Crack the Heian Shodan
The Heian Kata Foundation of Shotokan Katas
by Bruce D. Clayton, Ph.D.

Shotokan’s Secret
EXPANDED EDITION

The Hidden Truth Behind Karate’s Fighting Origins
by Bruce D. Clayton, Ph.D.
The founders of shotokan karate devised survival skills to overcome impossible odds. When the king of Okinawa found himself trapped between samurai occupiers and U.S. Marines, his Shuri bodyguards answered these threats by creating the cornerstone of hard-style karate: the heian kata. Modern masters have pass down these technical forms to their students, but their martial applications remained a mystery—until now.

In the expanded edition of the acclaimed Shotokan's Secret: The Hidden Truth Behind Karate's Fighting Origins, author Bruce D. Clayton cracks open the kata with new insights into their meaning and purpose. The new edition analyzes the enemies that unarmed Okinawan bodyguards like Sokon Matsumura and Yasutsune Itosu faced. From there, Shotokan's Secret delves deeply into the heian kata, revealing how each heian form contains the key techniques for defeating Okinawa’s adversaries.

The following is an excerpt taken from this book and includes a mini glossary.

The Shuri bodyguards had well-known fights with other martial artists on the streets of Naha. Some of these fights were life-and-death bouts, but usually they were contests where no fatal or maiming injury was contemplated. Their challengers were fighting for reputation, like the teenage boys who challenged famous gunfighters in the Old West.

The old strategy was strength and toughness. The Chinese approach encouraged toe-to-toe slugfests where the fighters stood in relatively upright stances with the knees turned in to protect the legs and groin. They exchanged a rapid series of blows to vital points that gradually wore the opponent down. To prepare for these fights, the Chinese artists beat their own bodies with split-bamboo clubs until they could no longer feel the pain of impact. They performed sanchin kata for hours at a time while holding weighted jars by their fingertips to develop shoulder muscles and a strong grip. People still undergo this kind of training in old-fashioned styles like uechi ryu.

The essence of Shuri-te was Matsumura’s discovery of momentum power. He charged in at high speed, using his body momentum to knock the opponent off his feet. From that point on, you didn’t need big chest muscles to win at karate.

No more weight lifting! Instead, we do deep stances to develop our leg muscles. No more short, mincing steps! Instead, we leap forward on the attack. No more standing still like a tree! Instead, we charge at the enemy and use the kinetic energy of the collision as our power source. Oi-zuki, with body momentum behind it, can literally make a man airborne. When I was a white belt, Sensei Ken Osborne proved this to me more than once. His front punch could lift me off the ground and throw me several feet backward to hit a wall. I felt like a bug on a windshield.

If we believe the legends, Matsumura used his new technical invention to overwhelm and humiliate his traditional (Chinese-trained) rivals. A linear punch or kick has enough impact to knock the opponent off his feet. From that point on, you didn’t need big chest muscles to win at karate. In comparison, shotokan white belts charge around the room like a group of weightlifters.

Heian shodan was revolutionary

Shotokan students learn heian shodan as their first kata, or possibly the first “real” kata after the taikyoku kata. Either way, their introduction to karate is based on front stance, front punch and high-speed stepping around the room. We do one-step sprints all over this kata. Since it is our first kata, it never occurs to us that this is bizarre.

To gain some perspective, have a look at George Alexander’s Hakutsuru, Secret of the White Crane, or the similar hakutsuru video by John Sells. The white crane kata is thought to be ancestral to shotokan. Compared to Matsumura’s dynamic karate, hakutsuru performers are standing still. Each dignified step introduces multiple hand techniques, as many as 20 per step. In comparison, shotokan white belts charge around the room like a group of weightlifters.

Figure 61: Ranking of Karate Styles, median kata of each style ranked by the linear ratio. The linear ratio ranks the styles in an intuitive sequence from soft Chinese styles (left) to hard Shuri-te styles (right). Heian shodan (far right) is the “hardest” kata in any of these systems by a wide margin. (Chart design by David LaVerne.)

1 Think of shotokan’s sanchin dachi and hangetsu dachi.
2 Thank you, Sensei Osborne.
pack of howling jackals.

To determine how heian shodan differs from earlier forms, I collected 121 videos of kata performances from multiple Okinawan karate styles. I also added a few forms from white crane and wing chun. I studied the videos frame-by-frame, over and over, looking for an objective way to measure the difference between “hard” systems and “soft” ones.

