

## Martial Arts “Living National Treasures”

Christopher M. Clarke

5/21/2020

The Okinawan provincial government on May 19, 2020 named another six elderly martial arts masters “Intangible Cultural Asset Holders”—sometimes known as “living treasures”—the first such honors awarded since 2013. This brings to 20 the number of persons so named, of which 10 are still alive. All are between the ages of 74 and 90, all are male, and all are ranked 10<sup>th</sup> *dan hanshi*. They are among 21 Okinawans this year honored as Prefectural Intangible Cultural Treasures in a wide variety of disciplines, skills, and crafts. The martial arts masters honored this year are:



**Takara Shintoku** (高良信徳), born October 5, 1930. One of the elder statesmen of Okinawan karate, Takara *Hanshi* was a student of Uechi Kanei (1911-1991), the son of the founder of what became known as Uechi-ryu karate. Training for over 60 years, he has turned his dojo over to his son, Kazuya Shintoku, but still visits the school once a week and trains at home daily, a habit which he credits with his robust health. He is now a great-grandfather. Amid the confusion, fracturing, and changes of names of the style after Kanei *Sensei* died, Takara remained with the Uechi-ryu Karate-do Kyokai (Okikukai). As recently as 2014, he was featured in an NHK broadcast and in 2015 was the subject of an

article in the *Okinawa Times*. He has traveled abroad a number of times and has been a regular teacher at seminars for foreigners in Okinawa.



**Iha Seikichi** (伊波清吉), born July 9, 1932. Iha is one of the few remaining links to the pre-War masters, having studied under Gusukuma Shimpan (1890-1954), a direct student of Itosu Yasutsune (1831-1915). After Gusukuma’s death, he was introduced to Miyahira Katsuya (1918-2010, 10<sup>th</sup> *dan hanshi* and an Intangible Cultural Asset Holder in the class of 2000) by his friend Miyazato Shoei (1928-2013, eventually a 10<sup>th</sup> *dan* who moved to and taught in

Argentina). Miyahira sent Iha, a young 5<sup>th</sup> *dan*, to the Philippines, where he assisted karate pioneer Latino Gonzales in setting up Shorin-ryu. He returned a year later to Okinawa where he taught American service members, but in 1967 was sent to Los Angeles to open a dojo along with two fellow 7<sup>th</sup> *dan* teachers under Miyahira. In 1975, Iha moved to Lansing, Michigan where he opened his Shidokan dojo which remains open to this day. Over the years, he built a large cohort of students and some 30 dojo.



**Nakahodo Tsutomu** (仲程力), born November 25, 1933.

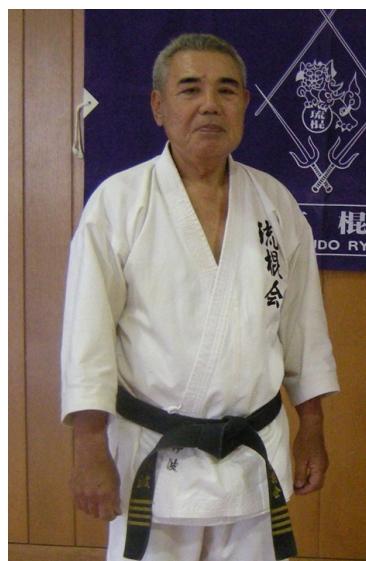
Nakahodo *Hanshi* has been one of the grand old men of Okinawan karate for years and a regular fixture at seminars for overseas students well into his 80s. He began training in 1955 under Seiko Toyama (1928-2009), reputedly the last student of the founder, Uechi Kambun (1877-1948). Five years later, he joined the dojo of the legendary Shinjo Seiyu (1929-1981). In 2016, he was named the first chairman of the newly renamed and reorganized Okikukai (Okinawan Karate Association). Well into his 80s, Nakahodo *Hanshi* has continued to demonstrate his speed, power, flexibility, and balance performing kata at various functions.



**Maeshiro Morinobu** (真栄城守信), at 75, is the second youngest master selected this year, and one of only a few of that age selected for this high honor. Maeshiro, who presides over the Shidokan Musei Juku in Naha, was a senior student of Miyahira Katsuya. A friendly, gregarious person, Maeshiro *Hanshi* remains very active, both hosting students and traveling overseas where he demonstrates especially his specialty, Gojushiho kata.



**Kikugawa Masanari** (喜久川政成), 74, is the youngest and probably least well known to foreigners of the masters honored this year. A student of Miyazato Eiichi (1922-1999) and Nakamoto Kiichi (b. 1939), Kikugawa is renowned for his kata performance, having won the Japanese kata championship in 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1988, and the Asian championship in 1987. He was also Okinawa kata champion a number of times. His specialty is Kururunfa. He is a senior member of the Okinawa Goju-ryu Karate-do Kyokai (OGGK).



