

## Yabe Genealogy

The information used to create this genealogy of the American Yabe was derived from Kenjiro Yabu's book, "Genealogy of the Surname 'So' Family: the Okushima Family Line". Kenjiro's work was completed in 1986, following which it was translated into English by Ben Kobashigawa and Yoko Fukumura in 1993. Other references used were "Okinawa: The History of an Island People" by George H. Kerr; and "History of the Okinawans in North America" by the Okinawa Club of America; and "Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawaii" by the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Hawaii.

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"Yabu" is the Chinese reading (*on yomi*) of the *kanji* (ideographs) used to write the family name. It is how our surname is pronounced in Okinawa.

In the United States, the same *kanji* are read in the Japanese fashion (*kun yomi*), and is pronounced "Yabe".

Hereafter, the surname "Yabe" means both the Yabu in Okinawa and the Yabe in America.

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Before getting into the genealogy of the family, it might be useful to discuss the cultural, diplomatic and political relationships that the independent islands of Okinawa had with China and Japan before it formally became part of the Japanese Empire in 1879.

Some time in the 1300s and for the next 500 years, Okinawa was closely bound to China. In fact, it was a suzerainty of its huge neighbor. A suzerain can be defined as "a dominant state controlling the foreign relationships of a vassal state, but allowing it sovereign authority in its internal affairs". Thus, Okinawa had its own system of government controlled by her own kings, but it was highly influenced by Chinese culture, language, traditions and thought. In fact, even today, much of the Okinawan customs and traditions can be traced to origins in China.

For centuries the Okinawan government paid tribute only to the Chinese government, by sending her gifts of material goods, crafted articles, and minerals such as sulfur, carried by special ships, and represented by officials of the Okinawan government. But in 1609, the Satsuma domain of southern Kyushu conquered Chuzan (the middle kingdom of Okinawa) and seized military control of the island and the so-called Twelve Southern Islands. From then until 1872, Okinawa sent tribute to BOTH China and Japan — or strictly speaking, to the Shimazu clan who controlled the Satsuma Domain.

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For such an impoverished country, this dual system of tribute was a painful hardship. Nevertheless, since neither China nor the Shimazu interfered with the internal politics or the economy of the island kingdom, Okinawans in general prospered, because of the huge success of their expertly managed, unrestricted maritime trade. Some of our Okinawan Yabu ancestors were the envoys in charge of the tribute missions to China; and some were the officials in charge of the mission to Kagoshima, which was the main port for the Satsuma Domain. The Yabu archive tells of these tribute ships, and describes the activities of at least two of their men, the story of one of which will be told later.

### Karate

There is a widespread notion that because the Japanese overlords defeated Okinawa militarily in 1609, the Satsuma victors proscribed the losers from carrying — or even having — offensive weapons of any sort. And that it was because of this order, that the Okinawans developed karate as a method of weaponless self-defense, first learned from the Shaolin monks of China.

But that is wrong.

It was the Okinawan King Sho Shin, son of King Sho En, who in 1586 ordered that swords could no longer be worn as personal equipment. In 1587, Sho Shin further ordered that all *anji* (chiefs or minor lords of various places) must bring ALL weapons to Shuri to be stored in a warehouse that was under the supervision of one of the king's officers. This was a remarkable feat and a testimony to the peaceful nature of the Okinawan people, because there was no resistance to disarmament. And as a matter of fact, Okinawa never really had much of a military class, which was very unlike its counterparts in China, Japan and Korea.

There seems to be some argument as to whether the original meaning of *karate* was "China hand" or "Empty hand", because there is a *kanji* for China, which can be read as "Kara" — but "kara" can also mean "empty" — so it depends upon which *kanji* was originally used to describe karate. Even today, although these words are not in wide use, there are some Japanese words that begin with the Chinese "kara" — such as *kara hafu*, which is the Chinese style of the curved rooflines that are frequently seen on temples; *kara jishi*, which are the stylized stone lions frequently seen on both sides of an entryway to homes and shrines — and meaning "Chinese lions". For centuries in Okinawa, it was customary to bestow a Chinese name on the male children of the hereditary aristocracy — this name was called *kara na* (Chinese name). It also seems that chicken *kara age* means Chinese (style) fried chicken, which is a popular order in many Japanese restaurants today.

It's also been suggested that the meaning — and the *kanji* — of karate had been changed from "China hand" to "Empty hand" during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95. That's not so strange, considering that in our own United States we've had multiple examples of hubristic super-nationalism exactly like that.

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But to get on with the genealogy:—

According to Kenjiro's research, the Yabe family can be traced to around the 1470s in Okinawa, Japan.

The story goes like this.....

In the earlier part of the 1400s, a commoner by the name of Kanemaro was born on Izena Island in the Okinawan archipelago. This man was the son of a farmer, but because of his unusual abilities, he rapidly rose politically and socially to become the Royal Treasurer to the First Sho Dynasty, which was the ruling class in Okinawa. But Kanemaro resigned in disgust when his lord, King Sho Toku of the First Sho Dynasty, started spending money on "frivolous pursuits".

Then, something strange happened, because King Sho Toku mysteriously died at the age of 29, and the next thing we know, Kanemaro has ascended the throne, changed his name to King Sho En, and has founded the Second Sho Dynasty of Okinawa. This was in 1469. His dynasty lasted for the next 400 years.

