The roots of Okinawan Karate can be traced back to the Indian martial art that was introduced to China by a Buddhist monk name Dharma. Dharma left India and traveled to the Shaolin Temple in the Honan Province to teach Zen Buddhism. Finding the monks in poor physical fitness and defenseless against bandits, Dharma taught the monks a series of exercises to enhance their physical strength and establish a means of defending themselves and the temple. These exercises and techniques are the origin of Chinese Kun-Fu, also known as Shaolin-Ji-Kempo.

Between the 6th and 19th centuries Chinese martial arts spread throughout the country. When King Satto of Okinawa opened trade with China, many Chinese masters brought their martial arts to Okinawa. Chinese kempo was merged with the Okinawan’s native martial art called Tode to create a unique method of fighting arts – known as Te (Hand). The foundation for the Okinawa Kenpo system came from China to Okinawa in the 7th. Kempo, as it was known, was taught only to family members until 1472. In that year, the system’s Master, Naha Bushi Nakayama, agreed to teach Kenpo (Kenpo is the Okinawan pronunciation) to students outside of his family. To keep the lineage of the system pure, he established a scroll that would document the succession of Grand Masters of his family’s martial art. The scroll exists today, and it is the only Okinawan martial arts artifact dating back to 1400 to survive the Allied invasion of Okinawa. Prior to the invasion of Okinawa, the Japanese placed all Okinawan artifacts in Shuri Castle. The Okinawa Kenpo masters refused to turnover their scroll. They hid their scroll in a cave in northern Okinawa. Shuri Castle was destroyed during the invasion, and unfortunately, so were the artifacts. The scroll is unrolled once in a lifetime and the new Grand Master’s name is added to it. Okinawa Kenpo Karate is the only Okinawan martial art that can document its lineage back to 1472.

In 1786, a Chinese military official named Kushanku came to Okinawa. Kushanku was the greatest Chinese martial artist to visit the island nation. A promising young Okinawan martial arts student named Sakugawa from Akata Village in Shuri observed a Chinese man standing on a bridge admiring the moon’s reflection on the water. As a prank, Sakugawa attempted to push the man off the bridge and into the river.
Kushanku seized the young man and was about to dispatch him when Kushanku’s translator intervened, telling Kushanku that Sakugawa was a local martial arts student. Kushanku told Sakugawa “If you want to learn the how and the why of the martial arts, return to China with me and I will teach you.”

After several years of training, he returned to Okinawa where he would come to be known as “Chinese Hands Sakugawa.” He taught his art to many students who would eventually become masters themselves. But, it was not until late in Sakugawa’s life that he would accept a young student who would become his most famous student, Sokun Matsumura (1787-1890) of Yamakawa Village in Shuri. Because of Matsumura’s great martial arts skill, he was appointed as the head of the Okinawan Royal Guard. Matsumura was never defeat in countless battles with Japanese Samurai, bandits, and challenges from other martial arts masters.

In addition to training under Sakugawa, Matsumura studied with a Chinese master called “Iwa” in China. Matsumura passed on his knowledge and skills onto many students who would later become karate masters. But, his greatest student was Anko Itosu (1832-1916). Like his teacher, Matsumura, Itosu was never beaten in the many battles he fought. It is said his body wore the scars from many deadly encounters. Furthermore, it was Itosu who introduced karate into the Okinawan school system.

Like Matsumura (who established his martial arts reputation in Shuri), Kitoku Sakiyama, of Wakuda Village established his reputation in Naha. Sakiyama had studied under a Chinese Imperial Guard. In 1839, Sakiyama accepted an invitation from the Imperial Guard to come to Fukien Province in China to further his study in the martial arts. Sakiyama studied in China for over four years under the tutelage of Lau Loon Kon, the Chief Martial Arts Instructor of the Imperial Military Academy. Upon returning to Okinawa, Sakiyama taught his martial arts skills to Shinkichi Kuniyoshi of Kumoji Village, Naha City. In later years, Kuniyoshi would pass his martial arts system onto Shigeru Nakamura, the founder of modern Okinawa Kenpo Karate.

Prior to the 1900, Okinawan martial arts (karate) were named after the three major cities where the specific styles were practiced. The three major martial arts styles were Shuri-Te, Naha-Te, and Tomari-Te. In the early 1900’s, the martial arts styles’ names were changed. Shuri-Te was changed to Shorin-Ryu (Ryu means school or style). Shorin-Ryu translates as the “Old pine tree style.” This is a reference to the mountain where the Shaolin Temple is located. Naha-Te was changed to Goju-Ryu. Goju Ryu translates as the “Hard/Soft style.” Tomari-Te was changed to Okinawa Kenpo. Okinawa Kenpo translates as “Okinawa boxing.”
Shigeru Nakamura was born on January 20, 1894 in Nago City. His father was a close friend of Anko Itosu’s most senior student, Kentsu Yabu (1866-1937). Nakamura’s father sent Shigeru to the prestigious First National Okinawan Junior High School in Shuri. For five years, Shigeru studied karate at the school.