**Iha Kotaro** (伊波光太郎), born February 12, 1939 is the class of 2020's representative for *kobudo*. As a youth, he tried judo but found his small stature a handicap. Beginning in 1958, he began training in Shorin-ryu karate with Chibana Choshin (1885-1969). In 1961, he started training under one of Chibana's most senior students, Higa Yuchoku (1910-1994), but still considered his size to be a disadvantage. This led him to explore *kobudo*, especially the *bo*, which he figured could give him an advantage. He found his life-long calling. Rather than joining one of the two major groups (under Akamine Eisuke or Matayoshi Shimpo), Iha, however, replicated the experience of kobudo pioneer Taira Shinken by traveling around Okinawa learning from a variety of teachers. In 1961,

he began studying *bo* with Tamai Shigenobu. In 1968, he started training in *nunchaku*, *sai*, and *kama* with Ishikawa Hoei (1911-?), scion of a well-known Shuri martial arts family. In 1970, he studied *bo* and *sai* under Toma Shiko; in 1971, *bo* under Izumikawa Kantoku (1905-1977), a student of and assistant to the famous *bo* master, Oshiro Chojo (1887-1935) and a student of Kina Shosei (1883-1981). In 1972, he began training in *eku* under Kinjo Takasha and *bo* under Tawada Shinchin. In 1981, Iha established his own association, the Ryu Kyu Kobudo Ryukonkai.

### Previous Awards

#### 1997

Nagamine Shoshin (1907-1997, *Matsubayashi-ryu*)  
Yagi Meitoku (1912-2003, *Goju-ryu*)  
Itokazu Seiki (born 1915, *Uechi-ryu*)

#### 2000

Iha Koshin (1925-2012, *Goju-ryu*)  
Tomoyose Ryuko (born 1928, *Uechi-ryu*)  
Nakazato Shugoro (born 1921, *Kobayashi Shorin-ryu*)  
Nakazato Joen (1922-2010, *Shorinji-ryu Kyudokan*)  
Miyahira Katsuya (1918-2010, *Kobayashi Shorin-ryu*)  
Wakugawa Kosei (born 1926, *Goju-ryu*)

#### 2013

Ishikawa Seitoku, (1925-2013) (*Kobayashi Shorin-ryu*)  
Uehara Takenobu, (b. 1930) (*Uechi-ryu*)  
Hichiya Yoshio, (1930-2017) (*Goju-ryu*)  
Higaonna Morio (b. 1938) (*Goju-ryu*)  
Nakamoto Masahiro, (b. 1938) (*Okinawa Dento Kobudo*)

### Some thoughts on the awards:

**First**, the 2020 awards are the fourth set of awards for martial artists as “intangible cultural assets” (*Ken mukei bunkazai*, 県無形文化財) since Okinawa prefecture set up the program in 1997. (See their statement of purpose, below.) There appears to be no schedule for the awards. The second set followed the first by only three years, but the next set was not announced until 13 years later. The fourth set came seven years after the third.

**Second**, it is clear that those awarded this honor are all elderly, ranging from 74 to 90. They are all very senior masters with 60 years or more of training and teaching behind them. Not all are household names among foreign students of the martial arts, but all are highly regarded in

Okinawa and all hold the rank of 10<sup>th</sup> *dan hanshi*. In many cases—but not all—they are the most senior representative of their style.

**Third**, the awards are spread among the major styles of Okinawan martial arts. So far, with very few exceptions, awards have been given only to practitioners of the *Kobayashi* (Chibana) branch of *Shorin-ryu* and to *Goju-ryu*, and *Uechi-ryu*. (Nakazato Joen was a student of Kiyan Chotoku, 1870-1945, and was thus arguably of “*Shorin-ryu*” lineage as well. Nagamine Shoshin was the founder of Matsubayashi *Shorin-ryu*.) No other styles, such as *Isshin-ryu* and *Ryuei-ryu*—have been honored. In 2013, for the first time a *kobudo* master was included, a precedent that was followed in 2020. Both Matayoshi Shinpo (1921-1997) and Akamine Eisuke (1925-1999) were passed over, although both were alive in 1997 and at least as healthy and active as the retired and failing Nagamine Shoshin. As heads of the two major *kobudo* lineages, they almost certainly should have received the same honor.

