

SHITO-RYU'S

Written by Sensei Mike Williams

LIVING LEGEND

KENZO MABUNI SOKE

In many cases, articles written about famous Karate practitioners are based on their lives after they have passed away. This article is about a famous karate practitioner who continues to devote his life to karate, a living legend, Kenzo Mabuni Soke. The writer has had the honour and privilege of meeting with Kenzo Mabuni Soke in person at his home in Osaka, Japan in September 2003. The information in this article has been verified and written with the permission of Kenzo Mabuni Soke. A draft copy of the article was sent to Japan where it was translated into Japanese by Kazuo Sakai Shihan and it was then given to Soke to review and approve. In order to appreciate the dedication and unselfish commitment to Karate-Do that Kenzo Mabuni Soke has made and continues to make, it is important to provide some background information.



Kenzo Mabuni Soke is the second son of Master Kenwa Mabuni (1889 – 1952) who is the founder of Shito-Ryu Karate-Do, one of the four main styles of Karate in Japan today.

When he was 13 years old, Master Kenwa Mabuni began training with Anko Itosu, a noted 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. Around 1905, Itosu Sensei introduced Karate into the Okinawan public school system. Among other accomplishments, Itosu Sensei created the Pinan (Heian) kata which are still practiced today as introductory or intermediate kata in many schools. Itosu Sensei had an important effect on Karate in the 20th Century.

About 1909, through an introduction by his friend Chojun Miyagi, Master Kenwa Mabuni started to also train with Kanryo Higaonna (sometimes known as Higashionna). Higaonna Sensei was an expert from the Naha region of Okinawa. Through Higaonna, 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 practicing and spreading Karate. During this time Mabuni Sensei also trained in various forms of Okinawan weaponry or Ryukyuan Kobudo.

In 1929, Master Kenwa Mabuni moved his entire family to Osaka (at that time Kenzo Mabuni Soke was 2 years old). There he established a small dojo and began teaching his unique art. Hanko Ryu or Half-Hard Style. In the 1930's, the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai (the Japanese martial arts sanctioning organization) began to demand the 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 or "half-hard" style. However, ultimately he decided on the name Shito. The name "Shito" is the combination of "shi" 糸 and "to" 東, the two first characters of the names of Master Itosu 糸洲 and Master Higaonna 東恩納. Therefore, the name Shito Ryu has no literal meaning but rather honours the two main teachers in the life of Master Kenwa Mabuni.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke was born on May 30, 1927 at Akahira-Machi, Shuri City in Okinawa. His family moved to Osaka city in 1929 when he was 2 years old and he still lives in the same house. He obtained permission from his father and joined his school when he was 13 years old and therefore has been in Shito-Ryu Karate-Do for over 60 years. Kenzo Mabuni Soke first obtained his Shodan (1st Dan) on August 1, 1943 and presently holds the rank of Jyudan (10th Dan) and is a well respected master not only in Japan but also throughout the world.

His organization, 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 these remain intact until today and Kenzo Mabuni Soke follows his father's syllabus exactly the way it was written down in 1929 and that's why people called it Seito Shito-Ryu or pure, true Shito-Ryu.

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It is interesting to note that Kenzo Mabuni Soke himself does not use the term Seito to describe his organisation, he simply calls it Shito-Ryu and 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 the original Shito-Ryu of Kenwa Mabuni.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke has dedicated his life to preserving the true lineage of his father's karate. He is not concerned with politics or image and remained unknown to the outside world until 1993, when he travelled to the USA to reveal Seito (pure) Shito-Ryu, the true karate of his father, Mabuni Kenwa.

Today, there are twelve countries outside of Japan that have official representatives appointed by Kenzo Mabuni to continue the teaching of traditional Shito-Ryu. Kenzo Mabuni Soke is the President of Shito-Ryu International Karate-Do Kai which is the organisation that co-ordinates all of the member countries throughout the world.

Kenzo Mabuni Soke emphasizes 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% Kata training and 25% Kumite (free or organized sparring) training, besides doing the regular Kihon (Basics) and exercises. He trained under the watchful eye of his father and would practice hundreds of times (making sure that he started the Kata facing north, south, east and west not just facing in the same direction every time) for a period of 3 months or more just to understand and perfect One single Kata. Soke advises that everyone should be aware of the following points when practicing Kata:

1. **Kata should start and end with Rei**
2. **Correct Basic Techniques**
3. **Breathing**
4. **Dachi (Stances)**
5. **Posture**
6. **Tenshin Hoppo (8 Directions)**
7. **Chakugan (Focusing)**
8. **Bunkai (Meaning and Application)**
9. **Zanshin (Awareness)**
10. **Repetition - to perfect the KATA**

Soke is regarded very highly in the martial arts fraternity worldwide and his advice is highly sort after. When I met him, he showed me a paper being written by a Professor from a University in Korea. The paper 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. It was in English and Japanese, so I was able to read through some of it with great interest.

Even at the age of 77, Kenzo Mabuni Soke still manages to travel to other countries to continue his commitment to promote the Seito Shito-Ryu Karate-Do of his father. His most recent trip was to Malaysia in August 2004 where he spent seven days teaching. He still teaches his Shihans once every month at the Honbu Dojo and Ohama Gym to ensure that the high standards of training are maintained and to ensure that the original syllabus of his father is strictly adhered to.

The Honbu Dojo is relatively small so in some cases where there are larger number of Shihans, the training is held at Ohama Gym. When there are smaller numbers, Soke still holds the training at the Honbu Dojo.