

The Last Samurai Kentsu Yabu

(1866 - 1937)

He may not have been a samurai in the classical sense, because the Japanese government abolished this exclusionary group shortly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. But his Koseki Tohon (official family register) classified him as Shizoku (samurai), so in the eyes of his government, he did in fact descend from a line of warriors. Possibly to live up to this expectation, Kentsu enlisted in the Japanese army, and rose through the ranks to retire as a Second Lieutenant, which entitled him to wear a sword — which is what samurai did.

Information used to create this story came from multiple sources. The most important sources were the Yabe family records and photographs from Okinawa and from America. But helpful information also came from "History of the Okinawans in North America", and "Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawaii".

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Kentsu Yabu was the Grandfather of the Yabes in America. He didn't stay in the United States very long, but two of his sons did — his eldest son, Kenden Yabe, and Kenshiro Yabe, his youngest son — left their island home in Shuri, Okinawa, in 1906 and in 1921 respectively, and never returned, not even for a visit. Both Kenden and Kenshiro married *naichi* (Japanese from the main islands of Japan) women in the United States and started their families here, where they live today.

Kentsu was born in 1866 as the first child of Kenten Yabu, who was a skilled calligrapher employed by the Shuri District Calligraphy School. Kenten had 4 sons and 3 daughters by his first wife, who was a former Morinaga. After his first wife died, Kenten married a woman from the Shimabukuro family and had 3 more daughters. So Kentsu had 3 brothers, named in order, Kencho, Kenkyu and Kensho; and 3 sisters, named in order, Maguji, Manabi and Moshi; and 3 half-sisters named Majiru, Makadu and Majini. There were 10 children in all in Kentsu's family.

In the late feudal days of Okinawa when Kentsu was born, there was an interesting mix of Chinese, Japanese and native Okinawan influences in the lives of the citizenry. The court, nobles and aristocrats were highly interested in things Chinese, including the study of Confucian thought, so they sent some of their brightest students to China. And by this time, the standard language seemed to have been Japanese, so students were also sent to mainland Japan. Buddhism seems to have been the most common religion, and several impressive temples had already been built, but powerful virgin priestesses called *Noro*, still carried on the rites and rituals of old animistic Okinawa.

Kentsu Yabu
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It was in this setting that Kentsu was born, and according to standard Okinawan practice, he was called *Kamade* in his childhood. This system of childhood names was called *warabina*. [Musing here — In the Japanese language, *warabi* is the term for young bracken fern, sometimes called fiddleheads, used as a food. “*Na*” could be the short, the abbreviation, for *namae* — “name” — although there are other meanings as well. Soooo, could *warabina* be translated to mean “young sprout name”?]

The system of given and family names in old Okinawa was extraordinarily complex. Not only did the children, including girls, have a *warabina*, but at least in the aristocracy and above, they also had Chinese first and last names, which were called *karana*. For boys in the gentry class when they became entitled to an adult name — this probably was true for Yabu women as well — they were named in accordance with the rules of *nanori-gashira*. *Nanori-gashira* was an ages-old tradition of naming children in a nuclear family, or even in a widely extended clan, with a hereditary first character in personal names — different ones for the different sexes — that prefaced all their given names. This was designed to say without saying it, that “I’m related to such and such a person”.

Still, this name business was much more complicated than that, because when an Okinawan male or female received his or her adult name, the next problem was to determine how the name was to be pronounced. In the old days in Okinawa, this might not have been a problem, because most of the *kanji* apparently were read in the Chinese way, *on yomi*. But at the same time, there was a way to pronounce the *kanji* in the Japanese fashion, and this was called *kun yomi*.

For example, in *on yomi*, the character for “mountain” is pronounced “san”, but in *kun yomi* that very same *kanji* is pronounced “yama”. So “Fuji-san” does not mean “honorable Mt. Fuji” in *on yomi* — it simply means, “Fuji Mountain”. But in *kun yomi*, the mountain is usually pronounced “Fuji Yama” — Fuji Mountain — the very same MEANING as in the Chinese reading. But quixotically enough, many Japanese also call this beautiful mountain, “Fuji-san”. I don’t claim to know what they mean by that..... it beats me.

And if the problems of tracking names in Okinawa is already not enough, there is also the Buddhist custom of giving posthumous names to the deceased. This is called *hogo*. Fortunately, *hogo* names are not commonly used. Still, there is the well-known example of Kobo Daishi, which is the posthumous Buddhist name for an extraordinarily talented priest who called himself Kukai. Today, few people know who Kukai was, but most Japanese have heard of Kobo Daishi.