After weeks of experiments, I discovered a simple way to do this. I ranked the kata performances by the number of linear-impact techniques (techniques where the body moves rapidly forward at the moment of impact) and divided by the total number of moves (mostly hand techniques). I called this the “linear ratio.” This ratio crudely estimates how much the kata relies on Shuri momentum instead of Chinese strength.

Every style had a few outliers, but there was a visible trend. If you apply the linear ratio to all the kata of a style and then plot the median (average) score for that style, you get an interesting bar graph.

A plot like Figure 61 conceals a multitude of statistical sins, and yet there is no doubt that the linear ratio sorted the Chinese styles to the left and the hard-style Shuri styles to the right. When we add heian shodan to the graph, it stands alone at the extreme right.

Heian shodan is a very different kata. That’s the key to understanding why hard-style, “linear” karate was such a departure from traditional chuan fa. Naha’s Chinese teachers must have been astonished to see people performing heian shodan. They had never seen anything like it.

VARIATIONS IN HEIAN SHODAN (PINAN NIDAN)

Now let’s look inside heian shodan to see where people have been tampering with it.

Comparing shotokan’s heian shodan to its counterparts in other styles, we note immediately that the enbusen (floor plan) of the kata is different. Shotokan, and styles derived from shotokan, use an H-shaped pattern. Other styles use Itosu’s original enbusen, which looks more like a double-headed arrow (↔). The “wings” of the kata were originally performed at a steep angle.

The branches of heian shodan all look a lot alike, except in a few places where someone has meddled. For instance, some groups begin the kata by turning to the left and shifting backward on step 1, recoiling from the threat instead of leaping toward it. You can see that in matsubayashi ryu and in seito shito-ryu. This is because of revisions by Chotoku Kyan.

There are changes visible in step 4 of the kata, too, where we pull back, swing our fist in a circle, and then attack with a hammerfist. All branches of karate begin this sequence in a front stance and down-block posture, and then pull back to a semi-upright stance. Some branches remain in the upright stance while executing the hammerfist; other branches give power to the hammerfist by dropping the hips into front stance again. Dropping down is a shotoism added after 1924. Non-shotokan styles don’t drop back into front stance, and early shotokans didn’t, either.

Another place where the kata differ is in the three up blocks (steps 7-9). Some shotokan groups do normal beginner up blocks here (fist closed). Other groups do an up block, and then open the hand into shuto position at the top of the block before stepping forward. The shotokai group does shutei blocks only. The 1924 shotokan students did normal up blocks that opened into shutos. That appears to be the original technique.

Matsubayashi ryu and seito shito-ryu do their front punches in a stiff, upright stance that kills the forward momentum. (That’s Kyan again.) All shotokan groups, and near relations like robukai, use the deep front stance we would normally expect.

The 1924 video of a Funakoshi student demonstrating heian shodan has a curious oddity at step 17: the punch at the second kiai. We would expect a front stance and oi-zuki here, but this student delivered the third punch in shiko dachi, punching to the side?

The modern shute uke technique, where you pull one hand back to your chest while striking with the other, was introduced very early in shotokan’s history. One of the 1924 videos shows a student doing the older, swinging type of shuto uke. In that version, both hands swing forward at the same time.

Most groups do mid-level, knife-hand blocks at the end of the kata, but matsubayashi ryu, seito shito-ryu and wado ryu do knife-hand down blocks instead.

Even noting these discrepancies, heian shodan (pinan nidan) is pretty much the same kata everywhere you see it. It is all about charging around the room doing front punches.

HISTORICAL APPLICATIONS OF HEIAN SHODAN

It is clear that heian shodan is mainly about using body momentum to knock people over with oi-zuki, the “pursuing” punch. Shotokan teachers are well-versed in teaching that kind of application. That doesn’t mean that there’s nothing more to say, however. When you add some jujutsu to the kata, heian shodan takes on some startling new qualities.

