

By Mike Williams

The End of an Era

Kenzo Mabuni Soke, 30 May 1927 – 26 June 2005

Kenzo Mabuni Soke, the son of Shito-Ryu karate's founder, Kenwa Mabuni, passed away on 26 June 2005, ending a life of dedication and unselfish commitment to karate-do. Mabuni Soke's Australian representative, Mike Williams Sensei, reflects on his teacher's life, methods and contributions to his family's fighting art.

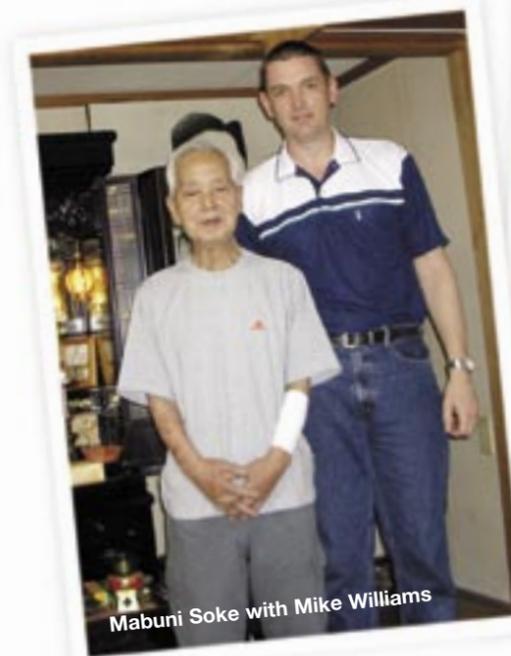
To appreciate the commitment to karate that Kenzo Mabuni Soke made right up until he died, it's important to understand the history behind his legacy. He is the second son of Master Kenwa Mabuni (1889–1952), the founder of Shito-Ryu Karate-Do, which is one of the four main styles of karate practised in Japan today.

Kenzo Soke's father, Master Kenwa Mabuni, began training at 13 years old with Anko Itosu, a revered karate master in the Shuri area of Okinawa. Itosu Sensei was not only highly skilled in budo, but also a great innovator in teaching the martial arts and in around 1905, he introduced karate into the Okinawan public school system. Among other accomplishments, Itosu Sensei created the Pinan (Heian) series of kata, which are still practised today as introductory or intermediate kata in many schools. Itosu Sensei had an important effect on karate in the 20th Century.

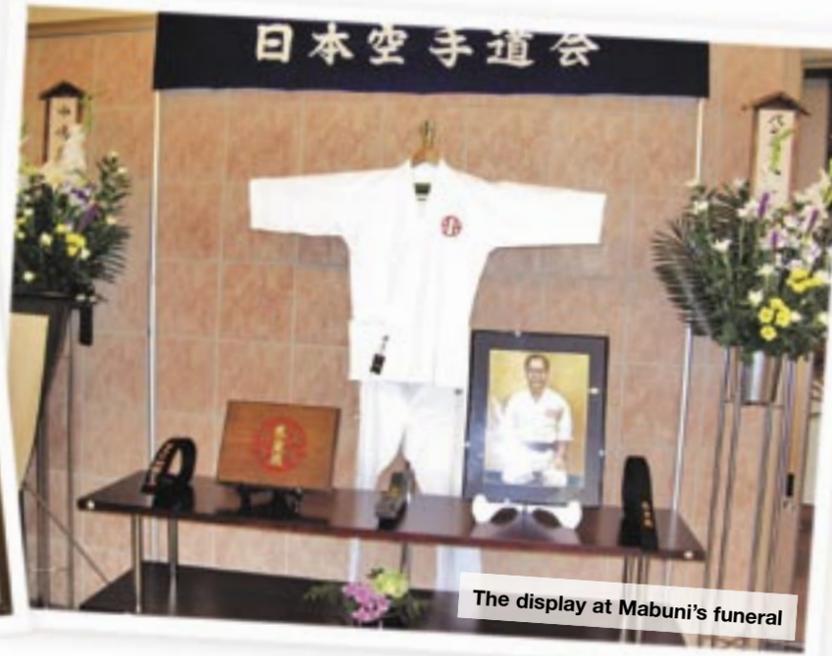
Around 1909, through an introduction by his friend Chojun Miyagi, Master Kenwa Mabuni started to also train with Kanryo Higaonna Sensei (sometimes known as Higashionna). Higaonna Sensei was an expert from the Naha region of Okinawa and through him, Master Kenwa Mabuni learned kata such as Saiha, Sanchin, Seienchin, Seipai and others.

In 1915, both Itosu Sensei and Higaonna Sensei passed away within a short time of one another. Master Kenwa Mabuni continued his training and later joined with other students of karate to start a research group aimed at practising and spreading the art. During this time, Mabuni Sensei also trained in various forms of Ryukyu Kobudo — the Okinawan weaponry arts.