The Karate instructor at the school was Chomo Hanashiro (1869-1945), who was regarded as one of Itosu’s greatest students. Itosu’s other famous students were Gichin Funakoshi (1863-1957), Chotoku Kyan (1870-1945), Moden Yabiku, Kenwa Mabuni, and many others. In fact, Itosu himself appointed Hanashiro to the prestigious position of teaching the students at the school. In addition to Master Hanashiro, Anko Itosu and Kentsu Yabu came to the school once a week to teach karate. Nakamura was very fortunate to study under three of the greatest karate masters in history. He took full advantage of this opportunity.

After graduation, Nakamura returned to Nago City. In Nago City, Nakamura studied under Shinkichi Kunioshi, successor to the late Sakiyama. Kunioshi was so impressed by Nakamura’s dedication to karate that he decided to pass on his secrets of Chinese Kenpo to him. Nakamura studied under Kunioshi for ten years.

Having mastered the basic skills during his study at the First National School, Nakamura was able to master the advanced martial art skills of Kunioshi’s system.

Prior to passing away at the age of 75, Kunioshi named Nakamura as the successor of the Sakayama/Kunioshi (Tomari-Te) martial arts system. After the death of his instructor, Nakamura changed Tomari-Te to Okinawa Kenpo and established the first Okinawa Kenpo Karate dojo in Nago City. At this time, Nakamura had developed the same powerful punching power as his instructor. Kunioshi was known as “The Iron Fist Warrior.” Nakamura’s reputation spread throughout Okinawa. Consequently, many martial arts students came to Master Nakamura for instruction in Okinawa Kenpo.

Furthermore, in the early 1900’s, the Japanese government enacted a prohibition on death matches (bare-knuckled full contact free-style fighting) between Okinawan martial artists. Consequently, all Okinawan karate practice was limited to only kata training. Katas are ancient arrangements of karate techniques (formal exercises) that are used by the karate instructor to evaluate and test a student’s skill level and condition the practitioner’s body. The masters believed that free style fighting among their students was too dangerous. Nakamura understood the importance of jiyu-Kumite (free style fighting).
Also, he valued the importance of kata training. Nakamura publicly proclaimed that jiyu-kumite was the actual application of kata. Therefore, if there is no realistic test of a fighter’s skill, there is no martial art. In addition, Nakamura feared that if the karate fighter could not test his skills in no-holds barred, full contact fighting, karate would change from a deadly combat system to a sport like kendo and judo. Nakamura developed protective sparring equipment by modifying kendo masks, chest protectors and gloves – referred to as “Bogu” gear.

Using this protective equipment, Nakamura was able to teach “bogu-tsuke kumite” (full contact fighting with protective gear). This was the first time in the history of karate that students could test their fighting techniques and skills at full power and full speed without serious injury. Master Nakamura considered full contact sparring extremely important to karate training. He believed that non-contact fighting was impracticable, ineffective, and betrayed the true purpose of karate – to kill or maim your opponent.

Although Nakamura’s Bogu Sparring was initially criticized by other karate masters, they eventually came to realize the benefit of it. By the 1960’s, the merits of bogu-tauke kumite were acknowledged by many karate associations and instructors. Furthermore, it was adopted by high school and college karate clubs. Many karate tournaments adopted Master Nakamura’s method of sparring.

In 1969, at the age of 75, Master Nakamura passed away. He was a true pioneer who devoted his life to the study and practice of karate. Master Nakamura is survived by his son, Taketo Nakamura, who carries on the Okinawa Kenpo Karate system as the current Grand Master. Taketo Nakamura is the President of the Okinawa Kenpo Karate-Do Association – headquartered in Okinawa.