• Steps 1-2 (down block, front punch) exactly match a well-known throw from aikido.
• Step 3 (the first turn) can be used to teach a wrist lock, a hair throw and a neck crank.
• Steps 4-6 demonstrate three deadly combinations of jujutsu and karate techniques.
• Steps 7-10 (up blocks, kiai, turn) exactly match the tai otoshi throw. There is not much doubt that this is the original application for this sequence.
• Steps 11-14 repeat steps 2-5 (hair throw, neck crank).
• Steps 15-17 are the core lesson in how to use oi-zuki. A successful attack requires a timing change.
• Step 18 repeats steps 9-10 (tai otoshi throw).
• Steps 18-21 demonstrate the true use of shuto uke, ending with ami uchi, a very useful throw from aikido.

Thomas, 1988. As mentioned in section 2.3, some of taekwondo’s forms are based on the heians. Their H-shaped pattern and numerous other photoisms demonstrate that they were derived from shotokan’s heians.

Nagamine, 2002.

Warrener, 2003. Credit to David LaVerne for noticing that detail.
STEPS 1-2:
IKKAJO AND HIJI ATE

In traditional shotokan, they tell you that step 1 (gedan barai) blocks a kick, and step 2 (oi-zuki) knocks the enemy over on his back. This is an example of restating the obvious (“this is a block; this is a punch”) as if that explained the application. We need to rise above that level. We can use the block and punch to teach a very important lesson about karate jutsu.

The first two moves of heian shodan can be explained as a subtle but very effective throw (Figure 63). Aikido students know it as hiji ate kokyu nage, the “elbow-pressure breathing throw.” It looks exactly like a down block and front punch.

Begin the kata with your partner standing in front of you, holding your wrists. As you stack up for the down block, reach across with your left hand to grasp his left hand in the jujutsu “pistol grip” (tanjuu nigiru, with your middle,  

8 Combes, Sam and others, Aiki-do, Volume 3, DVD 54 minutes, Black Belt Video, 1999.

Figure 62: Tanjuu nigiru, the “pistol grip.” This grip is the generic tool for applying various types of wrist locks (A). Wrap the middle, ring and little fingers around the edge of the opponent’s hand, gripping either the first or fifth metacarpal bone (B, C). Use your thumb to secure the other edge of his hand. Keep your index finger extended. This grip can be applied to the hand in multiple ways, as seen here (D, E).

Figure 63: Hiji ate, heian shodan, steps 1-2. The “down block” uses an ikkajo wrist lock to lock the opponent’s wrist and elbow, forcing him into a vulnerable position (A, B). The “punch” hyperextends his elbow, either breaking it or throwing him on the floor (C, D).
ring and little fingers wrapped around the little-finger side of his palm. As you start the down block, peel his hand off your right wrist and push it out ahead of you as you step to the left. This rolls his arm into an ikkajo arm bar and wrist lock. It also forces him to stagger an awkward step to the west with you.

As you begin the second step (the front punch), his arm is stretched across your path. “Punch” through the space below his arm, and use the fold of your elbow to put pressure against his elbow joint as you step through. Maintain your grip on his hand as you rotate your punching wrist and straighten your elbow for full extension on the punch. This rotation puts sudden, painful pressure on his elbow joint. Done with shotokan power, this will dislocate the elbow and sprawl your partner on his face. Aikido students do it more gently, giving the partner an opportunity to do a forward roll and save his arm.

In Total Aikido, Sensei Gozo Shioda points out that forearm rotation and elbow-snap are the ingredients that make this throw work. This is exactly what we mean by futi in shotokan. Wrist-rotation and elbow-snap are the elements that make the front punch work, too. This is true in both arts because they use the skeleton for biomechanical advantage. What works for one art works for the other.

This throw isn’t the historical application, but it is important that we learn it and teach it. Why? Because if the front punch can be a throw, then anything can be a throw. I use this as a tool for prying open closed minds.

If you still hunger for the “real” application of steps 1 and 2, consider this. The opponent isn’t kicking. He’s punching at your face with his right hand. The “stack up” before the “down block” is really the outside forearm block that defends your face. The downward swinging gesture sweeps his arm down and out to the side, leaving his center open and vulnerable. You lance through the opening with oi-zuki.

It seems so obvious once someone points it out.

