

The Obi Color Explosion

A personal observation and opinion

By: Bob McKean

Dr. Jigoro Kano, the father of modern judo, is credited for developing the first standardized colored belt system for ranks below black belt in the Japanese martial arts. The purpose of his system was for teaching judo in an educational setting. Different colored belts gave both the instructor and any visiting instructor a visual account for the level of training of each student in the class. It was also a way to grade and reward students for their ability, proficiency and training level.

When I began my Danzan Ryu Jujitsu training with Professor William Montero in 1974 he used seven colored belts for kyu (below black belt) ranks in his dojo: White, blue, green, purple and three levels of brown belt were used for adult ranks. Each rank level of brown belt had either one, two or three strips on the belt tips. Today we see some Danzan Ryu schools and organizations use two levels of blue belt, one stripe and two stripes. Some have added yellow and orange belts to their kyu rank levels for adults and additional colors and stripes for junior ranks.

Professor Montero also followed the five levels of black belt originally established in the early 1930's by the founder of Danzan Ryu Jujitsu, Professor Henry S. Okazaki. All five levels of black belt were plain black belts. Even as the founder of Danzan Ryu, Professor Henry S. Okazaki wore a plain black belt as did his original disciples. This was the Danzan Ryu standard for many years as there was no need for additional variations to the standard black belt.

A plain black belt was the standard used by most Japanese martial arts for decades. The Japanese did not rank all martial artists equally. Women ranked in judo had a different black belt than men. Their black belt had a white stripe down the middle of their belts. The practice of having different belts for men and women is not used in America. Today you will see some American martial art schools use this type of white stripped black belt for "junior black belts", usually under the age of 16.

A massive invasion of martial arts hit America during the 1970's. The sudden popularity of martial arts brought about many changes to the arts, ranks, titles, uniforms and belt colors. Commercial and franchised martial art schools began to open "belt factories" in strip malls all across America. By having more rank levels and using different belt colors a school owner, or organization, could charge a testing fee for each rank and could also charge a fee for each new belt or an additional stripe added to a belt. We also need to understand some of the cultural differences between Japan and America. American's tend to want immediate recognition and rewards for their accomplishments such as Boy Scout merit badges and seasonal sport trophies.

The most noticeable changes in Danzan Ryu Jujitsu belt colors can be seen in the black belt levels. As we fast forward into the 1980's Danzan Ryu 4th and 5th degree black belt ranks became black & red paneled belts. The newly added ranks of 6th, 7th and 8th

degree black belt ranks became red & white paneled belts and 9th and 10 degree black belt ranks became red belts. I asked several “senior” Danzan Ryu black belts, of one of the larger organizations, why it was necessary to change the Danzan Ryu original system of 5 levels of black belt to 10 levels. Their reason was Danzan Ryu needed to be rank compatible with other martial art systems so the more senior Danzan Ryu black belts could be recognized as equals by the senior black belts of other martial art systems.

Out of curiosity I checked several martial art supply catalogs and found the most common belt colors are white, yellow, pink, orange, blue, green, purple, tan, brown, red, black and even forest camouflage. Then you start adding colored stripes on the tips and center stripes like an orange belt with a center yellow stripe and belts with one color on top and a different color on the bottom. I found over 65 different belt colors and combinations.

Now we add some of the custom made belts that are available to martial artists. Some are real works of art. Many have names, ranks and systems embroidered in Japanese kanji, Korean, English and other languages. You can have multiple colored panel belts such as black & red, red & white, black & white and red, white & blue panels. You can even have flag belts made. An American flag belt with red and white stripes, blue tips and white stars or an American flag on half of the belt and the other half a Japanese or Korean flag? You can even get an African flag belt with green, black and red stripes.

Over the years I have attended a good number of different martial art seminars, clinics, conventions and tournaments. I look out and see all the different colors of belts, uniforms and tee shirts worn by the participants. Sometimes I can’t help myself but laugh as I look out onto the mat and see what looks like a large box of Crayola Crayons.

When you look at all the different colors, and combinations of colors, you need to ask yourself, “why this is necessary?” Is all of this for the betterment of the martial arts, for making money or stroking someone’s ego?

The *Obi Color Explosion* is only one part of the Americanization and commercialization of martial arts. We also need to examine the use of martial art titles and the fashion parade of martial art uniforms.

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