

Unsu / Unshu ("Cloud Hands")

Article supplied by Peter Crawford, 3rd Dan

Unsu is one of the advanced Shotokan kata, and is fairly challenging to perform. It was probably not a kata that was known to Funakoshi, and was not included in Funakoshi's "Karate-do Kyohan". Unsu was most likely introduced to Shotokan after WWII by Nakayama Masatoshi. Nakayama had been asked by Funakoshi to visit Mabuni Kenwa of the Shito-ryu style of karate, and learn some of the advanced kata in that system. Other kata introduced to Shotokan at that time include Sochin, Wankan, Meikyo and (probably) the Gojushiho pair. It is interesting that no Naha-te (Goju-ryu style) kata were adopted by Nakayama, although a number of Funakoshi's other students at the time adopted Sanchin, Tensho, Seiunchin and others.

Unsu gets its name from the spreading-hands block, which occurs twice in the kata. There may also be a link to a phrase quoted by Funakoshi - "Parting the clouds, seeking the way".

Due to its dynamic nature, Unsu is a constant tournament favourite, with noted performers being Yahara Mikio and, more recently, the late Michel Milon of France.

The Shito-ryu Unsu, being the source of the Shotokan kata, does not differ significantly, although the spinning jump and back-kick found near the end is not present. Instead, there is a crescent kick and low leg sweep - a technique which is far more combat-applicable, but less pleasing to watch at tournaments. The two mawashi geri kicks at the beginning of the kata are back kicks in the Shito-ryu kata.

There is another, unrelated Unsu kata, also claiming to be by "Aragaki". This kata comes from Richard Kim's lineage on the West Coast of the USA. This Unsu is a basic punching and kicking kata, although it contains a Chinese-style cross-legged stance which is strenuous to perform (this stance also occurs in the "Aragaki Niseishi" kata from the same source).

Confusingly, both of the Richard Kim lineage "Aragaki" kata have been attributed to a *different* Aragaki by some karate historians. Aragaki Ankichi was another famous Okinawan karateka who was known for his athleticism and dancing ability. It is probable that the intricate footwork in these kata, and the fact that multiple versions exist, led some people to conclude that he was responsible for these kata. It has also been suggested that Aragaki Ankichi was Aragaki Seisho's son, but I have seen no direct evidence to support this.

(Back to "our" Unsu)

Modifications have meant that applications are difficult to determine, and some of the more basic sequences (such as the four gyaku zuki in different directions) may only be intended to train body mechanics. A number of Goju-ryu kata have "four directions" sequences, and it may be that the original techniques were meaningful, and just became simplified over time.

The three "gunslinger" ippon nukite strikes from neko ashi dachi at the beginning of the kata are peculiar, and the usual explanations of single-finger strikes to vulnerable areas are perhaps a little suspect. The odd hand configuration makes more sense if one looks at the grips used by aikidoka and kendoka, where the index finger is left loose. A closer-range application could also involve holding the opponent's head at this point.

Other unusual sequences include the two haito uchi, mae geri, gyaku zuki, which, with some imagination, can be interpreted as an entry into judo's uchimata ("inside thigh") throw.

A number of small variations have developed since senior instructors started to break off from the JKA, the most notable being the variations in the "launch stance" prior to the jump. The JKA originally started from fudo dachi, with Kanazawa preferring to use kokutsu dachi. The penultimate technique (age uke) is also sometimes seen in fudo dachi, and sometimes in zenkutsu dachi.

Unsu is a tokui kata for SKIF yondan gradings.