**STEP 3: KAMI NAGE, ATAMA MAKIKOMI**

In the third move of heian shodan, we make a long step to the rear, turning 180 degrees to the right, ending in gedan barai. In traditional shotokan, they tell you that you are blocking a kick. Imagine that at the end of the previous move (the punch), your opponent successfully avoided your attack. Your right fist sailed over his left shoulder next to his head. Grab the hair at the back of his head and execute step 3. Step back, turn around and down block. He’ll sprawl on his back at your feet (Figure 64).

This is kami nage, hair throw, which I learned from Briggs Hunt at UCLA in 1972. Probably every street fighter in the world knows this move, which is why they shave their heads. You can see Iain Abernethy demonstrate it in the second cluster of pinan nidan in his Bunkai Jutsu DVD. George Kirby uses one hand in the hair and the other on the opponent’s chin to execute atama makikomi, the head winding throw. The Bubishi, the ancient text of Okinawan karate, calls this technique “a general holding a seal/stamp,” and then shows the same technique a few pages later as “beautiful woman wearing makeup.” (Sometimes there is a narrow line between ancient wisdom and ancient senility.)

There are multiple variations on the simple idea of grabbing the enemy’s hair and taking his head around and down. The technique is very appropriate to beginners.

**STEPS 4-5: IKKAJO, NIHKAJO, TE KAGAMI, TETTSUI UCHI**

Steps 4-5 of heian shodan find us pulling back from a down-block posture, swinging the right arm in a large circle, and dropping down into a tettsui uchi hammerfist strike. After the strike we step forward and execute a left front punch.

In traditional shotokan, they tell us this is a wrist release followed by a hammerfist strike to the collarbone, arm or head. This explanation frees your hand, but it is a tactical blunder. It returns 9 Shioda, Gozo, Total Aikido: The Master Course, Kodansha, 1996, p. 154-155.
10 The photo is from Jein Do: Self-Defense for Young People of All Ages, Teacher’s Guide, by Bruce Clayton, Jein Do LLC, 2010. Used with permission.
12 Kirby, 1983, p 57.
13 McCarthy, 1995, p. 169 and 175.
you to a neutral position against an alert, upright enemy. We pretend that the hammerfist attack would be effective, but any black belt would block it, dodge it or preempt it. There has to be more to this story.

In fact, step 4 of heian shodan can be used to teach three devastating wrist locks, each of which sets up a crippling or killing blow. That’s the kind of fighting we would expect to find in the Shuri Crucible.

**Te kagami:** You did a right down block, and your opponent has caught your right wrist with his left hand. Pull your arm gracefully (no jerking) back toward your left hip and swing it up until you can look into the palm of your open right hand. This is the setup for the **te kagami** (hand mirror) throw as practiced in aikijutsu, aikido, and hakkoryu jujutsu.14 (Te kagami is a variant on the **te nage** hand throw. See Figure 65.)

This move inverts his left hand so that you can reach under it with your left hand and secure the jujutsu “pistol grip” on the back of his hand. Your middle, ring and little fingers clamp around the base of his thumb so you can apply a very painful wrist lock. Once you have the grip, it is trivial to pull your right wrist free of his grip.

Do not throw your opponent over! Simply apply pressure with the wrist lock to break his posture. You can “dial in” increments of pain to twist him into more and more awkward postures (Figure 66). In one of those awkward postures, he exposes the right side of his neck to your downward tettsui strike. It’s a lethal strike. The tettsui will shear his neck vertebrae.

Twist his wrist to make him helpless and vulnerable; then unload the full power of your shotokan training against a vulnerable point. He can’t dodge, block or counter. This isn’t just an “effective” self-defense technique. It would be murder to do this in real life.15

Matsumura took every advantage. If you grabbed his wrist, you died.

**Ikkajo:** The opponent has your right wrist grasped in his left hand, as before. Bring the fingers of your right hand up to the outside of his wrist so you can grasp his left forearm just above the wrist (Figure 67). Now make the sweeping pull back to your left hip, as prescribed by the kata. Use your left hand to join your right in capturing his left arm in the classic

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15 San Ten is an equal-opportunity mayhem environment without regard to age, race, creed or sexual orientation.
ikkajo straight-arm bar and wrist lock. This is the first thing you learn in most aikido classes. In hakkoryu jujutsu, it is known as ude osae dori, the arm-pressure technique.