The *warabina* for both Kentsu and for his second son, Kenyu, was *Kamade*. But as far as we know, Kentsu did not have a *karana*, a Chinese name. The Yabu Genealogy stopped after the 11th generation of their method of counting, which was to count from the So founder through the Yabu generations. In this last recorded generation (4 So + 7 Yabu) there were at least 4 males, who were named Kenshi, Kenko, Kenji and Kenten. The genealogy gives the *karana* for the first 3 men listed above — for Kenshi Yabu, it was So Hoshō; for Kenko, So Hogi; and for Kenji Yabu, it was So Rinshō. This is very interesting because up to Kentsu Yabu’s time, our family had both Japanese and Chinese personal names as well as surnames.....and that has not been clearly under-

stood by most of us, excepting Kenjiro Yabu, the modern-day compiler of this genealogy. Actually, since Kentsu was born in 1866, two years before the Meiji Restoration, and Okinawa did not become a formal prefecture of Japan until 1879, there would seem to be a very strong probability that Kentsu also had a *karana*. But the problem is that, if he did, this information has so far not been found.

In or around 1878 the new Meiji government dissolved — abolished — the samurai class, making them instant *ronin* (masterless samurai, except they were no longer samurai). Then the government really created confusion, because although it had abolished the samurai by edict, it forgot to de-list them from the koseki tohon. It was not until many years later that the government removed the Shizoku classification from these official family registers. So that's why Kentsu Yabu's koseki — and that of his eldest son, Kenden Yabe — showed that they were Shizoku — samurai, a classification that no longer exists.

Neither do we know if Kentsu Yabu had a hogo, because nobody knows if he had a Buddhist funeral, and nobody seems to know where he was buried.

There are some reports that say that Kentsu Yabu was "one of the first Okinawans to serve in the Imperial Japanese Army", and that he entered the service as an enlisted man and worked his way up to officer rank. The record shows that he was a Second Lieutenant when he retired, presumably after 20 years of service.

In the United States Marines today, an enlisted man who is promoted to officer rank after years of service is called a "Mustang". There are not many such men, especially in peacetime, and those who do become officers, are treated with a great deal of respect and deference — not so much because they are officers, but because of the hard road they had to travel to become one. And as is so common in our own armed forces, monikers — nicknames — such as "Gunny" for a Marine Gunnery Sergeant, or "Gunner" for a Warrant Officer, are affectionately hung on certain favorite soldiers.

So it was with *Gunso* (Sergeant) Yabu, even though he later became an officer and sometimes wore his officer's sword when in uniform. *Gunso* Yabu never seemed to object to being called a Sergeant, and maybe he preferred it that way. Anyway, there are three stories concerning swords and *Gunso* Yabu.

The first one says that Toki Higa, who was one of his acquaintances who enlisted in the Japanese Army about the same time that Kentsu did, gave him a fancy sword that had been presented to him by none other than Sun Yat Sen, the first president of the Chinese Republic. The story doesn't say why his friend earned this mark of distinction, but Kentsu in turn donated it to the museum in Shuri Castle. This sword apparently was lost or destroyed during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 when Shuri Castle was reduced to rubble by air and sea bombardment by American forces.

The second story was told by a family friend, Mrs. Tomi Hokama, who had known Kentsu and Kenden Yabu in her childhood in Shuri. Mrs. Hokama said that she was afraid of Kentsu, because he always wore his sword, which to her, was threatening.

And finally, there is a family story that says that when Kenden Yabe asked his father Kentsu to visit him and his wife in America, Kenden pointedly asked his father to leave his sword at home. This visit to the United States may or may not have been Kentsu's first and only visit to this county.

It has also been said that Kentsu was one of the first "Karate Masters" of Okinawa, and that he taught his art to many students, some of whom — very old as they now may be — are said to be alive today. Almost any book or article on karate will usually mention Kentsu as one of the old master teachers of karate, and some of them will have detailed stories about our old "Grandpa Kentsu".

Our family has a photograph of what appears to be the teaching staff at Okinawa Shihan Gakko (something like a Teacher's College) in Shuri, and among them, standing in the top row, is Kentsu Yabu. This picture was taken in 1908, so Kentsu would have been 42 years old at the time. According to Patrick McCarthy, who studies the history of karate, Kentsu had been hired to teach karate at this school, and it was his students at this college who were responsible for the widespread teaching of this art throughout Okinawa.

Whether or not Kentsu had retired from the Japanese Army by 1908 is unknown. It's possible that he may have enlisted at, say, age 20 in 1886, and to have retired as a Second Lieutenant of the army by 1906 at age 40. If so, that would explain his full time employment as a Physical Education teacher at the Shihan.

