

Locating the Popular: Sports and Social Class Ideals in Egyptian Karate

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Locating the Popular: Sports and Social Class Ideals in Egyptian Karate

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Summary: This paper approaches the notion of the popular in relation to the ways in which social class ideals are performed and redefined through sporting activities. Egypt is a highly socioeconomically stratified country in which people live side by side knowing where the social class divide lies. I approach karate classes as a commodity that sheds light on social class ideals of the Egyptian middle class. Karate is the second most popular sport in Egypt after football. Some time ago, Bourdieu made us aware that we perform social class through consumption. In Egypt, public discourses seek to establish a correlation between the choice of sports or the sporting club one subscribes to and one's social class background. For the middle classes who aspire to maintain their status, engaging in sporting activities could serve as a means to accumulate cultural capital. Unlike squash or table tennis, which are limited to the upper class, Egyptians from all walks of life play or have experience in playing karate. By looking at the social class dynamics at play in karate classes, I will demonstrate how the middle class define their social class ideals in contradistinction to those of lower and upper class Egyptians. In contrast to the upper class, who view karate as a pastime, the middle class emphasise the educational value of the sport. I argue that the discourse on the usefulness of karate, which marginalises 'fun' in sporting activities, characterises one of the most important social class ideals of the Egyptian middle classes.

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Keywords: Middle class, sports, consumption, *sha'b* (the popular), social class ideals

1. Introduction

In February 2011 I attended a press conference in Berlin which had been organised to inform journalists about the political uprisings that were unfolding in the Arab world. My Egyptian colleague presented me to a German journalist as ‘the specialist of Egyptian popular culture’. The journalist stated that she did not see a point in talking to me as she was looking for ‘serious information’ about Egypt such as the names of ministers. I have experienced numerous occasions when somebody that I met thought sports or popular culture were ‘soft subjects’ for research compared to hard subjects such as politics or economy. Yet for the Egyptian middle classes, who equate sports with competition, karate is not just a pastime. There is no place for ‘fun’ in a real sporting activity. The Egyptian middle class define sports as activities with a clear set of goals and accomplishment. In this sense, attending aerobics lessons and jogging outdoors would not qualify as a ‘sport’ because these exercises are not geared towards a competition. Karate becomes a sport when the practitioner sets one’s objective on winning a medal in the national championship, passing a belt test or committing oneself to do a hundred push-ups every day.

In this paper, I explore the notion of the popular in relation to the ways in which social class ideals are performed and redefined through sporting activities¹). Egypt is a highly socioeconomically stratified country in which people live side by side, knowing where the social class divide lies²). Some time ago, Bourdieu made us aware that we perform social class through consumption. In Egypt, public discourses seek to establish a correlation between the choice of sports or the sporting club one subscribes to and one’s social class background. For the middle classes who aspire to maintain their social class status, engaging in sporting activities could serve as a means to accumulate cultural capital. However, how does this actually work? I approach karate classes as a commodity which sheds light on the social class ideals of the middle class. While the upper class regard sports as a pastime, the middle classes engage in sporting activities as a serious endeavour revolving around setting and accomplishing goals. By looking at the social class dynamics at play in karate classes, I will demonstrate how the middle class define their social class ideals in contradistinction to those of lower and upper class Egyptians. I argue that the discourse on the usefulness of karate, which marginalises ‘fun’ in sporting activities, characterises one of the most important social class ideals of the Egyptian middle classes.

This paper consists of four sections. Before delving into my ethnographic vignette, I will outline the main characteristics of karate in Egypt that sustain its popularity. I then discuss key concepts related to ‘the popular’ in Egyptian colloquial Arabic to show how social class ideals are profoundly related to nationalism. Lastly, by looking at the various ways in which karate trainers define this sport, I demonstrate where the divide between upper and middle classes lies. In the end, through the conversations I had with parents who bring their child to a karate class, I illustrate how their views on the value of karate in bringing up a child represent what it means to be middle class in Egyptian society.

2. Egyptian Society through Karate

The history of karate in Egypt is short, and yet this branch of Oriental martial arts has established firm roots in youth culture. Karate is the second most popular sport in Egypt after football and the large majority of karate players³⁾ are children under the age of 12. Unlike squash or table tennis, which are limited to the upper class, Egyptians from all walks of life practise or have experience in taking a karate lesson during their childhood.