Once you have his hand and arm in ikkajo, secured with your left hand, it is trivial to pull your right arm free of what remains of his grip. Your right fist arcs upward and starts down, aimed at his exposed elbow. The hammerstrike comes down on the elbow joint, dislocating it and probably breaking the proximal end of the ulna (the olecranon process).

Note that he is bent over in a helpless posture when you launch the oi-zuki in step 5. It hits him in the left temple, potentially cracking his skull.

Nikajo: This time, have your opponent grasp your right wrist using his right hand instead of his left (Figure 68).

Swing your arm back toward your left hip (as required by the kata), then up, over and down as if reaching toward his face. As the hand is on the upward curve of the circle, reach in with your left hand and press his fingers tightly against your right wrist so he can’t let go. This is called the nikajo lock in aikijutsu and aikido, and is known as matsuba dori (pine-needle lock) in hakkoryu jujutsu. The lock is vicious. Done slowly, it forces the opponent down to his knees, turning his body slightly toward your right. Done quickly, it tears his wrist apart. This puts the right side of his head squarely in the maximum-impact zone for your upcoming front punch. The punch will do vicious damage to the opponent’s right temple because he has no way to dodge or block. He’s going to get hit in the temple with all the power you care to use.

These are the beginner wrist locks that everyone learns in the first few days of a jujutsu or aikido class. It is appropriate to study them as part of heian shodan. In addition, these wrist locks teach a vital lesson about karate jutsu. The combined techniques (ju-jutsu plus karate) are vicious beyond anything seen in a normal karate class. This makes us reflect on the kind of fighting the Shuri bodyguards prepared for.

STEP 6:
GEDAN BARAI NAGE

In step 6 of this kata we turn 90 degrees to the left with a sweeping down block. Consider that the opponent is on his knees right in front of you and has just been punched in the side of the head.

• If you manage to hit him squarely in the temple, he’ll fall unconscious on his left side, sprawled away from you.

• If the hit isn’t solid, your fist will glance off his head and pass by, either grazing his face or passing behind the back of his head.

If your fist grazes his face, this is your chance to stack up for the down block and use it as a tetsui strike in the face or throat, taking him down decisively to his rear. If your fist passes behind his head, you can stack up for the same down block, grab his hair in your fist and take him down with a kami nage (hair throw).

STEPS 7-10:
TAI OTOSHI, KUBE SHIOKU YOKO NAGE

Shotokan teachers have some difficulty explaining the driving sequence of three up blocks in steps 7, 8 and 9 of this kata. Why would you block three times when you are obviously on the attack? The answer is very simple. We’re driving forward, deflecting a flurry of flailing punches, because we’re trying to close in for a throw.

Catching a flying arm in a flurry of punches requires multiple attempts. In this situation, driving forward to push the enemy off his base is a well-known tactic. This series of powerful up blocks seizes the initiative and gives us a chance to land an elbow blow or to catch an arm. We succeed in catching the arm in step 8 of the kata and the elbow blow under the chin is step 9.

16 Combes, Sam, Aiki-do, Volume 1, DVD 60 minutes, Black Belt Video, 1999.
18 Abernethy, 2006. Credit goes to Iain Abernethy for suggesting those two ideas.
19 Abernethy, 2006b.
Let’s assume that we are back in step 8. Step in and use your left up block to catch his swinging right-hand punch. Capture his arm by grasping his right wrist or sleeve in your left hand. Then, in step 9, rush in and strike him under the jaw with your right up block. Everybody loves that tooth-shattering interpretation, and it sets up a whole family of throws. The best fit is tai otoshi, which exactly matches the movements of the kata. The version of tai otoshi that appears in the kata is also one of the easiest to perform. It is appropriate to a beginner of this kata.

**Tai otoshi:** You just slammed your elbow under the opponent’s chin (Figure 69). You have his right wrist tightly gripped in your left hand. Grasp the cloth at the opponent’s right shoulder using your right hand, but keep your forearm pressed against his throat under his chin. The position looks just like the up block of step 9.

Turn to the left as you step in deeply with your right foot. Place the toes of your right foot on the ground just outside of the toes of his right foot. (Only the ball of your foot will be on the ground, not the whole foot.) Now pull his arm around to your left as you use your elbow to push his head around in the same circular motion. He spills over your outstretched leg and falls heavily on his left side.