Master Nakamura’s most senior student was Seikichi Odo (1926-2002). Master Odo received his first karate instruction from Chotoku Kyan (1870-1945) when he was 14. Master Odo was not only a master of Okinawa Kenpo Karate he was a master of Tomari-kobudo. Kobudo is the study of the traditional Okinawan martial arts weapons: bo (six foot staff), tonfa, sai, kama (sickle), nunchuku, nunte bo (fisherman’s spear), and eku bo (boat oar). Master Odo began the study of kobudo as a teenager with his bestfriend’s father, Simpo Mateyoshi – a famous kobudo master. Before Master Shigeru Nakamura passed away, he asked Odo to incorporate Tomari-karate with Tomari-kobudo to make the system Okinawa Kenpo Karate and Kobudo. Master Nakamura named his son, Taketo, to be the Grand Master after his death.
After Shigeru Nakamura died, Taketo Nakamura stated that since Seikichi Odo was the Master’s most senior student Odo should hold the Grand Master position. Then, on Odo’s death, Taketo would assume the Grand Mastership. This decision angered some of Master Nakamura’s other senior students. These students broke off their relationship with Odo and either chose to study under Taketo Nakamura, joined other karate associations, or formed their own associations. This was a great loss to the Okinawa Kenpo system because these masters were some of Okinawa Kenpo Karate’s most skilled martial artists.

Master Odo, fearing that many of the lesser-practiced Okinawan Karate Kata would be forgotten over time, incorporated all the original Okinawan Karate Kata into the Okinawa Kenpo Karate and Kobudo system. All total (karate and kodudo) there are thirty-nine kata that Master Odo practiced and taught. Many Okinawan karate systems practice less than a dozen kata. It is unimportant how many kata a system practices. What is important is the practitioner’s knowledge of the concepts, techniques, and training principles of his or her karate style. Traditionally, in Okinawa, a practitioner can specialize in the practice of kata. A practitioner can specialize in fighting. Or, the practitioner can specialize in both.

In the mid-1970's Master Odo created the "Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo Association." In 1983, Odo disbanded the Okinawa Kenpo Karate and Kobudo Association to form the Americanized "Okinawa Kenpo Karate-Kobudo Federation." Knowing that on his death, the Okinawa Kenpo Karate leadership would go back to Master Nakamura and the Okinawa Kenpo Karate-Do Association would become the official organization, in 1998, Odo changed the Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo Federation to be the "Ryukyu Hon Kenpo Kobujutsu Federation."

With Master Odo’s death on March 24, 2002, Grand Master Nakamura assumed the leader of Okinawa Kenpo Karate. Consequently, the Okinawa Kenpo Karate-Do Association became the official association for Okinawa Kenpo Karate.

The Okinawa Kenpo Karate and Kobudo Federation/Ryukyu Hon Kenpo Kobujutsu Federation is an American martial arts association that has no affiliation with Master Nakamura or the Okinawa Kenpo Karate-Do Association. Furthermore, the members of this organization have abandoned the primary teachings of Master Nakamura’s Okinawa Kenpo Karate and replaced them with an emphasis on American free-style open tournament (no/light contact) sparring. This has angered the traditional Okinawa Kenpo Karate masters.
**Kobudo** (Pronounced Co-boo-doe)

Kobudo is the study of the seven Okinawan martial arts weapons. In 1609, the Japanese Samurai invaded Okinawa to punish the Okinawan King for not supporting the Japanese during their war with China. Prior to the invasion, the Okinawans had their own warrior class similar to the Japanese and Chinese. The Okinawan warrior class fought with swords, spears, and bows. However, after the Samurai conquered Okinawa, they confiscated all Okinawan weapons and made it illegal to possess them. So strict was this prohibition, that at one point, the Okinawans were required to keep their utility knives secured in the village armory. The knives were checked out in the morning and returned at nightfall. Furthermore, the practice of the martial arts by the Okinawans were outlawed. The Okinawans were forced to practice their martial arts in secret.

As a means of defending themselves against the Samurai and Okinawan criminals the Okinawan martial artists developed their farming and fishing tools into weapons of self-defense. The Bo (six foot staff) was used to carry two buckets of water at the same time. The Tonfa was the handle to a rice grinder or a well winch. The Kama was a hand sickle that was used to cut vegetation. The Sai was a handled spike that was used for planting. The Nunchucku had two versions. One version was used as a fail to remove rice grains from its stock. The over version was used as a horse’s bridle. The Nunte Bo is a fisherman’s spear. The Eku Bo is a boat paddle.

The Okinawan Warrior Class adapted the techniques of their previously possessed conventional weapons for use with their work tools. Although some Okinawans masters only trained in Kobudo, most of the Karate Masters trained in one or more Kobudo weapons.

In the Okinawa Kenpo Karate and Kobudo system, as originally taught by Master Odo, there are thirteen Bo Katas, three Sai Katas, two Kama Katas, two Tonfa Katas, and one Nunchucku Kata, one Nunte Bo Kata, and one Eku Bo Kata.