It is difficult to ascertain when exactly karate was introduced to Egypt, but from my interviews I learned that a small group of karate enthusiasts emerged in the late 1960s. Newspaper articles reporting karate as an exotic Oriental sport or martial arts started to appear in the early 1970s, around the time when the Egyptian national team won the first Arab Championship for karate that took place in Syria in September 1973⁴⁾. During this period, owing greatly to the success of Bruce Lee’s kung fu films, Egypt’s youth became attracted to Oriental martial arts and karate schools mushroomed all over Egypt. During the Sadat era (1970–1981), the President’s enthusiasm for Oriental martial arts coincided with the Japanese government’s soft-power diplomacy to promote Japanese cultures abroad⁵⁾, and martial art instructors were sent to Egypt as part of a sports exchange programme. In 1974, the first JKA (Japan Karate Association)-certified karate instructor was dispatched to Egypt to train its national team⁶⁾.

The Egyptian national team is one of the strongest in Africa and the Middle East. Among the World Karate Federation’s 195 member states, several Egyptian *karate-kas* (karate practitioners) are ranked top ten in the official WKF Ranking. Karate will only enter the Olympic Games for the first (and possibly the last time) at Tokyo 2020, yet it has been included in other international sporting competitions in which Egypt has fared well – for example the Pan Arab Games, the All Africa Games and the Islamic Solidarity Games. Since Egypt is situated on the semi-periphery of the global political economy, victories at international sporting competitions are an important source of national pride. Regardless of the type of

sport or the scale of competition, victories — including karate victories — are reported widely by the national press and the public receives them with great pleasure. In this sense, Atif Abaza's victory at the African and Arab Championships of karate from the 1970s to the 1980s greatly contributed to the popularisation of this sport in the country, which was regaining its national pride after the October War against Israel in 1973.

While sports have contributed to the nation-crafting of Egypt as much as they have done anywhere else in the world, sports or physical education in modern Egypt are yet to be examined thoroughly⁷⁾. Due to the lack of physical education facilities in governmental schools in Egypt, the opportunity to play sport is generally restricted to the members of privileged classes who can afford the membership fees of sporting clubs. There are private, governmental and military owned sporting clubs. To attend karate training, one must first purchase a club membership. Lifetime membership for a privately run luxury sporting club may cost 175,000 EGP (approximately 1,200,000 JPY). Some clubs require a recommendation from an existing member to apply for membership. The monthly fee for joining a lesson is not costly, but membership is what prevents many to play sports. In 1986, the Japanese government donated the Japan Budo Centre to Zohor Sporting Club, which comprises of karate and judo training halls (*dojo*). Zohor Club is a publicly run sporting club in a middle class neighbourhood in Greater Cairo, but one must acquire club membership before joining the karate training.

Karate is one of the few sports offered outside sporting clubs. Karate schools are quite ubiquitous and encounters with Egyptians who have practised karate at one point in their lives are quite common. I have visited a karate lesson offered in the courtyard of a historic mosque, as well as another conducted in the reading room of a library. One can start taking karate lessons at the publicly funded youth centres (*markiz shabab*) built in neighbourhoods with low-income families. Many karate trainers are physical education teachers and they offer afterschool karate class at the school they work for. Although it is rare, some successful trainers establish an *academia* (a small-scale private sporting facility) dedicated to karate.

Karate trainers can start giving lessons outside sporting clubs because, in contrast to other types of sport or martial arts, karate training does not require much investment in infrastructure. *Karate-do* literally means 'the way of the empty hand' in Japanese. This martial art is founded upon the principle that its practitioners fight simply with one's body without the help of any instruments⁸⁾. When compared to judo, for instance, a judo training must take place in a hall with tatami mats and its practitioners must wear *judo-gi* (a judo training suit) that allows them to grab one another. On the other hand, a karate training hall can be established even in a relatively small flat with a wooden floor or in an outdoor

space. Students train barefoot, wearing the same shorts and T-shirts in which they arrive at the lesson. Such a characteristic is an important factor in sustaining the popularity of karate as it enables children from lower social classes to try out this sport.

