

# Nunchaku

After much research, here is the proper pronunciation of this Okinawan word:  
noon-CHOCK-oo

The use of Nunchaku as a weapon originated in the Okinawa archipelago which is now part of Japan. In 1429, King Sho Hashi united the three parts of Okinawa, creating the Ryukyu Kingdom. To decrease the possibility of a revolt, he prohibited the carrying of weapons by the common people. Only the king's army and the nobility could carry weapons. Naturally, the peasantry were helpless against the swords of soldiers and bandits. To defend themselves, many Okinawans took to practicing martial arts, largely in secret.

In the beginning of the 17th century, the Okinawan army was defeated and Okinawa was occupied by Japan. The unarmed population was unable to resist the Japanese samurai. Okinawa was declared a Japanese protectorate, which meant that the population had to pay high taxes and suffered discrimination of many kinds. The Okinawans didn't begin serious revolts, but occasionally killed Japanese officials and tax collectors, and staged attacks against small groups of samurai. Underground groups also fought against Japanese soldiers.

As a result of these acts of rebellion, warlords prohibited the carrying and ownership of any kind of weapon. Violation of this new law was punished by death. The government began a campaign known as "hunting of swords". All iron weapons (and even iron tools) were confiscated and public forges were closed. In addition, only one knife was allowed for an entire village. This knife was kept in the town square, tied to a pillar. Villagers were allowed to take this knife only for a few hours and only after confirmation of the village leader.

During this period, Okinawan martial arts were taught widely as a "last-ditch" effort at self-defense. While knowledge of unarmed fighting techniques can't help on the battlefield against an army, at times it was enough to defend against a few bandits or a small patrol. Citizens mainly practiced unarmed arts of to-te or okinawa-te, which later became the basics for today's karate. Villagers usually trained in the use of everyday tools as weapons--today we know these systems as kobudo or kobujutsu.

In the hands of a kobudo practitioner, everyday tools were transformed into weapons when needed. Not as effective as a sword or spear, but useful enough to significantly increase the odds of success against an opponent. Among the most popular tools used in kobudo as weapons were items such as staff (bo or rokushakubo), baton (hanbo), sickle (kama), the handle of the home millstone (tonfa) and of course, nunchaku.

It is sometimes said that nunchaku were originally used as a flail for threshing grain, but this is considered unlikely. Okinawan flails, like those used in Europe, have a much longer handle that is better suited to normal human height. Such tools are also used as kobudo weapons. Nunchaku were originally used as bits for a team of horses or oxen. Original nunchaku sticks were curved as opposed to the modern-day design which features straight sticks. The nunchaku probably wasn't a very popular weapon, since there is no known traditional nunchaku practice form (kata). In comparison, more than a dozen traditional staff katas are known today. This lack of popularity probably came from its lack of effectiveness when used against sword or staff. But a skilled nunchaku master could easily defeat several opponents who were unarmed or armed with knives or other short weapons.

Weapons similar to nunchaku exist in many martial arts elsewhere in the world. A few examples: Chinese ertzegoon, Philippine tabak-toyok, Korean ssanjalon, and European combat flails. All these weapons are constructed in much the same way as nunchaku. Some of these martial arts simply imported nunchaku from kobudo. For example, Philippine chako, tabak-toyok or dray bolo are just Okinawan nunchaku, but made from wood available in the Philippines. Other martial arts have their own "sticks-and-chain" weapons, such as the Shaolin santzegoon.

Nunchaku are so popular today that almost any new martial art integrates this weapon into its training. There's even a magazine published by a "pseudo-Russian" martial arts school, which claims that nunchaku were first used by ancient Russian warriors!

Due to its ease of construction and use, nunchaku have become one of the most popular martial arts weapons in use today. In addition, the masterful displays of prowess exhibited by Bruce Lee and others in widely popular martial arts films serve as a constant source of inspiration and fascination for anyone who likes things that look really cool when done well.

It is important to note that this ease of construction and use does have a darker side. Nunchaku are also very popular for use as street weapons. Anyone can make a pair of reasonably effective ones, and they are often easy to conceal, which causes a great deal of (justifiable) concern from law enforcement officials.

In the end, it's not just the utility of nunchaku that have allowed them to be used for so long. They are fun to swing and impressive to onlookers. And as with most hand weapons, particularly those used in the martial arts, they integrate easily with the body, allowing a fluid dance that is most exhilarating.