



UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD THROUGH KARATE: AN ANALYSIS THROUGH THE PRISM OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Compreendendo o mundo através do karate: uma análise pelo prisma das relações internacionais

Entendiendo el mundo a través del karate: un análisis a través del prisma de las relaciones internacionales

Marcelo Alberto de OLIVEIRA¹ , Eduardo GONZÁLEZ DE LA FUENTE² ,

Roberto Marques LEÃO SILVA¹ , Gustavo Oliveira Brito dos SANTOS³ 

¹University of São Paulo (Brazil)

²Kanazawa University (Japan)

³Federal University of Goiás (Brazil)

Correspondencia / correspondence: Marcelo Alberto de Oliveira. E-mail: marcelo.alberto@usp.br

Abstract

Karate is a social phenomenon that ended up acquiring prominence throughout the 20th century, projecting itself onto the international scene as a reflection of a Far Eastern culture. That said, how can Karate explain the world from the perspective of International Relations? There is a gap in whether this practice can be a mirror of Japanese society. Thus, the general objective is to understand the world through Karate. Therefore, in the wake of qualitative research, this theoretical essay proposed to raise some reflections. As results, it was found that the modality initially established itself through local relationships between agents and institutions and, later, projected itself internationally, coming to operate in various fields. In conclusion, it was observed that Karate can be a means of understanding geopolitical contexts.

Keywords: karate, martial arts, Okinawa, Japan, international relations.

Resumo

O Karate é um fenômeno social que acabou por adquirir proeminência ao longo do século XX, projetando-se no cenário internacional como o reflexo de uma cultura do Extremo Oriente. Dito isso, como o Karate pode explicar o mundo a partir das Relações Internacionais? Tem-se como lacuna se esta prática pode ser o espelho da sociedade japonesa. Assim, o objetivo geral é entender o mundo a partir do Karate. Deste modo, na esteira de uma pesquisa qualitativa, este ensaio teórico se propôs a

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levantar algumas reflexões. Como resultados, constatou-se que a modalidade consagrou-se inicialmente por meio das relações locais de agentes e instituições e, posteriormente, projetou-se internacionalmente, passando a orbitar em campos diversos. Como conclusão, observou-se que o Karate pode ser um meio para se entender contextos geopolíticos.

Palavras-chave: karate, artes marciais, Okinawa, Japão, relações internacionais.

Resumen

El Karate es un fenómeno social que acabó adquiriendo protagonismo a lo largo del siglo XX, proyectándose en el escenario internacional como reflejo de una cultura del Lejano Oriente. Dicho esto, ¿cómo puede el Karate explicar el mundo desde la perspectiva de las Relaciones Internacionales? Existe una brecha sobre si esta práctica puede ser un espejo de la sociedad japonesa. Así, el objetivo general es comprender el mundo a través del Karate. Por ello, a raíz de la investigación cualitativa, este ensayo teórico se propuso plantear algunas reflexiones. Como resultados, se constató que la modalidad se estableció inicialmente a través de relaciones locales entre agentes e instituciones y, posteriormente, se proyectó internacionalmente, operando en diversos campos. En conclusión, se observó que el Karate puede ser un medio para comprender los contextos geopolíticos.

Palabras clave: kárate, artes marciales, Okinawa, Japón, relaciones internacionales.

Introduction

England played a central role in consolidating the format of modern sports. There, this occurred through its aristocracy's inspiration and adaptation of popular games, between the 18th and 19th centuries – especially at elite public schools where the aristocracy children altered certain popular games outlines of the time. This social class strove to systematize, regulate and rationalize such practices, in accordance with their moral values. The idea of a sporting world took shape during this period, resulting in the emergence of sports such as cricket, target shooting, fishing, racing, hunting, hiking and boxing (Marques 2015).

In addition, the 19th century was marked by the rise of various sporting modalities in the wake of several international territorial disputes, result of nation-states consecration and the consolidation of capitalism as an economic model. The absence of sports in any foreign country at that time could be interpreted, conversely, as a sure sign of cultural weakness and even racial inferiority (Roden 1980).

It was during this period, through foreign teachers, that the Japanese learned about all sorts of American and European sports [...] a time when new political and cultural narratives and identities showed to be necessary (Pucineli and Martins 2014, 42).

If we can consider the 19th century as the century of Nation-State consolidation, as a hegemonic model of spatial organization, we may be able to perceive several aspects related to it and how these aspects were distributed in different areas of the globe. In the case of Asia – and more specifically of Japan – the problem of imperialism was decisive.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan was vulnerable to imperialist incursions. The Unequal Treaties negotiated among the great western powers and Tokugawa shogunate (1600–1867) wear and tear in the 1850s were part of this scenario of changes that were intensifying in Japan. One of the emblematic episodes was the ports forced opening to international trade¹ (especially the United States). On Japanese island horizon, foreign garrisons emerged, supported by warships, that used the ports as coal supplying stations and helped to guarantee commercial and residential privileges during the turbulent years of the Meiji Era (or Restoration) (1868–1912). Because of the treaties, the foreign residents, visitors and military personnel — whose combined numbers reached more than fifteen thousand during the 1860s — were free to transform the settlements into distinct areas

¹ Occurred in 1854.

(Roden 1980). In this way, the emperor, “with the coup of 1868, concentrated powers to execute the national modernization project, inaugurating the Meiji Era” (Saraiva 2008, 95).

Japan took over these Western representations to construct its own uniqueness discourse, translated into *Nihonjinron* theories [discourse of Japanese uniqueness], in an attempt to create a connection with the past and a shared sense of cultural identity that ignores the diversity of the populations inhabiting the Japanese archipelago (Morais 2019, 107, our emphasis).

We can also highlight that between 1868 and 1872, according to Nunes (2012), the following happened in Japan: “1) the return of political power to the hands of the Emperor, 2) the political capital return from Kyoto to Tokyo, 3) the formation of the new government, 4) the abolition of feudalism and 5) the strengthening of Western science within Japan” (p. 27). For example, according to Ueno (2019), the vision that people had of Japan during this period was that of a country of samurai, geishas, and cherry trees, considered “harmless and feminine”. Furthermore, due to its rapid modernization throughout the Meiji Era, Japan served as an example for Brazil to follow.

In this way of thinking, this perception ended up changing a few times, namely: i) with the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants in Brazil in 1908, and the dissemination of racial theories from 19th-century Europe and the “whitening” ideal, seen with “good eyes” by the Brazilian government; ii) with Japan’s expansionist policy in Asia, especially with the unfolding of the invasion of Manchuria and other regions, the Japanese became a threat, hence the meaning of the term “yellow peril”, widely used in the literature; iii) finally, the perception about the Japanese goes through a kind of “reconciliation”, as celebrations of Japanese immigration anniversaries were created in Brazil based on friendship, unity and peace between the countries (Ueno 2019).

