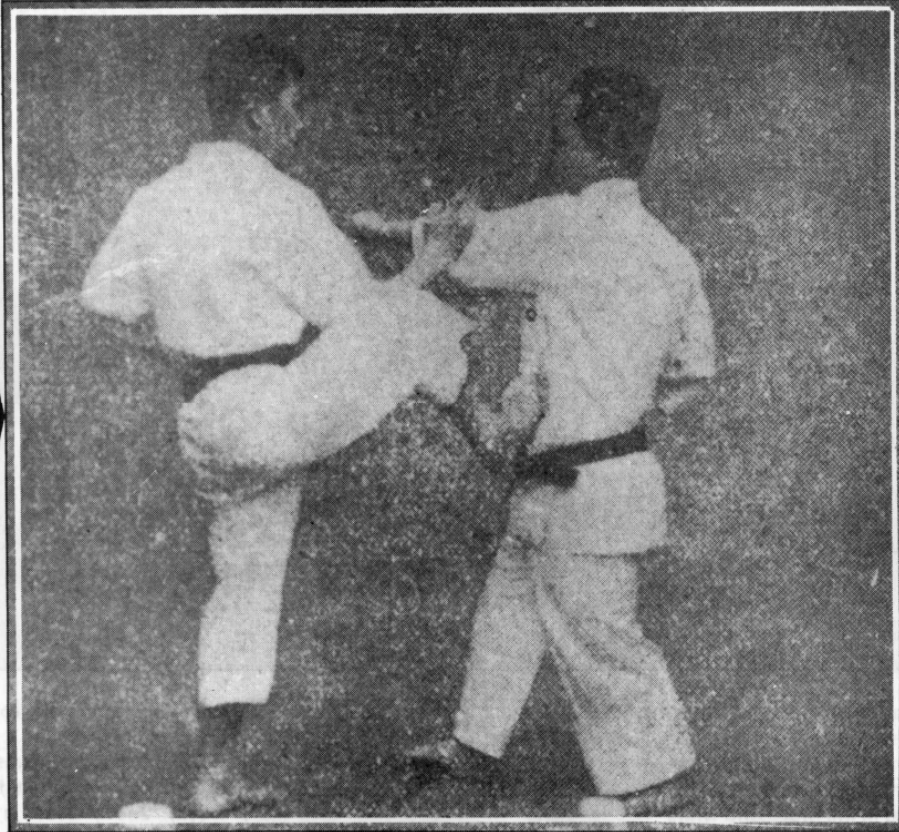


KENWA MABUNI (1889 -1952) THE FOUNDER OF SHITO RYU



Master Mabuni demonstrating with Master Konishi

Kenwa Mabuni, the founder of Shitoryu, although a familiar figure amongst the founding fathers of modern karate is, perhaps, the least known. Even the intentions of Mabuni's system have very little awareness of the history and development of their founding father.

Mabuni began training at the age of 13, in an attempt to overcome poor health, he was immediately accepted by Master Kanryo Higaonna, the founder of the modern NahaTe system. It is said that Higaonna's methods were extremely severe, and were largely based on the practice of the "San- chin" Kata to develop the inner strength of the body and vital organs. Mertoken Yagi, one of the great Okinawan Gojuryu masters claims that Mabuni's weak constitution prevented the young man from making great progress in the Nahate system, and, ultimately, the young Mabuni switched to the Shurite system, under the guidance of Master Ankoh Itosu.

There is little doubt that the young Mabuni "blossomed" into a great karetakea under Itosu's guidance, and both his technique and physical condition developed rapidly. There is little doubt that Mabuni became a kind of bridge between the two systems and he began to practice both simultaneously, a feat previously unknown. Mabuni mastered a vast amount of karate and his kata knowledge had probably never been exceeded; coupled with this he found time to study Kobujitsu under the tutorage of Aragaki and Yabiku. The most interesting influence on Mabuni was the Chinese White Crane System of Go Kenki and Mabuni incorporated the techniques and kata of this system into his own training.

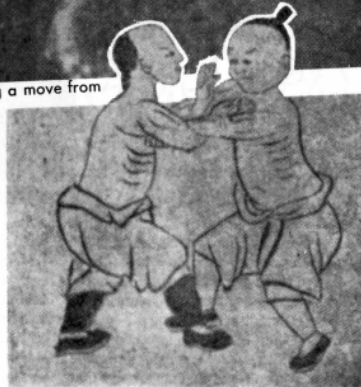
Mabuni knew virtually everyone involved in karate during the early part of the century, as the

collections of early photographs prove. However, by 1928, Mabuni travelled to Japan and staying in Tokyo for the first six months, at the house of Yasuhiro Konishi, a Kendo master who had begun training under Master Gichin Funakoshi. Mabuni had a great respect for Funakoshi, this, plus the fact that there simply wasn't enough scope for two Okinawan karate masters in Tokyo, meant that he decided to move to Japan's second city, Osaka, in the south-west of Japan.