In the combat version of this throw, you would keep your forearm under his chin and drop on top of him, driving the back of his head into the ground and crushing his throat with your elbow. That technique satisfies the Waldo Principle. In jujutsu classes, this part of the throw is not performed. We remain upright instead of riding the opponent down. The elbow is removed from the chin early to allow your partner to land safely.

This is a very solid, no-nonsense throw that exactly fits the kata. This technique is also pictured in FM 21-150 (1992) as a rifle-disarming move. Your left hand has a grip on his weapon instead of his arm as you execute the throw.

**Kube shioku yoko nage:** It is much easier to throw a person than you might think. I teach a second throw for step 10 just to make

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**Figure 69: Tai otoshi, heian shodan, steps 8-10.** The left up block in step 8 catches the opponent’s right wrist (A). The right up block in step 9 strikes under the chin (B), stunning the opponent. Then, grab the cloth at his right shoulder with your right hand. Turn to position your right foot next to his, and using your elbow under his chin for leverage, throw him to the ground (C, D).

**Figure 70: Kube shioku yoko nage, heian shodan, steps 9-10.** A gentle tug on the sleeve and thumb pressure in the side of the neck will put an opponent on the deck. The thumb gouge collapses his posture (A). The pull on the sleeve just shows him where to fall (B). This is a good application to teach beginners.

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23 Morris, Vince, *Karate’s Secret Throws*, DVD 60 minutes, Kissaki-Kai, 2009. See the section on “Mawate—Gedan Barai.”

21 Kirby, 1992, techniques 1-4.


After the up block and kiai, take the opponent’s right wrist in your left hand. Use your right hand to apply atemi pressure beneath his left ear (on the neck muscles about two inches below the ear lobe). Use just the tip of your thumb to dig into the muscle there. Pull on the sleeve and push on the atemi point as you execute the turn. He collapses and lands on his back.

This attack is trivially easy to do. People are astonished by how easily it works. We should teach every student to do it.

**STEPS 11-14: REPLAY STEPS 2-5**

Steps 11-14 of heian shodan are the “top” of the kata. We step in to punch to the east, then spin around and attack to the west. In step 14, we turn south and down block. The potential applications for this cluster are exactly the same as for the first few steps of the kata, except that we don’t get to repeat the wrist locks of step 4.

If we interpret this kata in the context of bodyguard tactics, this is the part of the reaction mission where we sow panic in the mob of attackers by driving into the center of the group and knocking people down one after another. The whole point of this kata is to get the enemies to focus on the protector instead of the protectee. This berserk attack on the crowd buys a few seconds for the extraction team to whisk the king out of sight.

**STEPS 15-17: OI-ZUKI!**

Steps 15-17 of heian shodan are a short course in oi-zuki. There is more here than meets the eye.

Oi-zuki delivers a powerful blow and was so significant to Matsumura and Itosu that they devoted most of a kata to it. So what’s the downside? If this is such a powerful technique, why doesn’t it win all the tournaments?

It should be said that karate is all about power, and tournament rules don’t let us use any power. This says a lot about the value of tournaments.

“Pursuing punch” implies that the target is backpedaling and we catch him in a state of kyo (unreadiness). Compared to the lightning punches and blocks of wing chun, oi-zuki is glacially slow. It is easy to block and easy to dodge. It works best against a retreating opponent who can be tricked by a change in timing. You use two standard punches to set the defender’s expectations, then you double the speed of the third punch to drive through his defense before he is ready. A change in tempo is a classic martial-arts technique. European sword masters call it mezzo tempo.

In a mob, a crumpled body on the ground creates a momentary “safe zone.” The crumpled man isn’t necessarily harmless, but the other fighters generally won’t step over him or stand on him. This lets us put our back to a zone of reduced risk as we turn our attention elsewhere. It isn’t a coincidence that this “finishing blow” comes just before a turn in the kata.

**STEPS 18-21:**

**SHUTO– UKE, SHUTO– UCHI, AMI UCHI**

Steps 18-21 are the four knife-hand techniques at the end of heian shodan. “Shuto uke” is the knife-hand block. “Shuto uchi” is the knife-hand strike.
stepping backward, this technique has little chance of success.\footnote{Kirby, 2001, p. 130-131.} He advised stepping back at an angle so that the block could be applied more easily to the side of the arm.