Most martial arts, especially those originating from the so-called Far East, were disseminated in the wake of military and geopolitical processes on a national and then global scale throughout the 20th century. In Portugal, for example, the first reports of Asian martial arts presentations date back to 1907, when *jujutsu* and *kendo* were performed by crew members of two ships – Tsukuba and Chilone – as they passed through Lisbon (García, Rosa, and Pérez-Gutiérrez 2010).

Still in the 20th century, we can mention the combined effect of the sporting practice of martial arts and their social representation, mainly in the cinematographic field after the Second World War, which brought the East even much closer to the West (Oliveira-Santos 2021; Ferreira, Sonoda-Nunes and Marchi-Júnior 2010). During this period, many Americans have experimented East Asia common martial practices (Karate, Judo, Taekwondo, Kung-Fu, among others). Initially accessed by soldiers who were serving in the Asian continent, these martial practices gained popularity outside this region when these soldiers returned and opened schools in their own countries (Bowman 2010).

Then, under the even more effervescent effect of the West-East cultural encounter, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Japan and other Asian countries absorbed foreign cultural stimuli in a particular way, each in its own way, being different cultures that passed through specific times and spaces. The rationalization of martial practices, as well as the concern to organize them into sports institutions, brought new contours to Asian martial arts, especially those that were directed as modern sport (Reis-Júnior 2019; Guttman and Thompson 2001; Mezcua-López 2012).

Allen Guttman (1978), a sports historian, formulated seven categories to understand modern sport, namely: Secularism; Equality of Opportunities; Specialization; Rationalization; Bureaucracy; Quantification and Records. In this universe, Frosi (2012) used these categories and applied them to Karate. The author noted that with the process of institutionalization and sportification, that is, when Karate was systematized, becoming a Budo and then being presented as a modern sport, the categories of “Secularism” and “Quantification” varied.

In other words, Karate experienced the effects of Secularism (moving away from religion) and Quantification (measurement of things) through individuals who divided themselves as: i) those who wanted Karate to be a modern sport; ii) those who wanted to maintain traditional Japanese remnants; iii) those who wanted to maintain traditional Okinawan remnants. On the part of the Japanese, it seemed to be an attempt to differentiate Chinese culture and ancient cultural elements linked to Okinawa and China. However, in simplified terms, there is a dispute between the

practitioners' groups of Budo Karate and sportive Karate, especially in fighting. Therefore, Budo Karate would lose its essence of real fighting by adapting to the rules and equal conditions of sportive Karate (Ito 2021; Frosi 2012).

Taking the Karate institutionalization process as an example, we can analyze some elements that ended up being incorporated into this practice, namely: mainly the form of uniforms (*dogi*, *karate-gi* or *kimono*), formal class structures, fixed study programs and the colored belts system, the use of terms such as “*Osu*” (or *Oss*) (Antunes 2019; Oliveira 2020). Or still, in the terminological change effect that occurred with Karate, namely: from *Tode* (Chinese hands) to Karate (empty hands) (Oliveira, Telles and Barreira 2019). This modality was also “sanitized”, with lethal movements removed or redefined as “block” or “punch”. It was this version, developed before and after World War II, that the American military encountered: an almost “Fordist” mass-production-line approach to martial arts, whose rhythmic and repetitive straight-line exercises and nuts-and-bolts approach were already similar to military drills (Bowman 2010).

Still addressing the West-East cultural encounter effect, in contemporary times, we can relate it to the emergence of the “*Ido*” concept in the martial arts field, whose philosophical thought is based on Eastern-Western wisdom, with the prevailing ethics derived from the European chivalric tradition, preaching the virtues of justice and fraternity (Cynarski 2017). In this thought, for example, there are studies in the literature that sought to compare the Aretê from classical Greek culture with the Bushidô from Japanese culture, which revealed similarities, such as: “the inseparability of body and spirit, the use of martial arts as a means of expressing virtues and moral values, and the formation of the citizen” (Pimenta *et al.* 2024, 1).

However, local developments of the introduction and diffusion of Asian martial arts culminated in perceptions, decoding, appreciations and, consequently, incorporations of local (or regional) cultural elements – this in line with the concept of “*glocalization*” (Trausch 2018; Giulianotti and Robertson 2007). For example, when Karate Budo arrived in Brazil between 1950 and 1960, already sportified in Japan, it was incorporated by Brazilians (local culture) in a different way when compared to the Spanish, French, Germans and so on. However, by undergoing a process of local perception and appreciation, both Karate and other sports overcame local particularities, or rather, “*sports* overcame local idiosyncrasies, expanding through regular and comprehensive competition circuits” (Martins and Altmann 2007, 3). Thus, the effect of standardizing the rules of the sportive modality facilitated its propagation, disregarding local characteristics (Pucineli and Martins 2014)

In this sense, codification is not the cause or the driving force behind the mass dissemination of a given way of practicing *sports*, but a device for partially disconnecting practices from local and regional influences, a decisive impulse for the constitution of a globalized sportive culture (Damo 2006, 6).

According to Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1992), fixed rules make the practice equal and global, without depending on local interests or traditions. Regarding the example of Karate, Japanese martial arts underwent a process of systematization guided by *Dai Nippon Butokukai* (or simply *Butokukai*), which aimed to standardize traditional Japanese martial arts, with greater effervescence during the first half of the 20th century (Lu and Pan 2018) – which reinforces the idea of mass production analogous to the Fordist mode, as commented by Bowman (2010).

At first, as the literature shows, the expansion and popularization of these cultural body productions in Japanese territory would initially occur due to the ability to standardize what was practiced so that it could then be popularized – here it would be worth emphasizing two distinct characteristics, but not mutually exclusionary: pattern and popularization. These characteristics gained greater emphasis over the course of history, even overcoming the extinction of *Butokukai* with the end of World War II. At a later moment, these practices, now systematized as *Budo*, took on new contours, as they were sportified, especially with the US occupation (1945-52). However, manifestations of sportive Karate were already perceived within Japanese universities since the 1930s (Figueiredo 2006), including with the pioneering – during the 1940s – of the Korean Kwaebyeong Yoon (1923-2000) (Kim and Kim 2022). As a matter of curiosity, protective

equipment, commonly used by Kendo at the time, ended up being implemented in some university Karate training sessions in mainland Japan, to reduce injuries caused by training (Quast 2016b; Sanches 2021; Kim and Kim 2022).

