

Kenwa Mabuni was born on November 14th, 1889 in Shuri, Okinawa . He was a descendent of the famous Onogusukini Samurai family. Although he was a weak child, the stories his family told him of his famous ancestors led to his dreams of become strong.

Mabuni began his training in his hometown at the age of 13 under the guidance of Anko Itosu. He trained every day and within seven years learned the Shuri-te style. At the age of 20, Mabuni's friend Chojun Miyagi (founder of Goju-ryu) introduced him to the Naha-te master, Kanryo Higaonna, whom Mabuni began training under. It was these two styles, Shuri-te and Naha-te, that would form the basis for Shito-ryu.

After graduating from high school and being discharged from the army, Mabuni went to work as a police officer. His position allowed him to travel the country, affording him the opportunity to train in other forms of Karate with little known, local masters. 1910 saw the official recognition of Karate as it was introduced into the Okinawan school system as a separate subject. In 1913, Mabuni and other well-known instructors began to popularize Karate. Mabuni organized meetings at his house which were attended by Gichin Funakoshi, Choju Oshiro, Choshin Chibana, Shimpan Shiroma, Seicho Tokuumura and Hoko Ishikawa. Mabuni made a few trips to Japan in 1915 to teach Karate. In 1918 Mabuni had the honor to demonstrate Karate-Do at the Okinawa Middle School in the presence of Prince Kuni and Prince Kacho. Kenwa Mabuni became the Karate-Do instructor in two schools in 1924 and received the honor to demonstrate the Art for Prince Titibu. With other masters, Mabuni organized "Okinawan Karate-Do Club" in 1925, which brought to life his dream of establishing a permanent training dojo. Many famous Karate-Do leaders like Juhatsu Kyoda, Chojun Miyagi, Choyu Motobu, Chomo Hanashiro, Choju Oshiro, Choshin Chibana, and Wu Xianhui (Go Kenki) trained in this first dojo. Kenwa Mabuni and Chojun Miyagi became the permanent instructors of the club as the youngest members.

In 1927, Dr. Jigoro Kano (founder of Judo,) came to Okinawa to open a new dojo. Mabuni and Chojun Miyagi had the opportunity to demonstrate Karate for him and explain the philosophies and techniques. Kano was inspired and impressed with Karate and deemed it the ideal art for both offensive and defensive tactics. He spoke with Mabuni and Miyagi about the need to spread the art of Karate in Japan. In 1927, Mabuni made several trips to Japan to teach, and by 1929, he moved to Osaka to teach his style of Karate full-time. At the time, Mabuni called his style Hanko-ryu, or Half-hard Style.

Shito-ryu's beginnings in Japan were tough. After Mabuni moved to Osaka in 1929, he worked diligently and tirelessly to promote the art. That same year Mabuni also worked to continue structuring and organizing instruction, and documented the syllabus. He taught for free at police stations and Buddhist temples.

Being that Karate was an Okinawan art, many Japanese had a hard time accepting it. While Mabuni worked to find ways to make Karate more popular, he never changed his style. He would demonstrate tameshiwari (board breaking) to show the power of the new martial art. He began teaching in police departments and Buddhist temples as well. When he registered the style in 1931 with the Dai Nippon Butokukai (the Japanese organization created to preserve, standardize and promote Japanese martial arts,) he officially named it

Shito-ryu, in honor of his two primary instructors, Anko Itosu and Kanryo Higaonna. The “shi 糸” derived from the first character in Naha-te master Itosu's name (糸洲), and the “to 東” from the first character in Shuri-te master Higaonna's name (東恩納.) It was in that same year he founded the Dai Nippon Karate-do Kai dojo, which was later renamed Nippon Karate-do Kai.