



The Kamiza

Most traditional karate dojos have an altar-like structure called a *kamiza* situated against one wall. Designs vary: it may be a closed cabinet or cupboard, a shelf, an open frame, a raised wall panel, or even a miniature medieval Japanese castle. In Japan and Okinawa the *kamiza* carries formal religious significance as the focus of Buddhist or Shinto meditation and prayer. In America, where students are likely to come from a variety of Western religious backgrounds, the *kamiza* is instead a purely secular symbol of respect for the karate masters who have gone before, and a ceremonial focal point of the dojo. The flag of the sensei's home country is sometimes displayed on one side, and the flag of his sensei's home country on the other. Or an Okinawan flag may fly on one side and an American flag on the other. A *hachimono* (vertical scroll hand-lettered in Japanese characters) may also hang nearby.

Drinking glasses for use in ceremonies honoring new black belt recipients are generally kept inside, along with various items of personal significance to the sensei. It is also common for photographs or portraits of the sensei and his or her senseis to be displayed nearby. Often an article of Japanese martial culture, such as a pair of samurai swords or a samurai helmet, will be placed atop the *kamiza* as a symbol of respect for the cultural context of Japanese/Okinawan martial arts.

Upon the call of "*Shomeni rei*" ("bow to the front"), all students, competitors, instructors and senseis bow to the *kamiza* at the beginning and end of tournament competitions, and sometimes also regular classes. This is part of the long tradition of respect and formal etiquette which are an essential part of martial arts training.

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