In fact, this technique has a rich heritage of applications that are widely taught in combatives schools. You have to realize two things about it. One, the so-called “stack up” is the block. Two, the alleged “block” is really an attack. You step forward, not backward, to apply it, just like in the katas.

There are at least three versions of the knife-hand block to choose from. In matsubayashi ryu, there is sagurite no kamae, “searching hand fighting posture” from patsai (bassai) kata.\footnote{Combes, Sam, Aki-do, Volume 5, DVD 50 minutes, Black Belt Video, 1999.} It is very close to shuto uke and is used when groping for enemies in the dark. Then there is the “swinging” version of the technique, wherein you swing both hands in the same direction, using hip rotation in the same direction as the sweep of the hands. Both hands strike the punching arm, one at the wrist and one at the bicep/deltoid notch. This is a circular (soft-style) technique that deflects the opponent’s arm to the side and stuns the nerves of the arm. You see this in very early shotokan films and in some present-day Okinawan styles.

The shotokan technique has been recently modified by the addition of hiki te (pullback hand) dynamics. The hands move in opposite directions, linked by contracting muscles across the shoulder blades. The power of the “block” is directed straight ahead and comes from the hind foot through a focused rotation of the hips at the moment of impact. (Most students I have seen have never mastered this hip rotation and, therefore, have weak blocks.) This is linear technique, driving power directly into the opponent’s body. The point of contact is still the bicep/deltoid notch of the upper arm, where a sensitive nerve is exposed against the bone.

For kata testing, we must demonstrate the “traditional” version of shuto uke. For applications, however, I think students are better off with the swinging version. It is much easier to do and is very practical. The two-handed block makes it easy to stun the punching arm and capture it.

The applications of shuto uke/uchi are shown in Figure 71. Stand in “yoi” stance (shizen tai or hachiji dachi). Your opponent takes a left front stance at a distance that will force him to step in deeply to reach your face. (All ippon kumite begins this way.)

Have your opponent step in (right foot) and perform a wide, swinging punch to the face. Use the punch you are likely to meet on the street, not the linear oi-zuki.

Step forward with your right foot, turn into the punch and block with two shutos. Your left hand strikes his wrist, holding it away from your face. Your right hand cuts into the bicep/deltoid notch, which is the dip in the muscles about halfway down the upper arm. (You’ll know when you have hit the right spot because your opponent will start to complain.)

After stopping the punch, close your left hand around his wrist. Use your right hand to deliver a sharp shuto uchi to the side of his neck, about two inches below the earlobe.\footnote{Westbrook, A. and O. Rati, Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere: An Illustrated Introduction, Tuttle, 1970, p. 250-255.} The shuto to the side of the neck is painful and disorienting, so we don’t really strike our practice partner.

With the opponent stunned by the neck blow, it is relatively easy to throw him on his back in the mud. The technique is ami uchi\footnote{Abernethy, Iain, Aike-do, Volume 5, DVD 50 minutes, Summersdale, 2007, drill #1.} or kaiten nage\footnote{Abernethy, Iain, Combat Drills, DVD 70 minutes, Summersdale, 2007, drill #1.} from aikido, and is included in Iain Abernethy’s list of combat drills.\footnote{Higaki, 2005, p. 110, shows the “cross counter,” which is Higaki’s name for blocking with the stackup hand.} It involves gestures that are exactly like stepping in and stacking up for the “next” knife-hand block.

After striking the opponent’s neck, let your right hand grasp his neck. (Your palm is on the side of his neck below his right ear, so your fingers hook around to the nape of the neck.) Use your left hand, still gripping his wrist, to push his arm down and to his rear, just touching his right hip in passing. Continue to move his arm back and up like a pump handle, locking the shoulder. At the same time, push down on his neck with your right hand, forcing him to bow. By pushing down on his neck and levering up on his arm, you can flip him into a forward roll. He ends up on the floor and you still have his right wrist. You can proceed to a submission hold from there.

