinawa the kyu/dan system did not really become universal until 1956, when the Okinawa Karate Federation was formed. Chosin Chibana (founder of Shorin-ryu) was the first president; Chibana and Kanken Toyama were officially recognized by the Japanese Ministry of Education to grant any rank in any style of karate. This helped to end the Japanese discrimination against Okinawans in the granting of ranks and titles. For some years previous, the principle "system" used in Okinawa had simply been white belt for students and black belt for teachers.

In 1964 an organization arose which for the first time unified all existing styles of karate: the Federation of All-Japan Karatedo Organizations (FAJKO). The ranking standards set forth by FAJKO in 1971 ultimately became recognized by the International Traditional Karate Federation (ITKF) and are generally accepted worldwide. It includes only six color-belt levels; some systems add two to four more and the exact sequence of colors tends to vary from one style to another. But today essentially all karate systems, whether formally tied to FAJKO or not, conform more or less to the basic FAJKO criteria and standards. This includes the All-Okinawa Karate and Kobudo Rengokai (AOKKR, formed in 1967).

In the United States the principle certifying organization for Okinawan, Japanese and Korean karate was, for a long time, Robert Trias's U.S. Karate Association. This organization in the 1980's boasted a membership of 425 American and 86 foreign karate schools in 56 countries. During its entire history it represented over 800,000 members. Following Trias's death in 1989, the association disbanded into four smaller organizations. KoSho Shuri-ryu schools are now in the U.S.A. Karate Federation, formed in 1985, which became a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee, the Pan-American Union of Karatedo Organizations (PUKO) and the World Union of Karatedo Organizations (WUKO; now reorganized as the World Karate-do Federation). As of 1996 it represents about 15,000 karate practitioners. The current president of the USAKF, Hanshi George Anderson (10<sup>th</sup> dan), is also Director of Kwanmuzendokai International; both organizations currently underwrite and certify our rank certificates,

and Hanshi Anderson is the sensei of Shihan John Linebarger, Director of KoSho Karate and Chief Instructor of Robert Trias's Shuri-ryu in Arizona.

## **Conclusion**

Karate ranks are thus, historically, a rather modern construct imposed over an old martial art. They are important in the standardization of requirements which helps to maintain the integrity and value of systems based on tradition. However, it should never be forgotten that rank does not make the man. Within every rank there can be found a wide range of students whose skills vary dramatically, causing the observant karateka to sometimes wonder whether rank really guarantees much of anything. Achievement of rank should be considered as a side-effect of karate training and not a goal. The true goal is personal development, to "be all that we can be" at whatever rank level we may attain.

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