

Mabuni History

Born in [Shuri](#) on [Okinawa](#) in 1889, Mabuni Sensei was a descendant of the famous Onigusukini [Samurai](#) family. Perhaps because of his weak constitution, he began his instruction in his home town in the art of Shuri-Te (首里手) at the age of 13, under the tutelage of the legendary [Ankō Yasutsune Itosu](#) (糸州安恒) (1813-1915). He trained diligently for several years, learning many [kata](#) from this great master. It was Itosu who first developed the Pinan kata, which were most probably derived from the 'Kusanku' form.

One of his close friends, Sensei [Chōjun Miyagi](#) (宮城長順) (founder of [Gōjū-ryū](#)) introduced Mabuni to another great of that period, Sensei [Higaonna Kanryō](#) (東恩納寛量), and began to learn [Naha-Te](#) (那覇手) under him as well. While both Itosu and Higaonna taught a 'hard-soft' style of Okinawan 'Te', their methods and emphases were quite distinct: the Itosu syllabus included straight and powerful techniques as exemplified in the Naifanchi and Bassai kata; the Higaonna syllabus, on the other hand, stressed circular motion and shorter fighting methods as seen in the popular Seipai and Kururunfa forms. Shitō-ryū focuses on both hard and soft techniques to this day.

Kenwa Mabuni



Born 1889
[Shuri, Okinawa](#)

Died 1952 (aged 62–63)
[Tokyo, Japan](#)

Style [Shitō-ryū](#)

Teacher(s) [Ankō Itosu](#), [Higaonna Kanryō](#)

Rank [Sōke](#), Founder of Shitō-ryū

Notable students [Kenzo Mabuni](#), [Kenei Mabuni](#), [Iwata Manzo](#), [Chōjirō Tani](#), [Kosei Kokuba](#), [Teruo Hayashi](#), [Ryusho Sakagami](#)

Although he remained true to the teachings of these two great masters, Mabuni sought instruction from a number of other teachers; including [Seishō Aragaki](#), [Tawada Shimboku](#), [Sueyoshi Jino](#) and [Wu Xianhui](#) (a [Chinese](#) master known as Go-Kenki). In fact, Mabuni was legendary for his encyclopaedic knowledge of kata and their bunkai applications. By the 1920s, he was regarded as the foremost authority on Okinawan kata and their history and was much sought after as a teacher by his contemporaries. There is even some evidence that his expertise was sought out in China, as well as Okinawa and mainland Japan. As a police officer, he taught local law enforcement officers and at the behest of his teacher Itosu, began instruction in the various grammar schools in Shuri and Naha.

In an effort to popularize karate in mainland Japan, Mabuni made several trips to [Tokyo](#) in 1917 and 1928. Although much that was known as 'Te' (Chinese Fist) or Karate had been passed down through many generations with jealous secrecy, it was his view that it should be taught to anyone who sought knowledge with honesty and integrity. In fact, many masters of his generation held similar views on the future of Karate: Sensei [Gichin Funakoshi](#) (船越義珍) (founder of [Shotokan](#) (松濤館)), another contemporary, had moved to Tokyo in the 1920s to promote their art on the mainland as well. During this period, Mabuni also taught many other prominent martial artists, such as Otsuka Hironori (founder of Wadō-ryū) and Konishi Yasuhiro (founder of Shintō Jinen-ryū). Both men were students of Funakoshi sensei.

By 1929, Mabuni had moved to [Osaka](#) on the mainland, to become a full-time karate instructor of a style he originally called Hanko-ryū, or 'half-hard style'. In an effort to gain acceptance in the Japanese Butokukai, the governing body for all officially recognized martial arts in that country, he and his contemporaries decided to call their art 'Karate' or 'Empty Hand', rather than 'Chinese Hand', perhaps to make it sound more Japanese. Around the same time, perhaps when first introducing his style to the Butokukai, is when it's believed the name of the style changed to Shitō-ryū, in honour of its main influences. Mabuni derived the name for his new style from the first [Kanji](#) character in their names, Itosu and Higashionna. With the support of Sensei-ryūsho Sakagami (1915-1993), he opened a number of Shitō-ryū dojo in the Osaka area, including [Kansai](#) University and the Japan Karate-dō Kai dojo. To this day, the largest contingent of Shitō-ryū practitioners in Japan is centred in the Osaka area.

Mabuni published a number of books on the subject and continued to systematize the instruction method. In his latter years, he developed a number of formal kata, such as Aoyagi and Meijō, for example, which were designed specifically for women's self defense. Perhaps more than any other Master in the last century, Mabuni was steeped in the traditions and history of Karate-do, yet forward thinking enough to realize that it could spread throughout the world. To this day, Shitō-ryū recognizes the influences of Itosu and Higashionna: the kata syllabus of Shito-ryū is still often listed in such a way as to show the two lineages.

Kenwa Mabuni died in 1952, and he is succeeded by his sons [Kenei](#) and Kenzo. His son Kenzo Mabuni died in 26 June, 2005, and was succeeded by his daughter.