3. Who is the ‘Authentic Egyptian’?

The Egyptian colloquial expression *sha‘b* and its adjective form *sha‘bi* illustrate that the notion of the popular cannot be divorced from Egyptian social class ideals and nationalism. *Sha‘b* is an Arabic expression which is generally glossed as ‘people’ or ‘nation’. Its adjective form, *sha‘bi*, has a connotation of ‘the popular’, in the sense of ‘ordinary people’ but also expresses various types of locally rooted ‘practices, tastes, and patterns of behaviour in everyday life’ (Singerman 1995: 11). Although many would agree that the *sha‘b* represents the authentic Egyptian, one cannot bypass the uncomfortable discussion regarding the various ideals associated with the middle class in order to find out who qualifies as *sha‘b*. At times, *sha‘b* brings incredible solidarity to the nation, but at the same time divides it.

On 25 January 2011, Egyptian protestors gathered in Cairo’s Tahrir Square (now world-famous) calling for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. On a frosty winter evening, under the glowing city lights, demonstrators shouted, ‘*As-sha‘b yurid isqat nizam! As-sha‘b yurid isqat nizam* (The people demand that the regime should fall)!’ The live image of Tahrir Square broadcast from above by the international media represented the Egyptian *sha‘b* as a collective identity. Regardless of differences between religions, gender, social classes and generations, demonstrators were striving towards one goal in the name of the nation. In a socioeconomically stratified country like Egypt, generally speaking, *sha‘b* indicates those who belong to the lower middle or working classes. Yet at moments of heightened political tension, the term *sha‘b* functions as a driving force to bring solidarity to the nation, overcoming the differences that would otherwise divide it.

Similar to the expression *ibn al-balad* (a son of the country, pl. *awlad al-balad*), *sha‘b* carries the connotation of ‘the authentic member of the nation’⁹). While upper class Egyptians may use the term *sha‘bi* to express the crudeness they perceive in certain fashions or mannerisms of the working class, an Egyptian, for instance, who cannot appreciate a *ful wa ta‘miya* breakfast¹⁰), the quintessential *sha‘bi* menu, might be regarded as somewhat lacking in Egyptian-ness. ‘As reservoirs of national identity and the Egyptian character, then, the *sha‘b* have a sense of authenticity and believe that they embody the values and beliefs of the nation’ (Singerman 1995: 14). Ever and again politicians and public intellectuals perform their *sha‘bi*-ness before the public through language and mannerisms as a proof that ‘I am just like you’. President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) and the

star preacher Muhammad Mitawalli al-Sha'rawi (1911–1998) are quintessential examples.

This bipolarised nature of the notion of *sha'b*, in the sense that the term can be used in a derogatory or a salutary sense depending on the context, is a common feature of Egyptian modernity. Egyptian modernism claims to seek national progress and development, yet it is never divorced from history and tradition. When discussing modernity (*hadatha*), the notion of heritage (*turath*) is employed as a twin concept signifying the source of strength and renewal (Salvatore 1995; Armbrust 1996; Winegar 2006).

A *Sha'b* is an authentic Egyptian who embraces middle class ideals. As Samuli Schielke (2012) aptly described, in spite of the difficulty in defining what exactly being middle class entails, large populations in Egypt associate themselves to be from the middle class (*al-tabaqa al-wusta'*) or between the poor and the rich (*fi al-nuss*). When studying the representation of beach holidays in Egyptian films, Walter Armbrust (1999: 112) concluded that, in the imagination of the Egyptian middle class, 'leisure is not for the poor, and it is not healthy when the extremely wealthy indulge. The presumed decadence of both the poor and the rich brackets middle-class identity.' In other words, members of the Egyptian middle class equate the popular (*sha'b*) with a diligent individual who contributes to the progress of the nation. One could qualify as a *sha'b* by committing to a competitive sport.