Nowadays, it has been difficult to make a prognosis about the future of Karate, but we can investigate what it represented in the past and represents today. In this line of thought, as well as Jigoro Kano's Judo (1860-1938) maintained part of its identity based on feudal Japan and, at the same time, followed the modernity flow, under principles of gestures usefulness and economy (or efficiency) of energy (Pucineli and Martins 2014), Karate also went through a similar process – but with a combination of cultural elements that were not only Japanese – ending up being hybrid. In other words, both Judo and Karate evidenced to have aggregated, in their corporality, aspects such as: “hygienism, eugenics, competitiveness, search for controlled excitement, etc. In other words, traits of modern sport and European Gymnastic Methods” (Pucineli and Martins 2014, 43–4).

From another angle, just as Japanese *Kabuki* theater strives in contemporaneity to preserve its essence, maintained despite adaptations (Sá 2017), it is possible to see that contemporary Karate can awaken the interest of new practitioners as an invitation to the ritualistic universe and values of its essence (Oliveira, Telles and Barreira 2019; Oliveira and Feijó 2023).

Considering these above-mentioned processes, the following question arises: how can Karate help in world understanding from the perspective of international relations? From a micro-social perspective, the question is whether this practice can reflect on itself Japanese society aspects that are of great value for its understanding, or even from a macro-social perspective, aiming to understand a globalized society.

Therefore, this theoretical essay focuses its efforts on raising a range of questions that, although they do not seek definitive answers, aim to provide researchers of martial arts and sociocultural studies with ideas that will help them understand the current context in which this practice is inserted (the process of art formation and its contemporary characteristics as a globalized cultural practice). In this context, of a qualitative research nature, this essay is divided into two sections: the first section seeks to present specificities of the history of Karate; the second section organizes these specificities in order to deconstruct some stereotypes and prejudices.

Okinawa as a starting point

To understand the process of Karate's genesis, it is essential to review its history to highlight some characteristics that differentiate it from other cultural practices. In this section, it is noted that the origin of Karate is deeply linked to social and cultural contexts developed over many centuries. In other words, the practice has undergone mutations and adaptations, registering influences from different eras in its formation.

Since the 14th century, the Ryūkyū archipelago, now Okinawa, has played an important role as a passage route for commercial vessels in East Asia, in a context marked by armed conflicts and piracy. Located in a strategic geopolitical position, the archipelago was home to the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429-1872), which established significant diplomatic and commercial exchanges with China, Japan and Korea, especially intense with the Chinese Empire, the predominant regional power until the 17th century (Røkkum 2006; Kerr 2000).

According to Hamashita (2011), Okinawa developed: “an envoy-tribute relationship in which *Ryūkyūs* administrations offered loyalty and goods to the Chinese empire in exchange for diplomatic recognition and external protection” (p. 172), thus becoming “a subordinate member of a regional security and trade alliance dependent on Chinese military and economic hegemony” (Hamashita 2011, 172). Such a geographical and socio-historical context would determine both Okinawa's and Karate's history.

It is undeniable that the development of Karate is linked to Okinawa. However, it is difficult to establish a time and space in which the modality began, given the absence of primary sources, that is, official documents, letters, powers of attorney, certificates, sculptures, etc. (Figueiredo 2006; Frosi and Mazo 2011; Oliveira *et al.* 2018).

According to Sciascio (2019, 19), “to describe and narrate the true history of Karate is a relatively difficult task, since establishing an absolutely correct genesis comes up against the absence of written documents”. In this context, it is common in Karate circles to point out a 17th-century poem, from the diplomat and Confucian scholar Tei Junsoku (1663–1734), as the first documented written mention of the practice. However, more research is needed to confirm whether the poem alludes to Karate or to other arts practiced in Okinawa in the past, since an ideogram used in the text can be equally translated as “calligraphy” and as “hand”, and the latter was the term used for the archipelago’s own combat system or martial skill, commonly known as “*ti*” (Quast 2016a).

In this context, by the beginning of the 17th century, Okinawa was no longer a fully sovereign kingdom since, in 1609, the Satsuma *han*² invaded the archipelago and established a submission relation to the *Ryūkyū Kingdom*. It was in the interests of the Satsuma domain (the *han* that was under the Shimazu control, its *daimyo*) and the Tokugawa shogunate to use Okinawa as an intermediary for trade with third parties, especially with the Chinese empire, expanding its tax collection capacity. Therefore, their control over the islands was carried out with the minimum necessary elements and always with the desire to hide it, to maintain the appearance of independence. (Kebbe 2021). Thus, Okinawa served as a “window” to the world, since Japan was “closed” (or *sakoku*) to commercial transactions. The only exceptions were via Okinawa – even though Chinese intelligence knew about the occupation of Satsuma – and further north, via the port of Nagasaki, – where the Netherlands was the main supplier of foreign goods (Jansen 1989).

The Satsuma invasion, in 1609, marks an important date because, for the Karate popular history, this event fueled the need for the Okinawans to “invent” or, at least, foster an unarmed martial art to defend themselves from the Japanese samurai abuses and their *katanas* (Japanese swords). However, historical evidence confirms that in the *Ryūkyū Kingdom* there was a military system that used many types of systems and weapons, including cannons, to defend ports, conquer territories and protect their ships on the high seas (Smits 2010, 2018). Given these circumstances, it would be logical to infer that hand-to-hand combat methods also existed before the Japanese invasion.

According to Guttmann and Thompson (2001), although there are few sources about the origin of Karate, we can find the best documented ones from 1867 onwards. That year, according to the records of the local erudite Shimabukuro Zenpatsu (1888-1953), an event was organized in which ten different martial arts, including Karate, were on display to commemorate the coronation of Shō Tai (1843-1901), the last King of the *Ryūkyūs*, before being assimilated by the Japanese nation-state (Okinawan-Prefectural-Government 2017, 17).

It is from this time that, for now and in the absence of further research, we can speak about Karate’s documented history that we know today, although martial arts had existed in Okinawa centuries before. This also coincides with another key period between relations of Okinawa and Japan. At this juncture, as unfolding of the American Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794-1858) offensives, Japan's ports were definitively opened to foreigners in 1854, in a more effervescent manner, especially to the great powers of the time, in this case, the United States. After the Okinawa assimilation process initiated in 1872 by the Meiji government, Emperor Matsuhito Meiji (1852-1912) announced in 1879 the formal *status* of Okinawa Prefecture, even though it had already been under his influence since the 17th century. Since China also exerted some influence over Okinawa, it ended up opposing this decision. Thus, the then American President Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) ended up mediating the dispute, ruling in favor of Japan (Kerr 2000).

