

**Article Title:** Martial Arts Research on Okinawa.  
PART 2

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**Abstract:** Simon Lailey continues his report on his travels to Okinawa to interview several Martial Arts masters. In relation to Uechi-ryu, Sifu Lailey met with Toyama Seiko Sensei at the Zakimi dojo. Lailey discusses the Suparimpe form from China in relation to the Suparimpe form that was not learned by Uechi-ryu founder Kanbun Uechi Sensei.

## **Part 2**

### **WALKING WITH SUMAKO**

As for me, I was up around 5 am. Up, showered, dressed, and out - out for a barefoot walk in the pre-dawn of Nagahama. With remnants of the typhoon still very much in the air, a cool breeze blew as I walked down the meandering road that led to the coast. As I walked I would observe beautiful Okinawan houses complete with ‘shisa’ (guardian lion dogs) perched in their pairs upon gate-posts as well as upon the terracotta-coloured slate roofing tiles.

But where there is beauty there is also potential ugliness.

My attention was divided between the beauty of tradition and the reality of 'habu' – the deadly viper whose bite, if left untreated, could possibly kill you if you have sensitivity to the venom. Much to my relief I did not see one habu for the entire duration of my stay in Okinawa, but never did I let my awareness falter. A watched pot never boils. An expected habu never appears!

I arrived back at the house one hour later. Seizan found me sitting outside the dojo and so together we talked for a while before we went inside the house. There we found Sumako fixing breakfast. "Ohayo gozaimasu!" Sumako bade me "Good morning" then Seizan asked me, "Do you like bread? Sumako bakes her own. It is so good!" And it was.

That day Seizan was going to be busy, but he assured me that Sumako would take good care of me as I eased myself into the Okinawan lifestyle. But that I had already done!

Prior to leaving us Seizan said, "Oh Simon, I have some good news. Toyama Sensei is now back home." Seizan continued: "He concluded his business early and didn't want to spend more time away from home, so he returned earlier than expected. We can see him Monday night."

Sumako enjoys walking so when she said that she was off on one of her walks I asked if I could accompany her. I also enjoy walking, but walking with Sumako would allow me to get to know her whilst, at the same time, allow me to unload my myriad of questions I had already lined up - questions relating to her culture, her language, and her training as well as to her beliefs, ideas, viewpoints, and opinions. My journey from England – from start to finish - had been an epic twenty nine hours - and most of it spent sitting down. Now I was able to walk that off, and in great company, too!

The walk (which I chose to do barefoot) took us on an alternative coastal route that delivered us to a 30 metre lighthouse tower which afforded a

panoramic view of Yomitan, the name given to this particular region of Okinawa. Ten kilometres we walked in total, the furthest I had walked since my 100 kilometre walk around my hometown (the Isle of Wight) which I had done in order to raise some finance for this trip. “You really are like a native Okinawan”, remarked Sumako in disbelief. “Walking barefoot!”

“I have always enjoyed walking barefoot”, I replied. “But back home in England the opportunity rarely arises. There I have to conform to (with) the local society. Walking barefoot would not be ‘understood’. Here I feel free to do as I wish.”

Sumako and I talked for the entire duration. Listening intently to what she was saying I felt more and more at home with each and every barefoot step. Her command of English is exceptionally high, as is her understanding of nuance and detail, which meant that I could learn from her on a very high level and also on a very deep level. It was a wonderful way to relax, unwind, and ease myself into the Ryukyu framework whilst, at the same time, learn more about the depth and dimension of traditional Ryukyu Karate-Do. Her words were both inspiring and stimulating and as refreshing as the walk, itself. I never did want the walk to end! I should have been jet lagged but I was far too excited and focused for that – that would have to wait until I was back in England.

The rest of the day was also very relaxing as Sumako, Seizan, and I just stayed at home and talked. I had so many questions to ask, so many thoughts to express, and so many ideas to voice. Back home in England there are few onto whom I can offload my thoughts, my feelings, and my conclusions. At least, few who can take the time understand what I am saying or feeling. So now, sharing space and time with a couple who are so knowledgeable, so absorbed, and so immersed in their chosen subject, I just wanted to speak my mind, share my ideas, and listen to the responses. After all, this was one of the reasons I had come to Okinawa at this particular time in the first place! Back home when I conduct my martial arts classes I very often think out-loud when I teach. For a very long time now I have been teaching what I believe, what I understand, and what I have perceived from my many years of study, and this I have always told my students. Indeed, they have

understood from the very start that one of my reasons for making this visit was to confirm my theories, and so now here I was engaging in in-depth and high level conversation the result of which I was to realize that my theories and methods of practice were closely in-line with the thought processes of these two iconic followers of classical Ryukyu Karate-Do.