From the very beginning Mabuni had a hard time, getting students to begin the alien art of karate was difficult enough, but the Wall Street Crash, and the economic depression of the 30's hit Japan as hard as anyone else. Survival was ofaten paramount on Mabuni's mind during this period, circumstances grew a little better with the invasion of China and ultimately the Pacific and Second World War (1939-45). Japan's defeat caused Mabuni real hardship, many of his best students had been killed in the war, and for the few who remained, fees for karate were almost an impossibility. The American occupation came to an end in 1952, but, by this time Mabuni was too frail to live to see the rise in prosperity and the mass popularisation of karate. The great man passed away on the 23rd of May 1952, a sad loss to karate.



Master Mabuni demonstrating a move from Kata-Sepai



Master Mabuni demonstrating a move from Kata-Sepai

Although Mabuni had suffered great deprivation during his period in Japan, nevertheless the quality of his karate had not suffered. However, his constant battle to survive meant that he really had no time to set up any kind of central organisation. Shortly after his death, most of his students went their own ways, and the Shitoryu style, as such, is now basically a wide group of organisations. The only common denominator being that they all trace their origins back to Master Kenwa Mabuni. The name Shitoryu comes from the different ways of reading the characters that compose the names of Mabuni's two teachers, Itosu (Shi) and Higaonna (To).

The method of karate that Mabuni taught is basically a hybrid system. Kata and techniques from Nahate (Goju), Shurite (Shorinryu), as well as White Crane, Kobujitsu and some of Mabuni's own creations are to be found within the system.

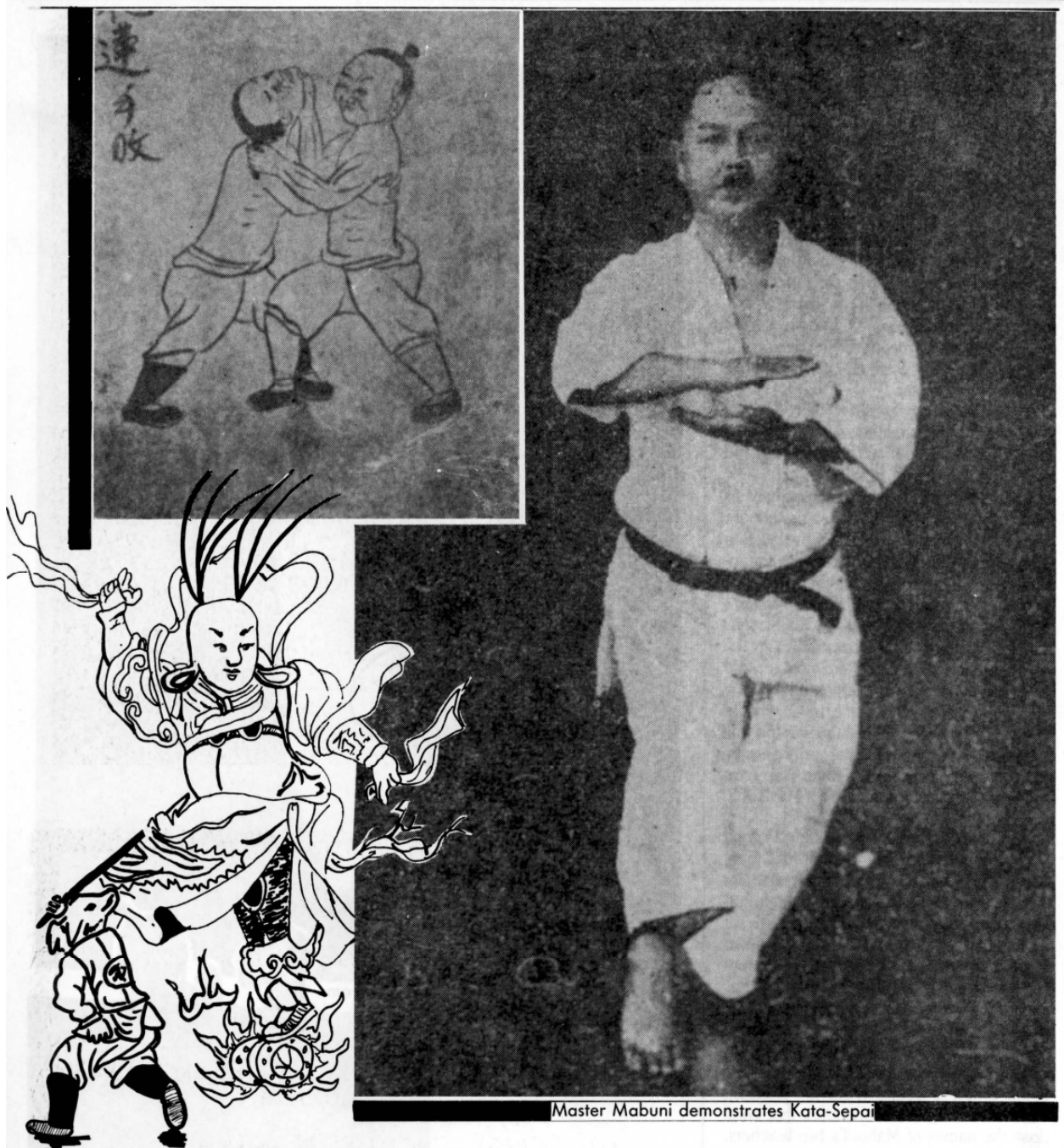
Unlike Shotokan, however, the Shitoryu katas have not had a great deal of modification and resemble their Okinawan originals. What is noticeable is the predominance of Shorinryu technique over Gojuryu. Shitoryu stylists, when performing the Gojuryu katas in their systems seem to lack the intense power and spirit of their Gojuryu comrades. They do, however, have greater precision and fine control over their head and foot movements (the undoubted hallmarks of their Shorinryu connections). Mabuni Sensei himself had a very neat and well balanced style, with a very clear definition in his stances at a time when most leading karatemen look crude and ungainly. There is no doubt that, had he lived longer, his

