Performing and Assessing a Kata

I believe that there is sometimes a misunderstanding about the performance and evaluation of traditional kata and the performance and evaluation of kata in traditional tournaments. I hear people say things like "They don’t teach traditional kata, they teach tournament kata." I would certainly agree that the performance of kata in "open tournaments" is often unrealistic, theatrical, and wholly lacking in good technique. However, the type of kata seen at tournaments which adhere to a traditional paradigm of performance and evaluation are the antithesis of this.

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Many people do not realize that contestants must devote many years to continuous training in order to be successful, and kata judges must devote years to rigorous training and testing in order to receive their license. This May, at our GKK Tournament, I heard a local Shotokan nidan complain about a kata performance and the judging of that kata. He complained "That person left a section out of Bassi Dai and changed its kihon. Those judges didn't even see it." Whereas this individual is knowledgeable in Shotokan, he was unaware that the contestant performed the Shito Ryu version of the kata, and did it correctly. The judges are required to know the differences between the two and the proper kihon for each. Sometimes the misunderstandings people have of "tournament kata" come from attending "open tournaments", and sometimes it comes from a lack of understanding about other traditional styles of karatedo. Below are the standards for judging traditional kata which have been agreed upon by many of the world's leading people in the major traditional Japanese styles of karatedo. This should help clarify the traditional nature and the rigorous standards for performing and assessing kata.

"Kata will be in accordance to the schools of karate recognized by the WKF based in the Goju, Shito, Shoto, and Wado systems... The kata must be performed with competence, and must demonstrate a clear understanding of the traditional principles it contains. In assessing the performance of an individual or a team the judges will look for:"

1. a realistic demonstration of the kata meaning
2. understanding of the techniques being used (bunkai)
3. good timing, rhythm, speed, balance, and focus of power (kime)
4. proper and correct breathing as an aid to power (kime)
5. correct focus of attention (chakugan) and concentration
6. correct stances (dachi) with proper tension in the legs and feet flat on the floor
7. proper tension in the abdomen (hara) and no bobbing up and down of the hips when moving
8. correct form (kihon) of the style being demonstrated
9. the performance should also be evaluated with a view to discerning other factors
10. in team kata, synchronization without external factors is an added factor

1. Realistic Demonstration of Meaning
- "A kata is not a dance or theatrical performance."
- "A kata must adhere to traditional values and principles."

2. Understanding of Techniques
- "It [kata] must be realistic in fighting terms and display concentration, power, and potential impact in its techniques."

3. Timing, Rhythm, Speed, Balance and Power
- Timing is important in combat, and that same type of timing must be demonstrated in kata.
- Dachi, technique, and breathing must be coordinated.
- Few katas have a single rhythm and speed (the Wado version of Chinto is an exception).
- Most katas have a varied rhythm and speed alternating between fast and slow.
- Goju katas (and some Shito) demonstrate both hard and soft techniques.
- Flow and grace – a kata should flow and possess grace (not be choppy).
- Balance is critical; any loss of balance is a salient error.
- Power must be commensurate to the realistic use of the technique being executed.
- "It [kata] must demonstrate strength power and speed as well as grace, rhythm, and balance."

4. Proper and Correct Breathing to Aid Power
- Breath and technique are synchronized.
- Exhalation ends with the completion of a thrusting technique (Tsuki waza, Kansetsu or Sokuto- gari).

- Exhalation continues through a "snapping" technique (Uchi waza, Mae-gari).

5. Focus of Attention and Concentration
- One’s attention must be directed toward the direction of the attack/defense.
- A kata must demonstrate complete concentration throughout.
- Zanchin – (remaining mind) must be demonstrated (just as in kumite).

6. Dachi and Proper Tension

In proper dachi there is a relationship between a person’s shoulders, feet, knees, big toe, etc for each stance. Feet are "rooted" – knife edge, toes, and heal are all in contact with the floor. Inward tension, outward tension or "natural" tension is demonstrated. Sanchin – (inward tension) Zenkutsu (outward tension) and han-zenkutsu Shiko (outward tension) Neko Ashi (quasi inward tension) Kokutsu (outward tension) and han-kokutsu

7. Tension in the Hara
- In some dachi (sanchin) the hara is pulled upward.
- In transition from one dachi to another the hara moves in a straight line.

8. Correct Kihon

- Each style has its own kihon.
- To perform Seipai with Shoto kihon is improper; to perform Seienchin (Shito) with Goju kihon is improper.

9. Other Discerning Factors

- A kata is an individual expression and no two people will perform a kata exactly the same.
- The spirit (ki) that a person puts into a kata is an important factor.
- The evaluation of kata is not limited exclusively to the factors listed above.

Goju Shitei Kata

A kata performed in a shitei round can not be performed in a Tokui round.)

- Saifa
- Seipai

Goju Major Kata List (Tokui Kata)
(Any kata once performed can not be repeated.)
Sanchin , Saifa , Seiyunchin , Sanseiryu , Shisochin, Seisan, Seipai, Kururunfa, Suparimpei, Tensho