Depending on the point of view, the relation between Okinawa and Japan has a trail of prejudice, racism, and xenophobia, given the cultural and diplomatic relations that have been established throughout history. Because it is a distinct culture, with local dialects, a particular phenotype of the local people, and customs and behaviors that are very different from those of

² *Han* was a territory whose control and right of exploitation was in the hands of a *daimyo*. This relationship between a territorial lord/military leader and the exploitation and dominion of a specific territory may seem analogous to the European system of suzerainty and vassalage. In the same way the *daimyo*, who were also samurai, seem analogous to the knights of the medieval warrior aristocracy. However, such approximations must be made with great care in order not to dilute the specificities of the Japanese phenomenon in a general rule based on the European phenomenon.

Japan, the *okinawans* (or *uchinanchu*) have often been historically marginalized – issue still being discussed today (Tanji 2006; Arakaki, Oliveira, and Rubio 2018; Kebbe 2021; Kerr 2000; Shimabuko 2016; Barreira, Telles and Oliveira 2023).

In this context, the question on historical racism that Okinawans have suffered and still suffer from Mainland Japan, as well as the initial historical erasure of Okinawan Karate, in the wake of the Japanization process, are sensitive and deserve a more careful analysis. That said, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) can help us in this undertaking, especially with the concepts of field³, cultural capital⁴, symbolic capital⁵ and *habitus*⁶. Racism against Okinawans and the cultural erasure that Karate has suffered reflect structural dynamics of power in which symbolic domination and the imposition of hegemonic narratives are central. These dynamics, which would be guided by hidden forms of domination (Bourdieu 1983), would not only marginalize Okinawa, but would also perpetuate the cultural and political centrality of Mainland Japan in the national and global social field.

In other words, racism against Okinawans is understood as a reflection of a hierarchical political-cultural field, in which mainland Japan exerts symbolic and material power over Okinawa. In this social field, understood as relatively autonomous, both dominant and dominated would be in competition for capitals (Bourdieu 1996). In this context, Okinawan cultural practices and traditions, including karate, would be subordinated or devalued in relation to the dominant narratives of mainland Japan. This devaluation would not only be explicit, but would operate implicitly, naturalizing the cultural marginalization of Okinawa, reinforcing the idea of a homogeneous Japanese identity in which Okinawa is positioned as “other” or peripheral.

Regarding the erasure of the Okinawan roots of Karate, through the initial Japanization process, especially during the first half of the 20th century, we can understand it as a process of reconfiguration of the symbolic capital of Karate, whereby mainland Japan appropriated this practice to strengthen its cultural identity and project power in a national and global context. In other words, it is understood that symbolic capital – consisting of prestige, recognition and social legitimacy (Bourdieu 1996) – was used by the Japanese imperial government to influence and exercise power within Japanese society and later outside it. Body practice was transformed into a symbol of discipline, modernity and hierarchy, aligned with values of the ruling elite. This process eclipsed Okinawa’s history and cultural contributions, displacing its original meaning and subtracting knowledge from practice – cultural capital.

In contemporary times, efforts by native Okinawans and even foreigners interested in preserving and reaffirming local cultural traditions—including the most authentic versions of karate—can be seen as a struggle in the cultural field. Enhancing strategies, such as elevating this martial practice to

³ According to Bourdieu (1996), the field is an autonomous social space where disputes and interactions occur between agents who compete for different forms of capital – economic, cultural, social, symbolic. Each field, be it political, cultural, sporting, or even Karate, has its own rules, values, and hierarchies, which determine what is recognized as legitimate in its context. Individuals or agents within a field, position themselves strategically to gain power and prestige, and these positions depend on the volume and composition of the capital they possess. The field, therefore, is a dynamic structure, where power relations shape and are shaped by the social practices of the agents.

⁴ For Bourdieu (1996), capital is a resource that people accumulate throughout their lives and use to gain advantages or prominent positions in different areas of society. It goes beyond money (economic capital), including knowledge and education (cultural capital), social connections and networks (social capital), and the prestige or symbolic recognition that someone may have (symbolic capital). These capitals work as a tool of power in “social fields”, spaces where people compete based on the specific rules of each area, such as education, politics or arts. Thus, capital shapes social relations and helps us understand why some people have more opportunities than others.

⁵ Symbolic capital is the recognition, prestige or legitimacy that an individual or group acquires in a given social field. It is a form of power that results from the perception and value attributed by others to someone's characteristics or actions, such as titles, honor or *status* (Bourdieu 2007). In Karate field, for example, symbolic capital is essential for the reproduction of particular social hierarchies of the practice, as it would legitimize the positions of power (degrees, belts, functions, positions) and inequalities within the fields.

⁶ *Habitus* is a system of embedded dispositions that unconsciously guides the actions, thoughts and perceptions of individuals. It is formed throughout life through social experiences, reflecting the structures of the environment in which one lives, such as family, school, work, or even a Karate dojo. *Habitus* functions as a mediator between the individual and the social world, allowing people to act and make decisions in ways that seem natural, but which are in fact profoundly shaped by the historical and cultural conditions of their context (Bourdieu 2009).

an intangible heritage by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), are efforts examples, which we will see later in this study. That said, this struggle seeks to reverse the historical erasure and dispute the symbolic capital associated with Karate, especially considering the globalization process that favors Japanese versions of the practice.

Okinawa, by maintaining traditional schools and highlighting its historical and cultural connections with Karate, would act to strengthen the *habitus* of the *uchinanchu* karateka, which would reinforce, according to Bourdieu (1983), a structuring and structured structure. In other words, we observe the promotion of a set of predispositions assimilated through learning, whether explicit or implicit, which would act as an organized and organizing structure of the ways of perceiving and acting in the Okinawan context, guiding the practices of the *karateka* in an often imperceptible and relational way. So, this structure, which would be, at the same time, structured and structuring, presents itself to the world as a product resulting from historical relations.

Therefore, it is a structure because it has a body of legitimate knowledge; it is structured because it has received external influences, adapting to new demands, especially in the field of tourism; finally, it is structuring, since it is a source of local transformations, which demonstrates the full power of the bodily *hexis* concept⁷. This concept, according to Bourdieu (2015), refers to the way in which the body is trained, positioned and presented in the world, functioning as a vehicle for incorporated social meanings. In the context of Okinawan Karate, it would represent not only the physical technique, but also the cultural and ethical values transmitted through training.

