

# Kenwa Mabuni

## The Founder of Shotokan?

*Founder of Shito Ryu*

By Damian Chambers

Everyone knows the founder of Shotokan karate is Gichen Funakoshi (1868-1957) but Kenwa Mabuni (1893-1952) is often not given credit for the many contributions he made to modern karate and the Shotokan style. In fact, Mabuni sensei brought many of Okinawa's unique kata to Japan that were later added to the Shotokan system. There is no question that he made a substantial contribution to the Shotokan style.

### ***Karate Comes to Japan***

In 1917, Gichin Funakoshi traveled to Kyoto, Japan and demonstrated the art of Okinawan Karate at the Butokuden for the Dai Nippon Butokukai, The Greater Japan Martial Virtues Association. This was the first time karate had been demonstrated in Japan. This was done in order to stimulate interest in the art in mainland Japan. In 1922, he made a second trip, this time to Tokyo, at the request of Japanese officials and formally introduced karate to the Japanese mainland. Therefore, he is credited as being the father of Japanese karate.

Karate was not accepted at first in Japan. Funakoshi Sensei and others spent a decade promoting the art before it became popular. Perhaps this initial



*A rare 1930s photo showing Mabuni sensei seated and Funakoshi sensei standing.*

resistance was due the fact that a plebeian art such as karate was perceived to be less effective than the martial arts of the samurai, i.e. jujitsu and kenjutsu. Realize too that in Japan, Okinawa was thought of as the "country" and Okinawan farmers and fishermen were thought of as little more than hillbillies. However, eventually karate caught on at various Japanese universities and began to spread all over Japan and karate grew in popularity. Eventually, Funakoshi Sensei's group became known as the Shotokan style of karate and the Japan Karate Association (JKA) was formed.

Funakoshi began learning karate as a boy from Master Yasutsune Azato (1827-1915) one of Okinawa's leading karate masters at the time. Azato had been a student of the great Bushi or warrior Matsumura of whom many legends are told in Okinawa. Azato encouraged Funakoshi to study under other karate masters and learn all he could. On Azato's introduction Funakoshi trained with Anko Itosu (1830-1915) and others of the Shuri-Te style and Kanryo Higashionna of the Naha-Te style.

Funakoshi originally brought fif-

teen kata to Japan with him. In addition to his kata syllabus, he formalized techniques and nomenclature and added a spiritual essence to the art. However, Funakoshi would send his senior instructors to Mabuni Sensei and he would teach them kata that were not included in Funakoshi's syllabus. These kata were rohai (meikyō), wankan, chinte, unsu, sochin, nijushiho (niseishi), gojushiho, jiin and bassai sho. They would then take these kata and Shotokan-ize them!

Mabuni began training in karate as a young boy in Okinawa. He was the seventeenth generation descendant of the famous Okinawan samurai family named Onigusikuni. Mabuni was very proud of his samurai heritage. He began studying Shuri-Te at age thirteen from Itosu. He first learned the naihanchi kata from Itosu. Itosu was over seventy years old at the time. Mabuni was weak as a boy but Itosu encouraged him to keep training. Mabuni trained very hard and learned "twenty three swift fists" or kata from Itosu. Mabuni ultimately became very adept at karate. An interesting story handed down is that when



*Kenwa Mabuni (L) meets with Gichen Funakoshi at Osaka Station 1948.*

Itosu died; Mabuni was so grief stricken that he stayed by Itosu's grave for one year. He practiced the kata that Itosu had taught him every day at the gravesite. Mabuni did this to show his devotion to his master.

Mabuni also studied kempo from a Chinese man named Gokenki who was living in Okinawa. Gokenki was a tea merchant from Fukien Province, China. Mabuni learned a form of Shaolin white crane (hakutsuru) from Gokenki. This form is preserved in the Shito ryu style today and is known as hakucho. Gokenki also taught Mabuni the kata nipai (nipaipo) and paipuren. Mabuni then studied Naha-Te with Kanryo Higashionna and Arakaki Seisho. He perfected the sanchin kata under Higashionna and Arakaki taught him unshu, sochin, and niseishi kata. All these kata were eventually brought into the Shotokan system as taught by Mabuni. Mabuni later combined the teachings of Itosu and Higashionna and

called his system of karate Shito Ryu. Around this time it was thought that it was necessary to name each style in order to differentiate one master's teachings from another's. The word Shito is a combination of two characters. The first character (shi) represents ito from Itosu's name and the second character (to) represents higa from Higashionna's name. He spent a great deal of time studying and teaching in Okinawa before he came to Japan. Mabuni taught the Okinawan police departments.