“When you talk it is just like I am listening to Seizan!” said Sumako upon more than one occasion as the three of us conversed. “You are both so much alike, and you understand the Okinawan culture extremely well.” Sumako continued: “Many visitors to our home have an understanding of Budo culture and Ryukyu culture, but you have really gone so in-depth.”

“What do you need to do whilst you are here?” they both asked me. Seizan and Sumako work full-time but, for the duration of my visit they were off on leave. Seizan works for a school and so my visit had been timed so that it would coincide with his school’s vacation-time. Sumako is a government worker and so she had actually taken time out of her annual holiday allowance just to focus upon my needs. For the whole time I was with them they had both put their lives on hold and so had selflessly devoted the entire nine days to my medley of ‘missions to be accomplished’.

I went through my long list of objectives not expecting for one moment that I would leave Okinawa having been able to tick all the boxes, so-to-speak, but with Seizan and Sumako always being there for me, little did I know that this was going to prove to be my most successful research trip I have ever made – and I have made quite a few!

Today had been a relaxing day. The typhoon was now well and truly on its way out, heading southwards for Taiwan thus allowing Okinawa’s typical heat to return as it would the very next day. The gods had been good to me. I had been eased into the local climate and my barefoot walking had proved to be without incident even though the law of averages may well suggest that I should have had at least one encounter with the native habu. But I had not, and I had no complaints over that at all! So, a quiet day: the calm before the storm as my long list of projects would be addressed as of the very next day.

## **HOKAMA SENSEI AND OHGIMI VILLAGE**

Hokama Tetsuhiro Sensei received me with the same sincerity I had encountered from this man more than ten years ago (in the early 90s). Sumako had called on my behalf way ahead of our visit and so now, here we were, watching a youngster's karate class as they performed kata, handled weapons, and kicked their way through wood.

Hokama Sensei is a Gojuryu 10th Dan yet his skill and expertise goes way beyond karate as he is also a Master of Shodo – Japanese character writing (or Calligraphy as we call it in the United Kingdom). He is also the founder, owner, and designer of the world's very first Karate Museum. This is located above his dojo which takes up the entire ground floor of what appears to be a five story tower block all of which is owned by him. It is also my impression that one of these floors serves as his home. Who could have it any better!

Hokama Sensei's command of English is very impressive, as it was all those years earlier when I had first met this multi-talented and multi-skilled Budo ambassador. Proud of his students and proud of his museum (and so he should be!), Hokama Sensei was also interested in hearing my story - why I was here, for how long was I staying, and what was I going to do - so when Sumako mentioned that one of my objectives was to visit Ohgimi Village, Hokama Sensei was very quick to inform us that he had a very good friend at Ohgimi to whom I might like to pay a visit.

Ohgimi Village is situated a good hour's drive from Naha City, Okinawa's capital. It is famous throughout the country as being the one essential place in Japan for its high population of 'oldsters' – Centenians, no less! Hokama Sensei knew a lady who just so happened to be the eldest lady of this coastal community. "Perhaps you can meet her and speak with her" he said. "Just mention my name and show her my name-card." Sumako and I thanked Sensei for this (Sumako was just as excited as I was!) and with that Sensei excused himself for a few moments then returned with a slab of wood (!!!) upon which he drew a rough street-map of Ohgimi, and wrote down her address.

For me, meeting with Hokama Sensei was certainly the highlight of today's activities, and proved to be the perfect way to begin my research exploits. I was a little disappointed that I would not be meeting with Master Toyama until Monday, but I figured that it would do him good to rest a while before he would have to suffer my endless barrage of questions and interrogations!

That evening, as had been the case the previous evening, Seizan, Sumako, and I relaxed. On my list of 'things to do' was a sit-down interview with both Seizan and Sumako. Sadly, this never did happen although we were all very much up for it, but our endless dialogue, our ongoing exchanges of recounted experiences, and our continual comparison of notes adequately took the place of an official tete-a-tete, and whatever gaps there might still exist could always be filled-in at a later date.