For Barreira, Telles, and Oliveira (2023, 114–15), “Chinese ascendancy over Okinawa is a politically and culturally determining fact. However, this did not mean that the archipelago changed its language or lost its cultural particularities.” It turns out that Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries showed itself to be orthodox and arbitrary even in its legislation, in addition to its nationalism, to the extent that it “had the most traditionalist and nationalist and least universal characteristics” (Kawabata 2017, 50). Typically, nationalist stories tend to hide a sincere discussion about Asian martial arts. And since martial arts traditions are often based on invented stories, the philosophies linked to these fictional stories often seem illusory and empty. These contradictions are evident on several levels in most Asian martial arts (Moenig, Kim and Choi 2023).

According to Moenig, Kim and Choi (2023), martial arts, especially those of Asian origin, are often surrounded by historical narratives that mix myths, nationalism and modern inventions. Terms such as “traditional” are used to evoke an ancestry that, often, does not reflect historical reality. For example, several practices, described as ancient, were, in fact, consolidated or created in recent centuries, in response to cultural or political changes, as occurred in Japan during the Meiji period. In addition, elements such as the spirituality attributed to Zen in Japanese martial arts or the use of Confucian philosophy to legitimize modern practices often emerge from an attempt to add credibility or mystical appeal to the disciplines.

Furthermore, according to Moenig, Kim and Choi (2023), these contradictions are also manifested in the differences between traditionalist and modernist schools. While traditionalists claim the preservation of ancestral practices and emphasize philosophical and spiritual aspects, modernists promote a more practical approach, often oriented towards sports competitions. In Karate’s field, for example, there is a unique identity that can only be fully understood when considering that cooperation is always accompanied by dynamics of tension (Rosa 2020).

However, the basis of many traditional elements, such as ritualistic training of forms (*kata*), lacks robust historical evidence and often contradicts the practical needs of combat or self-defense. This situation is aggravated by the romanticization promoted by media productions and the appropriation of narratives that exalt a fictional heroic past, generating philosophical and practical tensions that permeate contemporary discourse on martial arts (Moenig, Kim and Choi 2023).

⁷ The relation between the body and society in Karate is deeply linked to the history of Okinawa, an island marked by its strategic position and cultural influences from Japan, China and Southeast Asia. The movement repetition and discipline in training go far beyond preparation for combat. They carry with them stories of resistance, of preserving local identity and how the island's culture has adapted to challenges over time. In this way, Okinawan Karate, through bodily *hexis*, not only tells its story, but also keeps alive the traditions that shaped the essence of the island.

According to Drigo (2007), in the Brazilian context, in general, martial arts field may reflect a particular *habitus*, evidenced by elements such as the symbolism of belts that express hierarchy, the authoritarian stance adopted by many instructors during training, and the competitive fighters' focus on athletic performance. On the other hand, practitioners with less prominence in competitions (or with no interest in the sports field) tend to emphasize traditional and philosophical aspects of martial arts, showing different ways of experiencing this practice.

Returning to the case of the historical marginalization of *uchimanchu*, Okinawa had a strategic geographical position, but the Okinawan people were considered inferior relatives of the Japanese. To change and overcome this image, history reveals that it was not enough to recognize the Okinawans as Japanese. It was also necessary to reject the Chinese, denying the values of a cultural heritage that, despite having influenced the social and religious foundations that formed Japan, Okinawa, and Korea, would only have gained honor and dignity by becoming Japanese at heart (*Yamato damashi*), assuming leadership of the Asian hierarchy (Barreira, Telles and Oliveira 2023).

Within this discrimination regime, which was intensified by the construction of the Japanese nation-state, throughout the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, led by some Japanese elites intensely concerned and influenced by international geopolitics, Karate played a dual and contradictory role. The modernization and nationalization of Karate in the 20th century, since its popularization in Japan, are part of a dual movement of “traditionalization” and sportification. Even before the terminological change from *tode* to *karatedō* — recognized by the Butokukai in 1933 and, subsequently, by the Okinawan masters in 1936 — the *tode* practiced in Okinawa had already been progressively transformed. In this process, it acquired, at least in part, sporting characteristics.

According to Kadokaru (2021, 69), “at the Okinawa Normal School, the Karate Shorei Kai conducted training sessions and tournaments, as well as research on teaching methodologies applied to sparring and *kumite*.” That said, the first record of karate dates to August 1902 — at the time called *Mutekatsu-ryu* — at a sporting event, as indicated in a report published in the alumni newspaper (*Ryutan*) of the Okinawa Normal School. In this context, until 1911, dozens of karate demonstrations and tournaments took place in Okinawa (Kadokaru 2021).

By way of example, two events held in the capital (Naha) stand out, both recorded by the Okinawan newspaper *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, namely: (i) on March 8, 1905, after elementary school karate students gave a demonstration, according to Kadokaru (2021, 60), they “received prizes from Governor Narahara, the chief of police, Mr. Wada, and the counselor, Mr. Kishimoto”; (ii) renowned masters—such as Funakoshi, Kiyuna, Itosu, and Kentsu—participated in a sports tournament (*taikai*, 大会) on January 25, 1911 (Kadokaru 2021).

As Elias and Dunning (1992) have established, the pacification of violence and passions are absolutely essential for the modern civilizing process, and this is where sport and leisure come into play, transmuting agonistic impulses present in human beings into new, more organized and codified competitive forms, suitable both for their introduction into school curricula and for mass consumption. Japanese martial arts and *Bushidō*⁸, both in their practical organizational and cultural and ideological aspects, are not left out of this global civilizational dynamic (Guttmann and Thompson 2001; Sánchez-García 2019; Frosi and Oliveira 2019; Pimenta *et al.* 2024), interacting in the constitution of the spirit and structural Japanese nationality (Pita Céspedes 2014).

During the first decades of the 20th century, Okinawan Karate was used by institutions and authorities in the region, through its inclusion in the school system (1901), as a gymnastic and pedagogical method to acculturate the new generations to Japanese national values. In this way, and by extension, the Karate — which in this period was marked by the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese⁹ wars and by the preparation for the Second World War — acquired a notable reputation in Japan starting in the 1920s. This happened especially with the arrival of Gichin Funakoshi

⁸ Samurai way of life.

⁹ According to Saraiva (2008, 97), “the celebration of the alliance between Japan and Great Britain, in 1902, and the Japanese victory over Russia, in 1905, dramatically demonstrated the country's aspirations as a power”.

(1868-1957) in 1921, with the support of Jigoro Kano (1860-1938), the creator of Judo and the first Japanese member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Despite its educational and scientific orientation, both Karate and other Japanese martial arts would end up being co-opted by the Japanese imperial government and related entities to serve the homeland interests. In this context, in a time of growing militarism and ideological radicalization, *Bushidō* was read in terms of extreme nationalism (Nunes 2012).