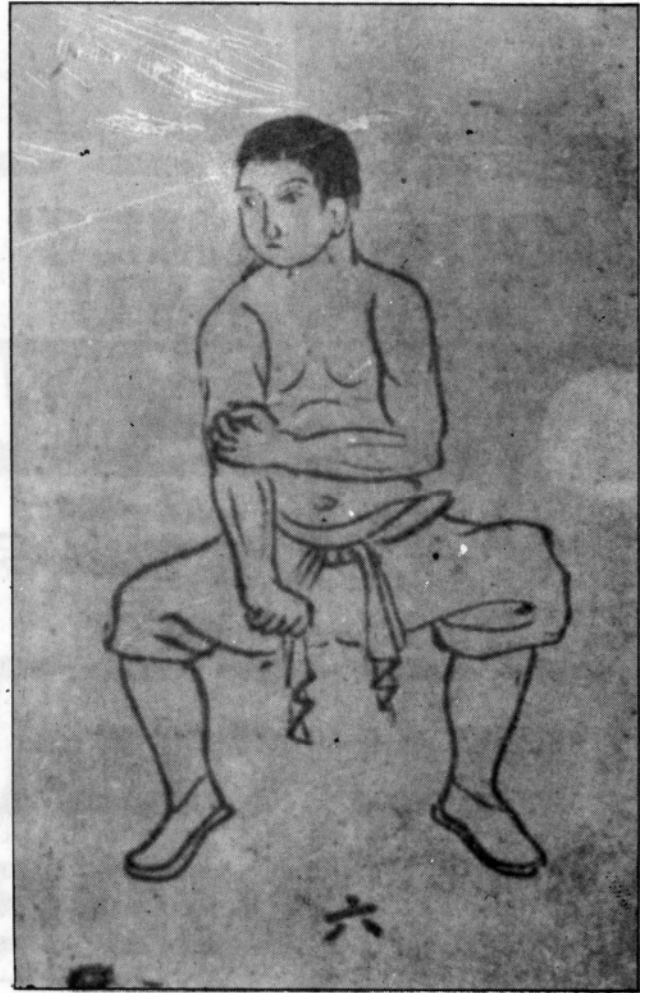
influence would have been greater.

The spread of Shitoryu as a system has been somewhat hampered by the fact that it's

stronghold has been in the Osaka-KyotoKobe area (Kansai), rather than Tokyo (Kanto), where

karateka who are more likely to spread the art of internationally congregate. Yet, in spite of all these handicaps, the style had developed and produced some great masters and champions





Illustrations from Master Mabuni's copy of the classic Okinawan text "The Bubishi"

