

Satsuma Muskets?

*Wow! Research is fascinating. Look what I ran across.
My web research gives strong indication that not only did the
Japanese Satsuma Clan Samurai attack Okinawa natives with
swords but also muskets! Also, check out the consequence of
Okinawa natives who insulted Samurai!*

by Renshi Mobley



The "Tanegashima" (Portuguese Musket) gun

Two thousand and nine is an especially important date in Okinawan history. It marks the 400th anniversary of the invasion and conquest of the islands in 1609 by 3,000 musket-bearing samurai from the mainland Japanese domain of Satsuma. 1 Till then, as the Ryukyu kingdom, the islands had been an autonomous part of the East Asian "tribute" world centering on Ming China. After the invasion, the appearance of independence continued but henceforth in fact the Ryukyu kings were subject to Satsuma, and to the Edo Japanese State.

In Japan, muskets were introduced in 1543 by Portuguese merchantmen and by the 1560s were being mass-produced locally. Japan then was in the midst of civil war. Oda Nobunaga revolutionized musket tactics in Japan by splitting loaders and shooters and assigning three guns to a shooter at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575. Popular records stating he used a Maurice-style three-line formation are incorrect according to onsite evidence. The total victory he won at this battle led other daimyo to acquire muskets in large quantities, and they proved highly effective during the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s ordered by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. At the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, nearly 20,000 muskets were used, comparable to if not greater than the numbers employed on contemporary European battlefields. While many believe that during the Sakoku the political power of the Samurai led to muskets being banned in Japan, this is a misconception brought on by romantic views. In actuality, the Japanese were fully capable of manufacturing their own muskets, and the Shogunate even created several political positions to oversee their manufacture and inventory.²

In 1609 the relations between Okinawa and China from which Okinawa had gained rich economic and cultural benefit came to an end. The head of the south-Japanese Clan Satsuma, Shimatsu Iehisa with the Japanese Emperor's permission, and three thousand Samurai armed with muskets on 100 warships captured Okinawa. This was the end of the Okinawa's independence and the beginning of a harsh subjugation of the Ruyku archipelago.³

In 1610 Shimatstu Iehisa introduced a great number of prohibitions and laws. The population of Okinawa was heavily taxed and subjected to discrimination. However, one of prohibitions, in an unexpected way for the invaders, turned out to be a powerful stimulus for the development of Okinawa Te. It was a question of the ban on not only carrying, storage but also the possession of any kind of weapon as well as any practice of martial arts under threat of the death penalty.



The Shuri Castle

The result of this was that all secret societies Tsuan Fa and To De joined to form one single alliance against the Japanese occupiers. The direct consequence of which was the emergence of a new lethal martial art, which arose as a combination of all existing conceptions, and which was first called simply TE then later OKINAWA TE. In regular skirmishes with Samurai armed not only with swords but also with firearms (Portuguese muskets) the Okinawan warriors sharpened their skills, instruction and training was carried out under the utmost secrecy. The official Japanese laws from this epoch stated: "Should a member of the lower class, such as a townsman or peasant, be guilty of insulting a Samurai, whether it be in word or in jest, he is to be sabered there and then". To these laws there was a perambulatory understanding - "Ta Mesi Giri" (sword test) giving the Samurai the right to test his sword on the head of any commoner. Subsequently, in skirmishes with Samurai, the Okinawans acquired a formidable reputation forever stating the cardinal principle - "ikken hissatsu" (to kill with one blow).

Okinawan martial arts masters secretly visited the continent and remained for years, learning the most effective styles, defeating the most famous Chinese fighters. The constant practical refinement of the fighting system, secrecy, and lawlessness became characteristics of Okinawa Te and remained a part thereof right up until the beginning of the 20th century, even though the official occupation by the Satsuma clan ended in 1875, when Okinawa was declared an integral part of Japan and Okinawan gained full civil rights freedoms.

Okinawan samurai were purportedly disarmed after the Satsuma invasion of 1609. But documents have been recovered that state that the Satsuma outlawed the ownership and sale of firearms, [but] all the Okinawan Samurai of the Pechin class and above were allowed to keep those muskets and pistols that were already in their family's possession. 4 Samurai Bushi swordsmanship indicates its rise to prominence during the Heian Period (AD 794-1185) to the Muromachi Period (AD 1378-1573). 5

In closing, after muskets were introduced in 1543 by Portuguese merchantmen to Japan, it appears that Samurai used muskets in battle. The movie "The Last Samurai" is seriously anti-historical this one respect. We are supposed to believe that traditional Samurai would disdain the use of firearms. In fact, traditional Samurai loved firearms and found them a natural extension of their traditional role as horse-archers. Samurai invented rolling volley fire three decades before Gustavus Adolphus, and improved the musket designs they imported from the Portuguese so effectively that for most of the 1600s they were actually making better guns than European armories could produce. 6 It is reasonable to presuppose that the Satsuma Clan were Bushi (warriors) who specialized in "musket warfare" rather than "battle swordsman" on the strategic battlefield. It is prior to 1543 that the image of gallant Japanese Samurai swordsman occupies most of our minds today. Based on this hypothesis, is it reasonable to assume that Okinawa natives practiced martial arts in secret as a means of self-preservation against Samurai muskets? On the contrary, is it reasonable to suppose Okinawa clandestine martial arts activities took place prior to Japan's introduction of muskets? If the latter were true, Okinawa-te, as a means of self-preservation from Japanese or invaders from other countries, took place prior to 1543.

1. <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3011>
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musket#Asia>
3. <http://www.okinawakarate.com/enmapsite/history/history.html>
4. <http://www.kenponet.com/flame/thesis/mcollingwood.pdf>, http://www.oshirodojo.com/kobudo_sai.html
5. <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/history-samurai.html>
6. <http://esr.ibiblio.org/?p=137>