4. Competing Definitions of Karate

In May 2011, I frequented karate lessons for children and teenagers offered at a luxury sporting club located in an affluent neighbourhood of central Cairo. This club hired four top-class karate trainers, including Atif Abaza, one of the most celebrated *karate-kas* in Egypt. After 18 years of coaching the Kuwaiti national team, he returned to Cairo in 2008 to help rebuild the karate school of this sporting club. Atif Abaza preferred to speak to me in English, occasionally mixing in Japanese words. The first thing he told me at our meeting was that 'karate is *atama* (mind, intellect) and *kokoro* (heart)', pointing to his head and heart. He emphasised the pureness of karate by evoking his connection to *Sensei* Okamoto and other Japanese karate masters¹¹. He met the legendary Hideki Okamoto (1932–2009) in 1975 in Lebanon when he won the karate Arab Championship. His trainer at the time, *Sensei* Takamiya, was in tears when he saw the victory and said 'Atif, your karate is better than that of the Japanese.' Throughout our conversation, Abaza emphasised that karate is not a mere '(competitive) sport' but a '*budo* (the way of samurai warriors)', and said he strives to teach his students pure karate with *nippon seishin* (Japanese spirit). While the majority of his students and

colleagues regard karate as a competitive sport in the sense of winning a match or passing a belt test, Abaza wanted them to understand that one must have a lifetime's commitment to karate. For him, karate must be 'a way of life'. He is very attentive to each of his students, carefully taking note of their personality and family background (number of siblings, parents' jobs, age, etc.). He told me that to thrive in *karate-do*, one needs to have the right mindset, spirit and knowledge, as well as a fit body, a good diet and the right amount of sleep. He said even the national team members were surprised when he taught them the philosophy behind karate.

It is worth pointing out that Atif Abaza is from a well-to-do family, as epitomised in his family membership of one of the most prestigious sporting clubs in Egypt. Since his childhood, he practised various sports (including track and field, swimming and football) until he had his destined encounter with karate. While Atif Abaza's approach to karate as a way of life must be taken seriously, I must point out that the majority of Egyptian karate practitioners from less affluent backgrounds are not aware of this philosophy because they regard sports as a means of gaining income. Not all the middle class can afford the time and energy for theoretical discussions at an historical juncture where their future is becoming increasingly uncertain due to the neoliberal policies of Egyptian governments.

On a hot steamy afternoon in May, under a blue sky, a child's concentration does not last five minutes, in contrast with the enthusiasm of karate trainers. On this particular day, the outdoor temperature reached 40 degrees Celsius. Even when the trainers raised their voices, students made the same mistake over and over again. Parents sat around the training hall, chatting to each other while observing the lesson. Their *à la mode* clothing was a clear indicator that these children were from very wealthy family. On the contrary, many karate trainers are from middle or lower middle class backgrounds and they have gained their current wealth and social status as a result of their success in karate competitions. After years of dedicating themselves to karate as well as coaching children, elite karate trainers have become heavily sought after by famous sporting clubs and national teams both inside and outside Egypt. In a country where the minimum wage of civil servants is 1,500 EGP (10,000 JPY) a month, an original Adidas or Nike tracksuit (which costs at least 10,000 JPY) as worn by the trainers is a gleaming symbol of one's professional success. Yet for their students, the children of upper class families who have been flooded with imported branded goods since their birth, a Nike t-shirt is a day-to-day outfit that they are brought up with.

As I continued to visit the lessons, some trainers started to share the frustration they experience when dealing with the upper class children of this sporting club. After an exhausting lesson of *kata* (sets of choreographed movements to demonstrate one's techniques) for children between the ages of seven and four, one

trainer told me, '*Fun is fun* and sports is sports [using the English expression]! They don't go together!!' The other trainer lamented: 'In the previous club where I was training, out of a class of 40, seven to eight students would compete at the national level. However, in this club, I see only one student who has such a potential.' The trainers struggled to grasp why their students come to trainings while showing no interest in committing to this sport. These children treated karate like any other commodities they consume on daily basis.

It seemed inevitable that the professional trainers from middle class background who had dedicated their entire life to karate and the affluent class had strikingly different outlook on life. Although karate is not a professional sport as in football or tennis, elite karate players in Egypt manage to convert success during their sporting career into economic gain. In a society where opportunities for upward social mobility are limited, Egyptian *karate-kas* view sports as a precious means to realise their professional goals and economic aspirations.