**Fourth**, it must be remembered that there is a political process behind these awards. Yagi Meitoku was the widely acknowledged senior *Goju-ryu* practitioner in 1997, but his claim was not universally recognized. Both Miyazato Eiichi (1922-1999) and Toguchi Seikichi (1917-1998) were long-time students of Miyagi Chojun and/or Higa Seko (1898-1966), and Miyazato claimed seniority over Yagi. One can conjecture that Miyazato would have been named to the class of 2000, but he died before then. By contrast, Miyahira and Nakazato were both senior students of Chibana Choshin, though Miyahira was more senior and Chibana’s successor. Nonetheless, the committee decided to honor them both in 2000.

There are also economic considerations behind these awards. It seems clear that, at least since 2000, part of the purpose of these awards is to foster “*karate* tourism.” The Okinawa Prefecture Government established an organization—the “Okinawa Traditional Karate Liaison Bureau”—with a web site (<http://okkb.org>) as part of the “Okinawa Traditional Karate Liaison Bureau Construction Project” under an “Okinawa Prefecture Culture and Arts Promotion – Industry Creation Support Project.” They seem interested in accessing all those who practice some form of “traditional” Okinawan martial art and encouraging them to visit Okinawa (as opposed to mainland Japan). It is a body associated with both the regional government and the *budo* groups of local origin, in an effort to promote Okinawa. It is not by accident that the majority of those given this award since 2000 are regular participants in seminars set up specifically for visiting overseas groups of *karate* and *kobudo* students.

**Fifth**, in addition to the welcome addition of a *kobudo* master to the recipients, it appears that the awarding committee may now seek to include one or two candidates in their 70s, in addition to their elders in the 80s and 90s.

**Sixth**, it is not known how the candidates are picked. In 2013, for example, both Nakazato and Miyahira were selected. They were heads of different branches of Chibana’s *Shorin-ryu*. In 2020, however, two students of Miyahira were selected, but no students of Nakazato. Some of Nakazato’s most senior students include Gibu Sokuichi (b. 1941), Nakaza Seiei (b. 1942), Ahagon Naonobu (b.1940), Matsuda Yoshimasa (b. 1939), or Chinen Kenyu (b. 1944). Nor were any Matsubayashi masters chosen, despite a number of very plausible candidates (e.g., Taira Yoshitaka, b. 1943; Arakaki Toshimitsu, b. 1943; and Ota Eihachi, b. 1946). *Shorin-ryu*

Seibukan chief Shimabukuro Zempo (b. 1943) has been a 10<sup>th</sup> *dan hanshi* for many years and runs a large and well-known organization. Also unrepresented has been the Matsumura Orthodox branch of Shorin-ryu, including Kenshinkan founder Kise Fusei (b. 1935) and Kyudokan Shorin-ryu, headed by Higa Minoru (b. 1941).

In Goju-ryu, Jundokan affiliates from the lineage of Miyazato Eiichi appear to be heavily favored over candidates from the Meibukan (Yagi), Shoreikan (Toguchi), or Shodokan (Higa Seiko) lineages. Toyama Zenshu (b. 1936), for example, is one of the most senior practitioners with links to both the Shodokan and Shoreikan branches but has not been selected. In Kobudo, neither the Ryukyu Kobudo Shinkokai (Akamine Hiroshi, b. 1953) nor the many seniors of Matayoshi kobudo have been named.

### **Purpose of Establishment**

"Okinawa Karatedo and Kobudo" are a precious cultural heritage that Okinawa is highly proud of. Due to the dedicated efforts of many people, they have been preserved and nurtured; they were officially designated an intangible cultural asset by Okinawa Prefecture in 1997.

"From its birthplace of Okinawa, karate expanded worldwide via mainland Japan. Nowadays, karate and similar combative sports can be found in 140 countries, where some 50,000,000 people are said to practice it as mental and physical training, an art of self-defense, or as sport. It also offers a fantastic example of development from a sport business point of view.

"Among many events held thus far, Okinawa Prefecture, together with Karatedo and Kobudo-related organizations, organized the '2003 Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo World Tournament' in August of 2003, welcoming many overseas participants. This was an important international exchange step for Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo.

"However, while Okinawa is the 'cradle of karate,' if compared with other combative sports, Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo are somewhat lacking in organizational ability, funding, and developmental power as an international sports business.

"In a world where other similar combative sports are widely developing, we feel we need to act now in order to ensure that Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo are properly inherited as cultural heritage, and that they see a new expansion as a cultural asset with economic value. Therefore, in cooperation with karate and economic circles, Okinawa needs to study, research and compare Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo with other sports in an aim of reaching an objective awareness. In doing so, we will later on jointly promote a 'New Expansion Strategy,' working on improving the position of Okinawa Karatedo and Kobudo on the international karate scene.

“Our NPO, working with the Okinawa Prefectural Government and Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo organizations, was established with the aim of supporting Okinawa Karatedo & Kobudo so they would further develop as important Okinawan cultural heritages and cultural properties.” (<http://okkb.org/>)