In 1929, Master Kenwa Mabuni moved his entire family to Osaka, including Kenzo, then two years old. There he established a small dojo and began teaching his



Mabuni Soke with Mike Williams



The display at Mabuni's funeral

unique art, then called Hanko-Ryu or 'Half-Hard Style'. In the 1930s, the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai (the Japanese martial arts sanctioning organisation) began to demand that different groups applying for membership be more specific in the description of their karate systems, and pressured them to name their systems.

Originally, Master Kenwa Mabuni was going to name his system Hanko-Ryu, but ultimately he decided on the name Shito-Ryu. The name Shito is the combination of *shi* and *to*, the two first characters of the names of Master Itosu and Master Higaonna. Therefore, the name Shito-Ryu has no literal meaning but rather honours the two main teachers of Master Kenwa Mabuni.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke was born on 30 May 1927 at Akahira-Machi, Shuri city, in Okinawa and moved with his family to Osaka two years later. He obtained permission from his father and joined his school as a 13-year-old and went on to practise Shito-Ryu karate-do for over 60 years. He even lived in the same house up until his death.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke obtained his Shodan (1st Dan) on 1 August 1943 and at the time of his death held the rank of Jyudan (10th Dan) and was a respected master not only in Japan but also throughout the world.

His organisation, Nihon Karate-Do Kai (formerly known as Dai-Nihon Karate-Do Kai) was founded by his father in 1939. His father left him the Shito-Ryu name, his complete syllabus and the dojo with the association name Nihon Karate-Do Kai, all of which remain intact today. Kenzo Mabuni Soke followed his

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Mabuni Soke's advice to me was that if you want to remember something, first your mind has to remember, then your body. If you want to be good at a kata, he said, you need to do it 1000 times.

father's syllabus exactly the way it was written down in 1929, which is why people called it Seito Shito-Ryu or pure, true Shito-Ryu. It is interesting to note, however, that Kenzo Mabuni Soke himself did not use the term seito to describe his organisation; he simply called it Shito-Ryu. In Japan, his students and followers refer to the style as 'traditional Shito-Ryu'. The term *seito* is frequently used outside of Japan to describe the style as being the original Shito-Ryu of Kenwa Mabuni.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke dedicated his life to preserving the true lineage of his father's karate. He was not concerned with politics or image and remained unknown to the outside world until 1993, when he travelled to the USA to reveal the true karate of his father, Mabuni Kenwa.

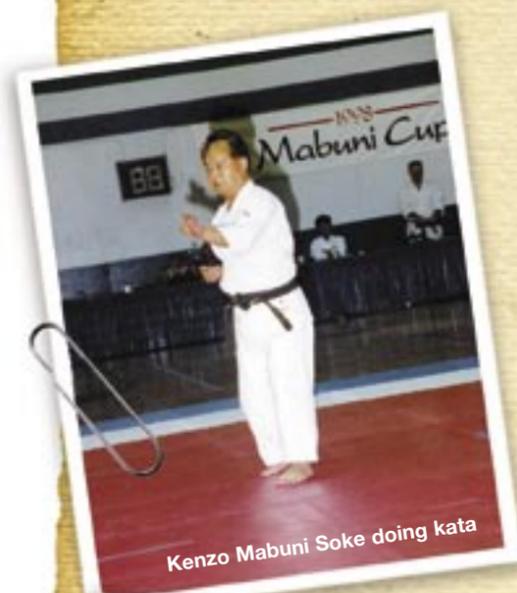
Kenzo Mabuni Soke was the President of Shito-Ryu International Karate-Do Kai — the organisation that co-ordinates all of the member countries throughout the world.

Today, there are official representatives appointed by Kenzo Mabuni in 12 countries outside of Japan.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke emphasised the training of karate based on his father's principle, "Kata (form) is karate". Kata is the essence of karate and in training, his policy is, 75 per cent kata training and 25 per cent *kumite* (free or organised sparring), besides doing the regular *kihon* (basics) and exercises. He trained under the watchful eye of his father and would practise hundreds of times — making sure that he started the kata facing north, south, east and west, rather than always in the same direction — for a period of three months or more, just to understand and perfect each single kata.

Soke Mabuni knew the importance of repetition and advised that, when practising kata, focus should be on correct basic techniques, breathing, posture, *dachi* (stance), *bunkai* (the meaning

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Kenzo Mabuni Soke doing kata



Kenwa Mabuni



Inside Mabuni Soke's funeral ceremony

and application of the movements) and *tenshin happo* — the eight directions of movement. He also stressed the importance of *chakugan* (focus) and *zanshin* (awareness), and that kata should always start and end with *rei* (bowing).

His advice to me was that if you want to remember something, first your mind has to remember, then your body. If you want to be good at a kata, he said, you need to do it 1000 times.

Even when he was ill, (shortly before he passed away) and no longer put on his gi, Soke would still make the effort to help others in their pursuit to learn Shito-Ryu karate-do. He would stand in front of the class and demonstrate kata moves and then

move around the class and give advice to students of all ranks.