That evening we all retired early; the next morning was planned so that we would be heading out soon after dawn, thus avoiding the heat and the day-trippers as they would make the most of a work-free Sunday.

Our early start proved not to be so early, but that did not bother me. If nothing else was to be accomplished that day but Ohgimi Village then that was fine with me. Spending the whole day with Seizan and Sumako and relaxing in the company of these two very lovely people would be satisfaction enough for me!

The northward drive from Yomitan permitted me a fleeting glimpse of Nago City although we did not stop there. Ohgimi was our focus for today, a sleepy little beach side hamlet, picturesque and quaint, and a strong magnet for Scuba enthusiasts (Westerners as well locals and Japanese) who probably do not realize just how important and unique this village is in terms of being home to a healthy number of the World's most senior citizens!

We arrived at Ohgimi right on lunch-time. Reaching for my slab of wood we found the street and the house without too much trouble, but as we approached the residents we realized that we were not so welcome at this time. "Come back in an hour", we were told. It was their lunchtime. Seizan and Sumako went off for a drive leaving me to wander around this very

special neighbourhood. Although it is not too far from the busy highway it still managed to remain a very still and quiet area. Walking around alone brought back vivid memories of my time in Fuzhou (China) – the narrow streets, the blanketing but not overly oppressive heat, the faint murmur of cicadas in the not-too-distant background, and the tell-tale signs of evident and unmistakable fengshui awareness.

Years ago I had visited Kanazawa – a city several hours drive north from Tokyo. Kanazawa is famous for its Ninja Castle (Ninjadera) and its magnificent Zen garden (“Kenrokuen”). It is also famous for its “Samurai houses” - tiny dwellings devoid of power (no lighting, heating, or electricity) and located in a very similar environment to Ohgimi although away from the sea. At that time (1990) I recall thinking to myself, “I could live here.” And now here I was, fifteen years later, in Ohgimi Village harbouring the very same thoughts and emotions. Ohgimi was calming, relaxing, and soothing. I could easily have ‘lost myself’ there.

In fact I did! Not geographically (it is too small for that) but in terms of time I did lose myself completely. Seizan had lent me his watch so we could meet a while later. I did not lose the watch did but I did lose all concept of time. But that is Ohgimi, and that is me.

We returned to the house where we received very warmly indeed. Sumako used both hands to give the elderly lady Hokama Sensei’s business card, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries she steered the conversation around to me and the purpose of our visit. The lady agreed to an interview but apologized for the fact that she could not stay too long (just half an hour) because very soon she was going out to a party. “What was the occasion?” we asked. She said, “It’s my birthday”.

I could not believe it! “How bizarre is that?” I thought to myself. Of all days for us to visit her and interview her and it is her birthday! That day she was celebrating her 104th birthday (104 years by the Western calendar and 105 by the Chinese Lunar calendar). “Is there anyone living in Ohgimi Village who is older than you?” I asked. The answer was no, and the only person (that she and her family knew of) who had lived to be older than 104 was a

lady who had lived to 105 (or 106 years by the Chinese Lunar calendar).

Whilst Seizan held the video camera, I would ask questions and Sumako would translate.

The questions I had prepared were answered fully, but as I neared the bottom of my hand-written page I sensed that this elderly lady was getting a little tired so I brought the interview to a close. “Look at that” she said looking at the clock. “Half an hour exactly.”

This lady was amazing - is amazing! Full of energy and life, she is able to walk unaided, listen unaided, see unaided and, indeed, live unaided! Living a life very much to the full she is still extremely active and with a very busy schedule, a loving and supportive family (her husband had long-since passed but she still had her two daughters) and so fragility, senility, and death seemed not to be on her ‘to do’ list at all!

That afternoon I had certainly been privileged in that I had met and spoken with one of the oldest individuals alive today in Japan!

Our journey back to Yomitan passed without event and as we rested for a short while at Nagahama, Sumako took off to one of her stretching sessions at a nearby American Military Base. She had already mentioned her stretching class to me upon several occasions, saying how much it was a part of her karate training, and I never quite been able to make the connection, but as she was going out the door she invited me to go along with here so I did. Then I came to realize that what she calls stretching I would call yoga. Then I did begin to see the connection, and the benefit.