Such a process requires an intense reconfiguration not only of the technical and symbolic Karate characteristics, but also to bring them closer to the context and values of the time, in which some of the main Okinawan masters are still involved (Frosi, Monteiro and Mazzei 2025). This involvement, however, also responds to two principles: preservation and conservation of Okinawan culture through Karate, its best-known exponent. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the dualities and ambivalences of the incorporation process of Okinawa into Japan are perfectly embodied in the Karate *status*.

In other words, in one sense, this martial art acts as a source of legitimacy and a claim to the value of the Okinawan culture particularities; while in another sense, it confirms the stigmatization of local traditions, as Karate must be modernized and centered toward the essence of the “Japanese Identity”, in order to fit properly into national institutions and their meaning. If anything, still defines the position and *status* of both Okinawa and Karate within the Japanese nation today, it is precisely what Oguma (2014) describes as the cultural and political dynamics of “inclusion/exclusion.”¹⁰

As the twentieth century progressed, Okinawa became the stage of one of the largest battles in Asia, the “Battle of Okinawa” (April 1–June 22, 1945) during World War II. After eighty-two days of fierce fighting, the island was in the allies’ hands. About twelve thousand Americans and over ninety thousand Japanese soldiers lost their lives (Kerr 2000), while the Okinawa government estimates that 94,000 civilians were killed, including many karate masters and practitioners. Furthermore, after the end of this war, the United States occupied and governed Okinawa until 1972. During this period, numerous military bases were built (mainly American) by expropriating land from the local inhabitants, which were recently deactivated. According to Kerr (2000), Okinawans, as Japanese citizens, felt that they were being robbed, due to the American military occupation. Japan also wanted the reversion of Okinawa. In part, this was a national guilt conscience for the tragic Battle of Okinawa and for allowing Okinawa to remain militarily occupied while they themselves had been free since 1952. It is in this context, of American occupation of Okinawa and post-war recovery in Japan, that Karate began to gain international fame and become institutionalized as we know it.

According to Barreira, Telles and Oliveira (2023), Karate was consolidated in Japan in a historical context (*zeitgeist*) marked by war. After the defeat in World War II, martial arts, associated with fascist imperial ideology, were banned for a long time. Karate escaped the ban by presenting itself as a type of local boxing, persuading the North American occupiers that it was more of a sport than a means of *Bushidō*. “The allied powers believed that these systems were little more than physical education methods in the ‘Chinese boxing’ manner” (Draeger 1983, 127 *apud* Kim; Kim, 2022).

Other forms of racism, however, have affected Okinawan karate. By describing its practice as having originated among peasants who fought against invaders’ oppression, the effacement of karate’s history prior to its Japanization has portrayed it as a primitive modality, diminishing the importance and interest of Okinawan leaders in martial arts. The conveyed message is that the moral hierarchy of karate resided in Japan, not Okinawa.

¹⁰ Oguma’s book is devoted to tracing the major historical events and intellectual foundations that defined these dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in the relationship between Okinawa and Japan, mainly between 1818 and 1972. For a general understanding, see mainly pages 5-9 and 351-358: “‘The Japanese’ are constructed in concert with the construction of ‘the Okinawans’ and the setting of boundaries between them. This construction process, however – at least in the case of the relationship between Japan and Okinawa – progressed not by excluding ‘the Okinawans’ from ‘the Japanese,’ but amid their inclusion into ‘the Japanese.’ This point differs from the way many theories based on constructionism consider that a majority is built by setting up a minority as a target of exclusion” (Oguma 2014, 352).

Karate and International Relations: some data and reflections

As Saraiva (2008, 346) states, “the study of international relations aims to develop conceptual frameworks that illuminate the understanding of the object”, in our case, Karate. Based on this assumption, we can say that Karate presents itself as a reflection of countless ruptures that make up the history of this art. At the same time, its history reflects several other ruptures and dynamics of various groups, subjects, communities and societies. Therefore, to correctly interpret Karate as a cultural expression, and in its factual and symbolic dimensions, it is essential to approach International Relations through the formation and expansion of a world built on the trail of diplomatic agreements, political clashes and wars - a liberal and increasingly globalized world (Renouvin and Duroselle 1967; Saraiva 2008).

However, we should not forget that this methodological relation is potentially reciprocal. In other words, Karate as an object of research can also shed light on International Relations. We will therefore proceed to outline in this section how mechanisms, debates and controversies that are at the heart of public diplomacy and the agendas of the global political economy can be perceived by observing Karate closely. It is not surprising to state that this martial art originating from Okinawa, thanks to its global diffusion and iconographic power, has acted as an intercultural bridge between Okinawa, Japan and the rest of the world since the middle of the last century. Therefore, understanding the extent of Karate’s global fame becomes pertinent.

For Bowman (2010), the answer relates to the military occupation of Japan after World War II by the military and cultural superpower of the mid-twentieth century: the United States. The fact that the cultural and martial experiences of the American military could have entered and reoriented the imagination of *Hollywood*, and the idea that this could impact the cultural literacy of the rest of the world (in terms of a certain knowledge about Asian martial arts), indicates the global reach of American cinema and media (Ferreira, Sonoda-Nunes and Marchi-Júnior 2010; Mori and Oliveira 2019).

The globalization of popular culture and cultural industries has accelerated the circulation of images linked to Karate. Logically, the Japanese government is aware of this ancestry and has no doubts about Karate’s international capacity to act as a cultural ambassador, to the point of becoming: “instrument for Japanese cultural diplomacy in contemporary world politics” (González de la Fuente 2021a, 23). A clear example that Karate is also a diplomatic mechanism, that is, a tool that serves and regulates relations with other States, is its inclusion among activities eligible for a cultural visa to visit Japan. In contemporaneity, obviously in the “Japanese” way, the government captures this cultural product and consecrates it as “legitimate” - or rather, traditionally Japanese - just as it was during the Meiji Era. One of the possible explanations for this is that:

In the current context of economic uncertainty, institutional denationalization and state sovereignty loss, governments around the world still try to cling to monolithic images of culture, identity and tradition in order to protect their national borders and the *status quo* on the world stage (Morais 2019, 107)

This official and political dimension of Karate is even more evident when we look at how it fits into the institutional architecture of the Japanese state at the beginning of the 20th century: Karate became officially and institutionally placed in the set of Japanese martial arts belonging to the bodies of the *Butokukai* and the Japan Sports Association, which reported directly to the Prime Minister's Office. However, the *Butokukai* ended up being banned with the American occupation (1945-1952) and reinstated in 1953, but with very different objectives from its origin.