On the last day of my field research, an Egyptian private satellite television station visited this karate school to film the lesson. Unlike on other days, the children showed up in their white *karate-gi* (karate training suit) with colourful belts; their parents wore even flashier fashion than usual at the training hall. A young trainer who came in his usual tracksuit rather than his *karate-gi* was shoved aside so that the TV camera would not film him. During the lesson, he asked me about my research project. I introduced myself as a social anthropologist who was conducting field research on karate because of my interest in Egyptian popular culture (*thaqafa al-sha'biya*). He looked perplexed with my answer and said, 'Why did you come to this sporting club? There is nothing *sha'bi* about this place.' Taken aback by his statement, I replied: 'I am fully aware that this club is nothing but *sha'bi*. I study karate as the sport of the popular (*sha'b*) in Egypt. Many people in Egypt love karate, don't they?' He stated: 'Karate is indeed very popular in this county. But look at this.' Pointing at the lesson, he continued: 'Next time you visit Cairo I will take you to a more authentic karate school.' Such utterances situate the members of the upper class on the margins of the popular and sound as if the authentic *sha'b* are the middle classes who sweat to earn their living without relying on existing privileges.

5. Karate for a Middle Class Upbringing

Asking parents who bring their children to karate training what they expect from the lessons reveals social class ideals of the middle classes that do not equate sports with leisure, 'fun' or a hobby. As in other countries around the world, the majority of karate practitioners in Egypt are kindergarten and primary school pupils. Hence, we cannot disregard the role parents play in sustaining karate as an

educational industry. When a three- or five-year-old child decides to join a karate class, their wish must be supported by the parents who are willing, for instance, to pay the lesson and belt test application fees, as well as to bring them to training.

During a karate lesson, parents sit around the training hall observing their child's progress and socialise with other parents. When I asked some from a middle class background about their views on the sport, many answered that karate was good for their child in terms of moral education. One father emphasised that, compared to sports such as football or swimming, karate training teaches children the importance of working in a group, because to win a competition the player must establish a strong bond with the trainer and collaborate with teammates. Others noted that karate would be effective in stimulating their child's intellect and improving their capacity to concentrate. Many suggested that, while classical ballet is just a dance, karate is *useful* because their children can gain the skills of self-defence.

Some parents explained that they bring their spoiled children to a karate class in the hope that the trainer might be able to discipline them. 'Discipline' is indeed the foremost important keyword in the discourse of Egyptian childhood education, yet not many parents succeed in achieving it. One mother was deeply impressed with the charismatic capacity of the 'captain' (the title karate trainers are addressed with in Egypt), who was able to stop her six-year old son from drinking Pepsi and eating potato chips.

In his work on Islamic education at Egyptian schools, Gregory Starrett (1998) persuasively reveals how Islam has been functionalised in the sense that the goal of accumulating Islamic knowledge is redefined in terms of concrete and practical objectives. The same type of blunt functionalisation can also be observed in sporting activities. Since the 1980s, karate has gained recognition among the educated middle classes as a morally safe and sound sport for young girls and boys to play. For example, a young *muhajjaba* (Muslim woman with a headscarf) once shared a childhood memory with me of attending Qur'an recitation and karate lessons in the 1980s at her nursery. She qualified as what Samuli Schielke terms 'the old middle class' as her parents worked in civil service (Schielke 2012: 36–40). It is instructive that both Qur'an recitation and karate lessons strengthen children's capacity of memorisation – a skill that is highly cherished in Egyptian pedagogical philosophy. Similar to memorising the verses of the Qur'an in short phrases, children learn to perform a *kata* through basic technique drills. Karate competition is based on *kata* (sets of choreographed movements) and *kumite* (sparring), but children start with the former. Many children take great pride in training for the belt test, which clearly marks their progress as a *karate-ka* by the colour of the belt they wear.

There is no doubt that karate's popularity is sustained by its belt test system,

and tests are scheduled three to four times a year. The majority of those who start practising karate are children under the age of 12, and many quit before attaining a brown or a black belt. They might throw away the colour belts but they will continue to display the certificates (*shahada*) from their belt tests in their living room. Such a collection of memorabilia serves as a proof of one's middle class belonging. Owing greatly to the growth of the national population, karate continues to be a lucrative source of revenue for the Egyptian trainers who manage to break into the highly competitive market of running karate schools.

6. Conclusion

My contribution has explored the notion of the popular through the performance of social class ideals in sporting activities. Through an urban ethnography of karate practitioners' communities in Egypt, I have illustrated the various ways in which members of the middle class approach karate to fulfil their social class ideals. After outlining the history and main characteristics of karate in Egypt, I have discussed how the word 'popular' (*sha'b*, *sha'bi*) figures in Egyptian colloquial Arabic in relation to social class ideals. Although *sha'bi* carries the connotation of the manners and customs of the lower middle class, it is also associated with authentic national culture. More specifically, the middle class represent the hardworking *sha'b*, striving for the nation's success.

