

Kata Combat Article – Duality of Theme



Every Kata can be viewed from two perspectives: Kata for effective combat and Kata for competence.

Kata Combat is primarily concerned with the effective application of the techniques and principles found within the Karate Kata. Studying the techniques and applications and combat principles, effectiveness is tested in live drills. Kata competence is concerned purely with the practice of solo kata where emphasis is placed on demonstrating correct form along with all the elements that constitute Kata excellence.

In some ways this approach contrasts that of Kata Combat, but serves as a precursor to fully understanding the principles upon which the kata techniques and motions are based.

Every Kata has a duality of theme: one for performing the Kata as a standalone form (Kata Competence), and the other for applying the techniques to combat (Kata Combat). This duality of theme can be seen in all kata but tend to be more prominent in what are commonly classed as the intermediate and advanced Kata, this is due to the diversity of the techniques contained in them.

In some cases a collection of Kata share the same overall theme and are linked by the theme itself. The Heian/Pinan Kata series are all separate Kata in their own right and each require different levels of competence when performing them correctly. When grouped as a series of Kata, they show logical effective combative progression.

At inception, Anko Itosu formulated the Pinan/Heian series to serve as a summary of an entire fighting system.

Shotokan Karate kata are referenced by their more modern Japanese names rather than their former Okinawan/Chinese sourced names. It is known that Gichin Funakoshi recognised both the combative and competence aspects of Kata. When he relabeled many of the Kata with Japanese names, he chose them based on the solo performance characteristics embodied in the kata. For example, the Kata Chinto, which was named in honour of the martial artist "Chinto" was renamed to Gankaku. In this context "Gankaku" means "Crane on a Rock" because of the Katas' prominent inclusion of techniques executed from a crane like stance (as shown above).

Furthermore when Funakoshi renamed the Pinan series to Heian, he also switched the order in which Pinan Shodan and Pinan Nidan were taught and performed. Pinan Shodan became Heian Nidan, and Pinan Nidan became Heian Shodan.

The decision was based on the competence theme as clearly Pinan Shodan is the more technically difficult of the two kata to execute in solo practice. The Heian Kata were utilised in a Karate School based curriculum and exposed to new populations, unfamiliar to Karate. This facilitated a more manageable learning curve for new students. It's important to acknowledge that the original order of the Pinan Kata was based purely on their combative function. Pinan Shodan and Pinan Nidan, as a pair introduce and build upon respectively, the combative striking fundamentals of Karate.

In the Shotokan style, the Kata Jion and Jiin are very closely linked by both competence and combat themes. As a specific example, consider Jion in its own right. Regarding the competence, Jion as a standalone form contains big, bold techniques in the basic core stances: front, back and straddle. The format is similar to that of the Heian/Pinan Kata with the prominent use of North-East-South-West directions (North to South directional techniques use 4 steps) and are almost symmetric. This may explain why it is a compulsory (*shitei*) Kata at WKF Kata competitions. It tests how well the competitors can form basic techniques within the realms of competitive Kata.

In terms of the combative theme, Jion presents explicit choices in the application of the various techniques. For example in the sequence of the three Age Uke (upper block) combinations leading up to the first Kiai, the first two in the sequence are performed with a Gyaku Zuki (reverse punch) as a follow up and the last precedes an Oi Zuki (stepping punch).

This shows that the creator is aware of the choice between punching on the spot or moving with forward drive as the opponent reels back during the physical fight. These choices exist because, in a fight, things are not guaranteed to go to plan. The Kata will not provide every possible answer but assumes a certain instinctive response from the opponent.

Considering Jiin as a Kata that can be grouped with Jion, it too inherits the same duality of theme that its elder Jion exhibits. Jiin, however from a competence perspective is shorter and contains very similar core movements albeit with slight differences in grouping, angles and transitions. From a combat perspective, some of the combinations grouped in Jion are either expanded (more choice) or abbreviated (assumed learning). Jiin essentially builds on the already established choices presented in Jion and also assumes the creator has the prior benefit of the principles that Jion records without overstating them.

Combination expansion in Jiin can be seen in its use of Kakiwake Uke (Wedge Block). The kata Jiin includes the same sequence as in Jion, with the addition of another Kosa Uke (Cross Block). Combination abbreviation can be seen at the start of Jiin where two single Manji Uke (Angular blocks) are performed consecutively without any following up techniques. In Jion, Manji Uke (Angular Block) is present in two separate places and in both cases, precedes a separate follow up.

A thorough exploration of the relationship between Jion and Jiin is covered in my article *Kata Combat – A Kata Evolution*.

Having expanded on the notion of a duality of theme, the question arises, how do we ascertain the Katas' themes to suit us?

Firstly, like the Kata Bunkai itself, the themes are not fixed as they are subjective.

In order to decipher for ourselves we should follow a simple process where key points are considered in the analysis of the Kata movements, from both a competence and combative perspective. Kata elements like stances, angles, rhythm, timing and grouping, symmetry and repetition, preparatory and intermediate movements, consistency and redundancy are some of the key factors that influence theme from both competence and combat perspectives.

Given that kata are ways to record the true combative principles in Karate history, why is it important to consider themes its two perspectives?

There are several reasons, but the main one is the analysis and appreciation of technique.

Since there is little or no hard evidence of what the original true combative applications that Kata record, it is necessary to look to the Kata movements themselves and analyse them according to the guidelines stated above. We should be looking to apply the Kata bunkai in a way that is based on foundation and rules. Motions found in Kata are a collection of techniques that can be compartmentalised into their respective silos. A similar approach can be used when applying the techniques and motions to combat. We acknowledge that blocks will not be used for blocking and kicks will not reach much higher than knee height, but essentially we are forming a complimentary foundation and set of rules upon which the bunkai is based.

Having a baseline understanding of how the Kata techniques are supposed to be executed and an appreciation of the different shapes that we make with our bodies, helps when applying the kata to combat. Very few kata techniques are applied as they are executed in solo form. Some applications far removed from the emphasis of the Kata technique that only the overall shape determines the link between them. The relentless execution of literally thousands of differentiated blocks, punches, kicks and strikes practiced in Kata, prepares us for learning to apply them to combat.

Take your favourite kata and ask yourself, why it is your favourite. The answer will probably be based on one of the two themes. For example you may like Tekki (Niahanchi) for its lack of stepping and pivoting, and for having to generate adequate power from the ground up using stance - well that's definitely a theme, especially as the kata is performed in a straight line. How does that relate to the combative emphasis that Tekki exudes? It's certainly not necessarily performed in a straight line. What about the static stances that restricts full body movement - what can we deduce from this? Maybe, this is the creators way of appreciating and capturing the fact that we must execute the same technique multiple times until the target is either not available (and requiring alternative action) or the opponent ceases to be a danger. Striking multiple times using the same technique requires effective body management and requires an overall oscillating body movement. This is a luxury that we cannot rely on in the chaos of a fight.

The intention of this article is not to list the duality of themes of every kata, but rather to introduce the kata theme as a concept. I hope this serves as food for thought and you incorporate theme analysis into your kata training and study.

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