The processes that led Japan to configure itself as a Nation-State in the modern molds were accompanied by the invention of the Japanese “*Homo Sportivus*”¹¹ through the construction of a

¹¹ According to Bento (2007, 318–19), “the ‘*Homo Sportivus*’ —the athlete or sports practitioner— is one of the expressions resulting from the evolutionary conceptualization line that established the problem of the relation between culture and nature in man’s configuration, namely that of his body”.

hybrid form of body practice that recombined elements of traditional martial arts with European sports practices and gymnastic methods (Pucineli and Martins 2014, 45–6).

In contemporaneity, with the debut¹² and brief participation of Karate as an Olympic sport, in Tokyo 2020-21, Japan intended to renew and strengthen its role as a diplomatic and cultural ambassador. This way, the Okinawan martial art must be reconstructed once again as a national symbol that exposes to the world a new Japan, in which tradition and modernity come together in the multiculturalism discursive recognition of the country itself and of Asia, with Okinawa as a reference. The institutionalization of such a narrative around Karate, however, brings into play economic and political factors that hide – but also reveal, since there is a will to research – certain power structures in the relations between Okinawa (as its own historical subject) and Japan (as a modern nation-state with great influence in the field of International Relations).

Karate has an educational value that goes beyond the Physical Education and Sports sphere, and which was potentially valued by its Olympic appearance. Along with sports techniques, athletes end up, even if indirectly, studying the tradition, the culture and Japan's history, consequently reaching the issues that orbit Okinawa¹³ (Bagińska *et al.* 2022). This phenomenon of the Karate practitioner fascinated by the discovery of Okinawa has already been captured by fiction in such successful productions as the film *Karate Kid II* (1986), where we can see Daniel-san reading *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* by George Kerr (2000), published in 1958 – a classic in studies on Okinawa – in the plane with Mr. Miyagi on a trip to the islands.

It is precisely this type of question about the nexus between Karate (as a phenomenon of global culture), Okinawa and Japan, that is leading to Karate's candidacy for UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage. A process that involves not only the city government and the Japanese national government, but also other international and independent actors, such as the *World Karate Federation* (WKF), based in Madrid (Spain). According to González de la Fuente and Niehaus (2020, 49), Karate as heritage: “transverses temporal, geographical and political boundaries”, while at the same time “channels contemporary claims about the past that may be consistent with or contradict normative discourses on the Okinawa-Japan relationship”.

However, it is important to understand that the transboundary character of Karate and the geopolitical discourses associated with its past and present also collide with diplomatic relations in the East Asian region, both because of the claims about the Chinese origins of Karate (Xie *et al.* 2022) and the indisputable weight of the Okinawan martial art in the genesis of Korean Taekwondo (Moenig, Sungkyun, and Taek-Yong 2014). This is even more important when we find that there is a growing competition between Asian countries to achieve recognition of their martial arts by UNESCO as cultural heritage. Both China, with *Taijiquan* in 2020 (Raimondo, Rea, and Yong-shun 2022), and Korea, with *Taekkyon* in 2011 (Park *et al.* 2018), have achieved this, but Japan has not yet. The recognition of national heritages such as martial arts by UNESCO's list of intangible heritages not only serves the purpose of registering the power of national culture in the international sphere, but also brings enormous economic benefits, since heritage is a source of income strongly linked to intellectual property and tourism. As González de la Fuente and Niehaus (2020) point out in the case of the construction of Okinawan Karate's candidacy:

¹² According to Bagińska and authors (2022), when we look at the geography of Olympic combat sports in the Far East, especially on Karate's one participation in an Olympic edition, Tokyo 2020/21, we notice that Turkey stood out by obtaining the first place in number of won medals and Japan conquered the first in total points. Curiously, only representatives of countries in the northern hemisphere and a rather narrow belt of countries in Asia, Europe and North America (temperate latitudes) won medals.

¹³ A Karate practitioner, even a beginner or intermediate, would not be away for long from issues that end up making him notice the contours of the problems between Okinawa and Japan. Starting with the multiplicity of Karate styles developed throughout the 20th century. This soon leads him to understand that Karate can be catalogued into two large groups: Okinawan styles and Japanese styles. The experience increasingly acquired by the practitioner also leads him to realize that the two matrices have differences in the mechanics of some techniques, in the body aesthetics of these techniques, in the names and meanings, etc. Without much effort, this practitioner can also realize that, despite being part of the territory of the Japanese nation-state, Okinawa presents itself as a historically apart place. With a little more effort and curiosity, he may recognize that many names are in uchinaguchi, the traditional language of Okinawa, and not in Japanese. Therefore, the reflection of the ruptures mentioned above and of historical-social attrition appear even in the practical mechanics of this art.

Several actions, institutional, propagational, discursive, and so on have been developed in the last decade to build up the case for karate as ICH [Intangible Cultural Heritage]. These local activities have already profoundly changed the landscape of Okinawa karate and it remains to be seen how far the long-term vision of the prefectural government will further alter local karate communities, as well the understandings and performance of karate in the future". (González de la Fuente and Niehaus 2020, 49, emphasis added).

The first decades of the 21st century brought new developments that connected karate to the reconstruction of the past, to *Ryūkyū*¹⁴ and its heritage, such as the aforementioned karate's candidacy to UNESCO. However, these developments go hand in hand with the commercialization of Okinawan culture by the tourism industry. Crossed by the Tropic of Cancer, the archipelago has an attractive subtropical climate, where temperatures reach a minimum of 10 °C and can reach 40 °C. Okinawa is considered the "Hawaii of Japan" due to the beauty of its beaches with diving spots, the presence of coral reefs and a rich marine flora and fauna with a predominantly warm climate (Kerr 2000). This tropicality makes it an even more attractive tourist destination for karate practitioners and is part of the set of images with which the island's martial arts tourism sector is constructed.

The creation of a tourism niche based on Karate also takes advantage of these conditions, in a movement that requires a "re-mapping" and "re-centering" of the martial art born in Okinawa (González de la Fuente 2021b), according to the conditions of globalization and mass tourism. Socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors have promoted an economic change in post-industrial societies towards the cultural industries sectors at their intersection with leisure and tourism, providing accessible services to a considerable mass of citizens. In addition, "there was an interest in transforming the tourism industry into an agent of economic development and an important resource for the recovery and revitalization of the less urbanized areas of the country" (Sganzerla and Yokoyama 2021, 24). Martial arts were not exempted from such changes, despite their traditionalist veneer (Ko and Yang 2009). So much so, that in December 2021, and after Tamaki Denny, Governor of Okinawa, *karateka* and director of the Committee for the UNESCO registration of Okinawan Karate, meet with the Japan Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Sports Agency, the Prefecture was praised for its "Karate promotion as a new engine to develop Okinawa's economy" (Okinawa-Karate-News 2022, 1).