To teach that drill using the modern shute-ude/uchi technique, simply change the initial block (Figure 72). Instead of using the two-hand shuto uke, have the student stack up for a right shuto uke. The student’s right hand sweeps across his face to the left side to intercept and deflect the incoming punch.\footnote{Higaki, 2005, p. 110, shows the “cross counter,” which is Higaki’s name for blocking with the stackup hand. The stack
up is the real block.

The student’s left hand reaches toward the opponent to work some nerve mischief. For instance, the student can jab his fingertips into any number of nerve pressure points exposed in the opponent’s face, throat or shoulder. Jamming the fingertips into the armpit is very effective. (This technique is called “monkey threading a needle” in the Bubishi, the ancient textbook of Okinawan karate.)

The purpose of these finger jabs is to make the opponent flinch out of posture, which disrupts and delays his next technique.

That was just the stack up! The student now completes the shuto-uke by stepping in with the right, drawing the left hand back to trap the opponent’s right wrist and striking shuto uchi to the side of the neck with the right hand. Then, execute the ami uchi throw as before.

This interpretation of shuto uke/uchi is a classic that is widely taught outside of karate. Peyton Quinn called it “brush, hold, strike” in his classic video on Barroom Brawling in 1991. The ami uchi throw appears as “spinning the mark” in Quinn’s textbook on the same subject. In combat hapkido, they call it the “brush-trap strike” and do it exactly the same way. I’ve seen instructors drilling it at the annual UKAI applications seminars in New Jersey. I’ve been drilling it with my students for years.

CONCLUSION

How do we know that these are the “real” applications of heian shodan? In one sense, we could hardly go wrong because the kata is so simple. Oi-zuki is for knocking people down. On the other hand, the very simplicity of the kata robs us of the internal evidence that we are on the right path. It is hard to show a progression of techniques when half the kata just repeats the same technique.

Even so, if we step back and look at the kata as a whole, there are significant points to make:

- The theme of the kata seems to be “fighting for reputation.”
- Can we recognize the enemy? He does not appear to be armed. He uses flurries of rapid hand techniques. He grabs our arms when he can. We can charge into him and knock him over. This sounds like one of our Naha-te rivals, doesn’t it?
- Does the kata exploit the enemy’s weakness? The Naha-te

champions liked to stand up to each other and slug it out. They could be knocked over by a high-impact attack. Half of the kata frames that exact attack.

- Can we see one of our masters teaching the lesson? We easily recognize Matsumura showing us a technique for which he was famous. This kata led the karate world in a new direction.
- Are the techniques in a logical sequence? The kata is too simple to support a deep sequential interpretation, except for the three up blocks that set up the tai otoshi throw. That sequence shows a first technique that sets up a second one.
- Are the techniques historically appropriate? Some of these techniques are so universal that they are practiced by bouncers in biker bars. Certainly they were within the experience of the Shuri fighters.

- Does the kata form a complete lesson? The kata teaches us how to knock the opponent over backwards, throw him over our hip or roll him head-first to the ground. If the point was to coat him in mud, then the kata gives us adequate tools to the task.

Heian shodan doesn’t give us very much to work with, but what is there fits the profile.

In the next chapter, we’ll be dealing with a gang of petty criminals. We’ll get to see the Shuri bodyguards in their other role as police on the waterfront of Naha.

MINI GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- Futi – Forearm rotation, the wrist-snapping action used in nearly every strike and block in shotokan.
- Gedan barai – Lower level swinging block.
- Jutsu – Skill or technique studied for combat application instead of spiritual fulfillment.
- Kata – A “form,” showing the one, exactly-correct way to do something. Sometimes “kata” can also refer to the shoulder, as in the following entry.
- Naha – The major seaport of Okinawa. Sometimes seen as “Napa.”
- Oi-zuki – Front punch (strictly speaking, pursuing punch), usually launched while stepping forward in zenkutsu dachi.
- Shito-ryu – A style that attempts to include both hard and soft karate.
- Shodan – First degree black belt rank. Sometimes used to mean “virgin.” It takes four years to become a shodan. There are another 60 years of tests before you reach 10th dan.

Shotoism – Shotoisms are kata moves that have been changed, added, or deleted by shotokan masters. You can recognize styles influenced by shotokan by the presence of these markers.


Taikyoku – Beginner kata shared by several karate styles. It means “supreme ultimate” and uses the same kanji as tai chi.
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