There is a great deal of confusion and uncertainty regarding Kentsu's visit to the United States.

On the one hand, Charles Goodin, another student of the history of karate — in his case, karate in Hawaii — believes that Kentsu came to the continental United States in 1919, and stayed here until 1927, when he returned to Okinawa after first stopping at Hawaii for a few months to sight-see and to demonstrate karate. This would seem to say that Kentsu had been in the continental United States continuously for 8 years, which seems incredible.

Yet, there is a family photograph of Kentsu Yabu and Kenden and Mitsuye Yabe, believed to have been taken shortly after Kenden and Mitsuye married in 1919 in El Centro, Imperial Valley, California. This picture must have been taken in America, because Kenden never left the states except for one short visit to Mexico in the 1920s. In this photograph, Mitsuye could easily have been the 22 years of age which she was when she married Kenden.

Then, there are several reports in the book, *History of the Okinawans in North America* that details Kentsu's whereabouts in various parts of California in the 1920s. For example, many years after the fact, a dear family friend of the California Yabe's, Takashi Higa, wrote that in the Fresno area in July, 1921, there was a great impromptu Okinawan sumo match that had been promoted by "Gunso" Yabu, who was the father of Kenden Yabe. Kentsu had been working in the grape harvest that year.

The family also has a copy of the April 18, 1921 passenger manifest of the S.S. Siberia Maru, the ship that carried Kenshiro Yabu from Okinawa to the United States, where he was to join his father, Kentsu Yabu in El Centro, California.

Also, Emi Yabe Wiitala, the eldest of the living Yabe children in the United States, remembers that "Grandpa Yabe" (Kentsu) loved sweets — she is the only Yabe who personally remembers Grandpa Kentsu's visit here.

So, the preponderance of evidence says that Kentsu Yabu did in fact come to the United States in 1919, and that he probably stayed on for 8 years, moving from place to place. Since by 1919 he must have had a military pension, he probably didn't have to work very hard to provide for his family, which by then consisted of only his wife, Oto Takehara Yabu — who was waiting for him in Shuri — and his minor son, Kenshiro Yabu/Yabe, who had joined him in the Imperial Valley.

This presumptive 8 year stay in mainland America and in Hawaii, is mind boggling because one wonders what Kentsu was doing all this time in the United States, and for what purpose? Eight years! How did Oto manage while her husband was away for so long? Nobody knows the answers.

And then, there is this legendary story in the Kenden Yabe family that says that Grandpa Kentsu came to America in 1926, pending the birth of Mitsuye Yabe's fourth child. As the story goes, if this baby turned out to be a boy, Grandpa Gunso Yabu expected to take the boy home with him to raise in a proper Okinawan fashion. Well, this did not happen, because Mitsuye's fourth and last child turned out to be a girl named Miyuki Yabe. So Grandpa probably went home in disgust, and certainly empty handed — *karate*.

Next, we can track Kentsu to Hawaii in 1927. There have been several published reports, as well as some pictures, of his being there at that time. Charles Goodin says that Kentsu stayed several months in the Hawaiian Islands, giving demonstrations of karate, and leading "kata" (formal karate exercises) for some students of the martial arts.

While in Hawaii, he was also said to have become interested in the Okinawan *samisen* (a three-stringed guitar, or banjo-like instrument), sometimes called a *jamisen* (if the sound box is covered with snakeskin) and sometimes called a *sanshin*. Kentsu wasn't interested in learning how to play the sanshin; he was interested in collecting them. And

according to Shigemori Tamaki — another longtime Los Angeles Yabe friend — he was instrumental in saving some famous pieces after his return to Okinawa. The next time that Kentsu comes to our attention is in 1936. Another karate *aficionado* named Joseph Svinth wrote that in that year, several of the old karate masters of Okinawa met in Naha to decide how, and what, to call karate. They were to recommend how the *kanji* (Chinese characters) should be written for karate. This group of elderly masters recommended that the kanji for “empty” — *kara*, and “hand” — *te*, be used for karate from then on. The original kanji for “Okinawa-te” and for “Kara (China)-te” were abolished. This should come as no great surprise, because in 1936 Japan and China were again at war; and wartime is when nationalism and jingoism becomes the rallying cry of the “patriots” of any country in the world.

According to Joe Svinth, Kentsu Yabu traveled to Tokyo in 1937 to get help for his medical problems, which turned out to be tuberculosis. But help was not forthcoming because nobody knew much about tuberculosis in those days.

And so, Kentsu Yabu died that year at age 71.

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