Groups of students would travel from different countries to attend special seminars with Soke. He didn't speak English, so one of his senior Shihans would translate and pass on the knowledge from Soke that they had travelled so far to glean. The last seminar that I know of was just over a year before he passed away when 46 students arrived in Osaka from the USA to learn the kata's Wanshu, Chintei and Kenshu.

Soke was regarded very highly in the martial arts fraternity worldwide and his advice was highly sought-after. When I met him, he showed me a paper being written

by a professor from a University in Korea. It was about the development of martial arts and the differences between styles in different countries. Soke had received a copy and was asked to review the content on karate.

I felt privileged to have had the opportunity to visit Kenzo Soke at his home in Osaka and sit in the original dojo of his father, Kenwa Mabuni. I felt even more honoured when I was told that even some Japanese Shihans had not had the opportunity to visit Soke at his home.

Even though he was ill at the time and had just come home from hospital, he still agreed to meet me and was happy to talk with me through an interpreter.

When we first met, I used a formal Japanese greeting phrase that I'd been practising. He assumed that I spoke Japanese and proceeded to talk to me, only to find out that the only Japanese I knew was what I'd already used! Soke seemed amused, but appreciated my attempt and motioned for me to sit down as his wife came in with some cold drinks.

I asked him if he had any plans to write a book about his karate. He told me that he wanted people to learn by practising and gaining knowledge directly from a more experienced student, rather than reading from a book. I found him to be a very friendly and humble man and after my short visit, it was obvious to me why people held him in such high regard.

Even at the age of 77, Kenzo Mabuni Soke still managed to travel to other countries to continue promoting his father's system of karate. His last trip was in August 2004, when he spent seven days teaching in Malaysia. He taught his Shihans once

every month at the honbu (headquarters) dojo and Ohama Gym to ensure that the high standards of training were maintained and that the original syllabus of his father was strictly adhered to. The honbu dojo is relatively small, so in some cases when there were larger numbers of Shihans, the training was held at Ohama Gym instead.

The Ohama Gym, in Sakai city, Osaka, also hosted the fifth International Shito-Ryu Karate-Do Cup in July last year, with over 200 people travelling from around the world to join the Japanese contingent. Unfortunately, this was the first time that Kenzo Mabuni Soke did not preside over the biennial event. The traditional welcome party was changed to a memorial service for Kenzo Mabuni Soke, who passed away at 2.45pm on Sunday 26 June 2005, less than two weeks before the event.

At his funeral, a traditional Buddhist service held on 29 June, a huge shrine with a photo of Kenzo Soke took up the whole front of the room (see photo opposite, top) and flowers from around the world adorned the side walls, each arrangement with a label scripted in *kanji* (Japanese lettering) showing the name of the organisation that sent them. His *dogi* (uniform) and belt were also on display.

His family was present to listen to a continuous flow of tributes from Shihans from many countries, including Japan, who were visibly upset as they spoke highly of Soke Mabuni's commitment to karate-do.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke's eldest daughter, Miwako Mabuni, then spoke on behalf of her father and explained that he would have wanted the event to proceed. She also confirmed that she had accepted the responsibility to carry on her father's work, and gave the following address to the gathered mourners:

"My name is Tsukasa Mabuni. My grandfather is Kenwa Mabuni, the founder of Shito-Ryu. My father, Kenzo Mabuni, succeeded as the second Soke of Shito-Ryu when my grandfather passed away in 1952.

"Continuing with budo tradition, I have succeeded the role of third Soke of Shito-Ryu, upon the recent passing of my father. The organisation of Shito-Ryu International Karate Do Kai will continue on with the same objectives. I urge all Shito-Ryu karateka worldwide to support the organisation that my grandfather founded — the same organisation that my father developed as an international entity, teaching Seito, or authentic, Shito-Ryu."

The title Tsukasa means 'to manage' and it was agreed by the Japan Karate-Do Kai that the third Soke of Shito-Ryu would be known as Tsukasa Mabuni, and that this title would also be passed on to the fourth Soke when the time comes. This is why Miwako Mabuni now introduces herself as Tsukasa Mabuni. The most important aspect of this arrangement is that the lineage of the Mabuni family will continue, with the aim of continuing to fulfil the purpose of the organisation, which is:

"To honour the moral principles of Shito-Ryu Karate-do founder Mabuni Kenwa Sensei* and his successor Mabuni Kenzo Sensei. To carry on the grand inheritance of Shito-Ryu karate technique, spirit and accurately present it to the next generation by handing it down correctly. Always practise Go Do Shin."

And so, the legacy of Mabuni Shito-Ryu continues.

*Sensei Mike Williams is the head instructor of Shito-Ryu Australia Karate-Do Kai, appointed by Kenzo Mabuni Soke. The historical information in this article was translated into Japanese by Kazuo Sakai Shihan and verified by Kenzo Mabuni Soke shortly before his death. *(Note: in Japanese, the surname is always written first, and the title last.)*



Portraits of the Mabunis at their home in Japan

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