Finally, we can consider that the phenomenon of Karate and its globalization has reached surprising levels. In this context, the International Relations that have unfolded throughout its history have brought new contours to the modality. We realize that Karate, whether sportive or not, can be seen as a "calling card", given that curiosities about its past can contribute to the emergence of new practitioners and researchers (Oliveira, Telles, and Barreira 2019), who would shed light on the geopolitical power struggles inherent in the history of this physical practice. Furthermore, data and experiences on Karate, collected in Okinawa, in the wake of immersive training by the researcher can promote reflections such as, for example, the pre-reflective character of the body¹⁵

¹⁴ Ancient kingdom formed by the archipelago of present-day Okinawa. Territorial organization that preceded the province creation in the modern Japanese National State.

¹⁵ According to Telles and Barreira (2024), the pre-reflexive nature of the body, applied to karate training experiences in Okinawa, refers to the body's ability to act and interact in the environment before any conscious reflection. As discussed in their study, this means that the learning and execution of karate techniques are not based exclusively on cognitive processes, but on a direct incorporation of practices and movements through repetition and body sensitivity. This phenomenon highlights the role of the body as a means of knowing and responding to the world, where actions are guided by bodily habits and memory, often without conscious mediation.

(Telles and Barreira 2024), or even the relationship between master and student from the perspective of the concept of “ma”¹⁶ (Pucineli and Martins 2023; Pucineli, Frosi and Oliveira 2025).

In general, the image of current Karate is much more based on Japanese Karate, which is different from the traditional Okinawan version. However, we have noticed efforts to make Okinawan Karate more accessible, whether virtually or in person (Telles and Barreira 2024). Karate is in constant interaction and changes, and these changes are influenced by the specific historical, social and cultural contexts of the East and the West. Current globalization trends are affecting the development of Karate, leading to social changes in usage and customs (Rosa 2020).

Final considerations

It should be noted that Karate can be considered, in a historical-political sense, and because of its martial-military character, as the hermeneutic vehicle that best exemplifies the tensions in the historical-political relations between Okinawa and Japan, after the conquest of 1609 and the assimilation of 1879, deeply marked by center-periphery relations. In other words, as we have observed in this study, by investigating the scientific literature on Karate, we can outline in depth some of the historical events and processes that link Okinawa-Japan relations in the broader consecrated context of East Asia, including the participation of other countries, such as China and Western powers, up to the present day.

Likewise, and after the International Relations and economic and cultural globalization acceleration at the beginning of the 20th century, Karate was resized and re-signified together with civilizational processes that opened this martial art to the mass culture of Japan – such as sportification, standardization, institutionalization, commodification and democratization. After the Second World War, and as Okinawan Karate gains its visibility with its own modality, a prototypical modality in fact, it gains more and more followers, largely because of its push into popular culture. Thus, whether through practitioners who go there in person to learn about it or by those curious on the history of the Karate’s origin, the wounds of Okinawa are illuminated – Karate projects itself as a key element of Okinawa’s cultural identity. Learning about Karate and Okinawa as an explanatory system is, also, to be impressed by its past, especially associated with the social injustices historically constructed in this part of the world. It is to realize that the archipelago was the stage of one of the greatest battles of the Second World War and that this had a profound impact on the island’s already complex history. It is to realize that there are clear American military influences that persist in inhabiting it. It is to identify racial clashes, even if the differentiation is recognized by the Japanese side, “including through the ‘other’ inferiorization. And it is the Western ‘other’, not the Japanese ‘other’, who needs to know about this differentiation” (Santos 2021, 124).

As Barreira, Telles and Oliveira (2023) reinforced, despite the racism that surrounded it, Karate survived the centuries and spread throughout the world, enchanting generations of practitioners, encouraging the emergence of other martial arts, marked by contradictions and obscurities that revealed less of its practice than of what it can serve, such as extremist ideologies. This danger is not exclusive to Karate, it is at the origins of modern martial arts, and it is strengthened whenever the claim to classify themselves as more effective relative to each other, is joined with other classifications, such as racial or nationalist ones.

That said, International Relations has helped us see Karate as a current and globalized object, while also helping us to reflect on the characteristics of this art and allowing us to determine various aspects of the history of Japan's International Relations. Furthermore, it has been observed that the *Ryūkyū* Islands are more than just paradisiacal beaches; in other words, Okinawa is a “Pandora's box” that every time someone visit it is as if a box were opened, revealing traces of a somber,

¹⁶ As discussed by Pucineli and Martins (2023), the concept of “ma” refers to intervals in space-time relationships, representing not only transitional gaps, but also creative opportunities in the context of the interaction between master and student. In other words, it is a void full of potentialities, which allows the manifestation of something significant in time and space. These intervals, noticeable in the dynamics of a karate dojo – whether between one exercise and another, in the contemplation of body movements, in the regular interaction between practitioners, or even in reflections after dialogues with the master or training colleagues –, are configured as propitious moments for the strengthening of social ties and the consolidation of shared knowledge.

bloody, and half-buried past. As future research topics, based on this initial kickoff, we suggest that the researcher investigate issues related to Orientalism (Said 1990), as well as the effects of globalization (Tausch 2018; Giulianotti and Robertson 2007), *sportswashing*, *soft power* (Almeida and Özdemir 2024; Leite Júnior and Rodrigues 2017) and dual career (Mateu et al. 2025; Marques et al. 2021), focusing on Karate.

The choice of Karate as a research subject presents a challenge, requiring an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theoretical frameworks from various fields of knowledge, such as Anthropology, History and International Relations, among others. Such a perspective is essential to understand not only its historical trajectory, but also its position in the contemporary globalized world. Furthermore, Okinawa's cultural hybridity and strategic geographic location offer a privileged lens for examining broader sociocultural issues. In this sense, Karate reveals itself as a complex and inexhaustible source of knowledge, in which the rich popular culture of Okinawa persists as a form of resistance to historical and contemporary adversities.

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ORCID

Marcelo Alberto de OLIVEIRA  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8555-3605>

Eduardo GONZÁLEZ DE LA FUENTE  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8483-4867>

Roberto Marques Leão da SILVA  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2127-126X>

Gustavo Oliveira Brito dos SANTOS  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5392-9326>