My time with Sumako was just as important to me as my time with Seizan. (Seizan was the yang but I also needed the yin). I actually spent more time with Sumako than with Seizan although Seizan would join us whenever and however he could. But when he was not with me then he was otherwise engaged doing work on my behalf and that would surely benefit me. This is Seizan!

The next morning over breakfast, Seizan tried calling the “Okinawa Times” newspaper. “They want to interview you,” Seizan informed me, “so I am trying to set it up for the end of the week.”

Today, Seizan had some matters to attend to whilst he was also teaching karate later on in the afternoon, so Sumako and I spent most of the day downtown where I could conduct various aspects of my multi-angled research.

As thrilling as that day was, and as much as I loved to be in Sumako’s company (talking with her, listening to her, and forever running my ideas and philosophy by her) the highlight of the day was meeting with Toyama Sensei later that evening.

## **MASTER TOYAMA SEIKO**

Sensei’s dojo is within the compound of his house. It is a purpose-built dojo with carpet on the floor and a makiwara fixed to the wall: “Merely a gift”, he informed me, “and not for personal use” he added as Toyama Sensei does not personally use them. Sensei entered the dojo but was dressed out-of-gi. Welcoming me to his dojo he then entered into discussion with Seizan and Sumako refusing to make any eye contact with me for more than an hour (“He was testing your patience” Seizan told me later when I remarked upon the obvious period of extended ‘blank’).

Sitting there in ‘seiza’ I was prepared every single passing moment for Toyama Sensei to ask me to perform my “108” form...but he never did. I was itching to show him this form and thought that he would be as equally as anxious to see it too - this was why I was here, after all. This was the essential reason I had come to Okinawa at this particular time. To show him the form which might well be the “missing” or “lost” form that Kanbun Uechi Sensei...

had brought back from Fuzhou but had forgotten, had not learnt in totality and so never did teach, or had learnt in whole but chose not to teach.

What I did not expect was for Toyama Sensei to ask me to perform what Seizan had so far taught me: the Old-Style UechiRyu Kata “Sanchin”.

I had not come to Okinawa in order to learn UechiRyu KarateDo for I was not going to be there long enough, but somehow Toyama Sensei had the idea that Seizan was teaching me Old-Style UechiRyu. Very quickly and with great skill on his part, Seizan took me through the Sanchin form as if it was ‘merely revision’ for me when in actual fact it was my very first time to practice it! Toyama Sensei then had me perform Sanchin again for him during which he put me through the traditional kitae (conditioning) routine, reigning heavy blows upon my body.

Carefully controlled blows, bathed in sincerity and seriousness but still very strong and powerful, and potentially dangerous if administered incorrectly!

The gravity of this I was to learn a few days later when Toyama Sensei would not let one of his other high grade students administer another full shime test upon me.

Having performed (and survived!) Toyama Sensei’s ‘kitae’, Toyama Sensei said that he was impressed with my skill (and, of course, Seizan’s) and that he would look again at my progress later in the week.

This meeting lasted all evening, during which time Chinese tea and Okinawan snacks were ever-present. No-one was wearing their dogi as these are only brought out for public (karate) demonstrations or special events. Yet as informal and relaxed as it was, the respect and courtesy aspect was always there.

Finally, it was Seizan who decided that it was ‘time for us to leave’ but, in true Chinese tradition, that decision was made more than an hour before we actually left! But that was fine by me because I could have stayed there all night! I had taken an instant liking to Toyama Sensei and so upon our departure I was very keen for our next audience with the Master to be arranged. And that was to be the following afternoon.

At that time I would be able to interview Sensei via Sumako-san's invaluable translating skills.

Upon the ride home in the car, I asked Seizan about Sensei's apparent disinterest in the "108" form. "It is not that he does not want to see it...he is waiting for the right time to see it. He feels it is impolite to ask you to show it so soon. Later, when the time is right, you can offer to show it to him. That is the Okinawan way."

And yet, it is my understanding that according to the Chinese way, if I was to offer to show it then that would be seen as arrogance on my part!

**Continued in Part 3 - Master Yagi Meitatsu, Sanchin training under 'Seizan', An interview with Toyama Sensei.**