In the subsequent section, I have examined the social class dynamics of a karate class offered at a luxury sporting club in an upper class neighbourhood. While a karate trainer from an affluent family background sought to redefine karate as 'a way of life' rather than as a mere competitive sport, trainers from the middle class struggle to teach spoiled children the significance of setting and accomplishing goals, which they consider as the sole purpose of doing sports. For these trainers, sports ought to be a serious endeavour, not a pastime. Furthermore, they feel that the rich, who equate sports with fun, do not represent the authentic national culture.

In the end, I looked at conversations I had with parents who brought their children to a karate class to show the extent to which karate has been functionalised in the eyes of the Egyptian middle class. Many parents were eager to explain the characteristics of karate in terms of moral education. They asserted that karate was a sport suitable for their child because it would strengthen their moral values as much as their body. Although karate and classical ballet are comprised of similar body techniques, karate is considered *more useful* because children learn self-defence techniques and enhance their memorisation skills. The Egyptian middle classes cannot simply enjoy karate as a pastime. They must be able to explain the usefulness of the sport their child takes part in. The

functionalisation of karate thus illustrates the significant characteristics of middle class ideals in contemporary Egypt.

Notes

- 1) This paper is a thoroughly revised and updated version of Aishima (2012; 2013). I would like to thank James Disley for his superb editorial job.
- 2) For discussions on social class ideals in contemporary Egypt, see Schielke (2012); de Koning (2009); Petersen (2011).
- 3) In Egyptian karate, athletes who train for sporting competitions are called players (*la'ib*). The Japanese term *karate-ka* generally designates both karate trainers and athletes in other countries, but in the Egyptian context only those who train for competition are considered *karate-ka*.
- 4) *Al-Ahram* (Cairo) (1973) 'Misr tafawwuz bi-batulat al-dawlat al-'arabiya fi al-karate (Egypt wins the Arab Karate Championship)', 13 September. *Al-Ahram* is the most established and widely distributed national newspaper in Egypt.
- 5) Kosaku Yoshino (1992) has undertaken insightful research on how ordinary people were conscripted into Japan's soft-power diplomacy in the 1970s and the 1980s by spreading the theory of Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjin-ron*). For a more recent approach to cultural nationalism in Japan see Surak (2013).
- 6) *Al-Ahram* (Cairo) (1973) 'Khabir yabani li-tadrib al-fariq al-ahali li-l-karate (A Japanese expert for training the national team of karate)', 3 October.
- 7) Some informative studies on sporting culture during the colonial era have been produced by social historians. For body building and masculinity in the emerging middle classes in Egypt see Jacob (2011); for football and nationalism see Lopez (2009); for sporting clubs and upper class society see Oppenheim (1991). For the role of physical education and scouting in the formation of the new middle class in Iran see Koyagi (2009); for Algeria, see Kraiss (2017).
- 8) It is generally understood that Hunakoshi Gichin (1868–1957) established the modern day *karate-do* (the path of the empty way or hand) in the early twentieth century by reforming traditional Okinawan karate (spelled as the 'Chinese way' in Japanese). Master Hunakoshi replaced the Chinese character for *kara* in karate from that of 'China' to 'emptiness'. When martial arts were becoming obsolete in the age of industrially produced weapons, the newly spelled 'karate' – the way of the empty hand – was reborn by gaining connotations from the philosophical tradition of Zen Buddhism.
- 9) For a discursive genealogy of *ibn al-balad* and its usage in modern Egypt see El-Messiri (1978).
- 10) *Ful* is a fava bean paste. *Ta'miya* is an Egyptian falafel made of deep fried fava bean paste. In contrast to the culinary culture of the Levant, which cherishes chickpeas and olive oil, Egyptians use fava beans and vegetable oil.
- 11) Hideki Okamoto initially arrived in Egypt as a part of the sport experts exchange programme of the Japan Foundation. He was an official instructor of the JKA and visited several countries in the Middle East to spread karate. He eventually left the Japan Foundation and settled down in Egypt, marrying an Egyptian woman.

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