Initially, Mabuni made several trips to Japan from Okinawa. Then he spent about a year in the Tokyo area. At this time he taught the senior members of Funakoshi's group including Nakayama and Obata the advanced Shito Ryu forms. This was during 1927 and 1928. He also taught Yasuhiro Konishi and helped him establish his style known as Ryobukai. Then in 1929, Mabuni moved to Osaka and began teaching at

various universities and police departments. He taught at Kansai University, Doshisha University and Kansai Gakuin University. He established a dojo in Osaka called the Japan Karatedo Kai that attracted a large following in that area of Japan.

When Funakoshi introduced karate to mainland Japan in 1922 he taught the following kata: pinan 1-5, naihanchi 1-3, passai, wanshu, chinto, seisan, jutte, jion, and kusanku. These kata became the basis of Shotokan and Japanese karate. Later, the following kata were added to the Shotokan system: roh'ai (meikyo), wankan, chinte, unshu, sochin, nijushiho and gojushiho, jiin and bassai sho. Although in the literature of the Shotokan system they never say where these kata came from! In 1927 and 1928 Mabuni taught these kata to the senior members of the Shotokan group [it wasn't called Shotokan until 1936] in Tokyo when Funakoshi, Konishi and Mabuni were training altogether and sharing ideas. Around this time there was an impetus to organize an All Japan generic style of karate under one organizational banner. Kanken Toyama who had organized the All Japan Karate Do Federation fostered this. However, the establishment and formalization of this group failed. Typically, as is often the case with Japanese karate organizations, each group went their separate ways deciding that they would each maintain their own unique stylistic and organizational integrity, no doubt motivated by an elitist attitude within their respective groups.

Mabuni's kata repertoire of his Shito Ryu style combined Shuri-Te, Tomari-Te and Naha-Te lineage kata into a set that used kata from all three sources. Mabuni taught an amazing

number of kata. All in all there were over sixty kata in his seito or orthodox Shito Ryu style. Some authorities say this is too many kata and is more than necessary to be an accomplished fighter and teacher of a combative martial discipline. However, Mabuni saw himself as a preserver of these forms. He was certainly one of the most prolific kata practitioners of all time. He gave a glimpse of his kata system in his book that he published in the 1930s. However, Funakoshi on the other hand felt that only fifteen kata were enough to provide an overall training methodology and were a sufficient number to comprise as a complete training regime. This is exemplified by Funakoshi's book Karate Do Kyohan that contained the orthodox kata of the system that included only fifteen as opposed to sixty plus kata in Mabuni's system. Although, Funakoshi along with his son Gigo

(Yoshitaka) were to make their own changes to karate. They lengthened the stances, added the sidekick, and made changes in certain kata movements. Funakoshi changed the names of the kata. He modified the original kata of the Okinawan art to adapt it to the Japanese culture. One way he did this was by changing the older Okinawan names of the kata to names with a clearer meaning to the Japanese. He also changed the meaning of karate from Chinese hand to empty hand in 1936. The change served to disassociate the art from its Chinese origins and influence. Japan was at war with China by 1937 and this change was politically necessary.

Although Funakoshi and Mabuni had some of the same teachers, Mabuni also had teachers that Funakoshi did not. They were different ages and studied under the same masters but because of age differences they studied at different times. This accounts for the difference in knowledge level of kata and bunkai. Some critics of Shotokan say the level of understanding of bunkai or practical application in the Shotokan style was lacking. In other words, they had no deep or advanced understanding of the practical techniques and meaning of the kata movements beyond a cursory level.

Some authorities say Mabuni moved to Osaka in 1929 out of respect for Funakoshi. Since the affiliation of Funakoshi's and Mabuni's karate groups [and others] didn't work



Kenwa Mabuni (1893-1957) the founder of Shito Ryu Karate and contributor to Shotokan.

under the auspices of the All Japan Karate Do Federation. In addition, some members of Funakoshi's group ostracized Mabuni. However, Funakoshi himself never showed any disrespect or ill will towards Mabuni. Ultimately, Mabuni was not given the recognition he deserved as a substantial contributor to the development of the Shotokan system of karate. Certainly the literature of the JKA (S) does not mention him. Although not the founder of Shotokan karate as the title of this article intimates, he was the founder of the highly technical and comprehensive style of Shito Ryu Karate. Finally, Mabuni sensei was a conduit and preserver of many of Okinawa's unique karate kata that today form the basis of Shotokan's advanced repertoire of kata.



**Japanese Traditional Shito Ryu**  
 This video was taken in the early 1960s and has been totally unedited as it is the only footage known of this great master of Shito Ryu Karate - Shogo Kuniba. In this video master Kuniba unveils the bunkai of Shito Ryu kata which he became famous for as well as he performs the kata of Shito Ryu Karate Do.

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