King Sho En had an uncle named Sogenji, who was his trustworthy advisor for the 8 years that he ruled before he died. The King didn't make Sogenji a royal member or a noble, because he didn't confer a last name — a surname — on Sogenji, and to be any one of those, one had to have a last name. But King Sho En did give Sogenji's son a first name, and also a Chinese surname, which was very, very important in those days. King Sho En called Sogenji's son, Kengi, and his Chinese name (*karana*) became Chohei So. So that's why the Yabes have descended from the So Family — because from Kengi the founder through Kenten Yabu of the 11th generation, the Chinese surname of our family has been So. It's only from the 12th generation — that of Kentsu Yabu — that this distinctive Chinese name disappears from the record.

Remember that Kengi's father was Sogenji (also known as the "Kurautchi Sobe Shidu", an Okinawan designator which can be translated to mean something like 'Director of the Warehouse in the Sobe District' — which was a very important post at that time) and that Sogenji was King Sho En's Uncle. Therefore, Kengi and all his descendants are royalty of sorts, if we don't look too closely at how King Sho En ascended the throne. However that may be, the Yabe have always been part of the gentry of Okinawa, if gentry can be defined as "people of good family or superior social background". Several Okinawan kings have appointed different Yabu men to be *Pekumi* or *Pechin* — magistrates in charge of villages, and in some cases, of entire districts. As used here, magistrates means an appointed public official with the power to administer and enforce the laws.

Actually, the family PROBABLY is "higher class" than that, because the mainline Yabe have lived in Shuri for generations; and even today, it is generally believed that the permanent residents of Shuri are the descendants of those who served the King directly, and for that reason are at least "aristocrats". This is almost certainly true for the Yabe, because in Kenden Yabe's *koseki tohon* (official, legal, Japanese family register) he was

classified as *Shizoku*, which means “of the Samurai class”. In the old nomenclature, which has long since been abolished, the social ranking from top down — excluding the Emperor’s family, which was unclassified — was *Kazoku* (nobility), *Shizoku* (samurai) and *Heimin* (commoners). This presents a problem, because there was never a samurai class in Okinawa, although of course from time to time in Okinawa as anywhere else, armed men fought each other for wealth, influence, prestige, territory, or any combination of the above. Still, in Okinawa this did not constitute a trained warrior class whose main purpose in life was to support the ambitions of his lord by any means, including war. In Kenden’s case, the *Shizoku* classification must have meant someone who was born into a hereditary aristocracy — which the samurai of mainland Japan surely were — but whose service to his master required the exercise of his brain, not the muscles of his sword arm.

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Another interesting fact about the Yabe family is that from the time of Kengi the founder, the *kanji* for “Ken” has always prefaced the first name all male Sos, who later became the Yabe. This is true even for Norman Yabe of Denver, whose given Japanese name is pronounced “Norimasa” in *kun yomi*, but which is read as Kensho in *on yomi*.

This seems to be a Japanese and an Okinawan tradition called *nanori-gashira*, in which the same root *kanji* is found in all the given names of the men in a family, or even in a greatly extended family. One meaning of *nanori* in Japanese, is to “claim kindred with such and such a person”. While still in quite common usage in Japan to this day, the system never seemed to have been applied to women

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Now comes a tale about the Yabe toper to add spice to the story:

Kenki was the firstborn grandson of Kengi, so he was a *honke chonan*, and like all others before him and many others after him, he had a childhood name which was called a *warabina*, as well as a Chinese name, so he was important.

Kenki was born in 1606, and by 1649 he had been appointed a gunnery officer (yes the Okinawans had guns by then) on one of the tribute ships that sailed to China. His ship was unable to make port in Fukien in 1654 because of civil unrest there, so it stopped at Haitandao, an island in the estuary of the Fukien River, for provisions. But by this time, Kenki had become a roaring drunkard, so he was left behind on one of the Kerama Islands, which was a bit southwest of mainland Okinawa.

In those days, some of the Kerama Islands were inhabited, so presumably Kenki was marooned on one of these, the largest two of which were called Tokashiki Island and Zamami Island. Whatever the case, Kenki stayed in the Keramas for the next 18 years, until he was allowed to return home in 1672. Nothing is reported of him after that, but the record does say that Kenki had no children.....which is no big surprise.

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It appears that the So Family persisted until the 5th generation, when the First Yabe appeared some time between 1715 and 1752. The Yabe line began when Kenpo So branched off from the So family, and changed his name to Kenpo Yabu. Nobody seems to know why Kenpo did this, but maybe it was because he wanted to start his own MAIN family line.

In the Japanese family tradition — and very probably in the Chinese hierarchy too — the first born son occupies an extremely important position. This son is called a *chonon*, and the importance of this position can hardly be overstated; and it has been going on in Japan for countless generations. The *chonon* is the head of any main branch of any given Japanese family; and this main branch is called the *honke*. The side branches; that is, the families of the sons of other than the *chonon* are called *bunke*, and these families are second class in theory — not considered to be very “important”.

So, what Kenpo Yabu MAY have done — since he was the second son in his birth family — was to establish his own Main Line family. And he might have done this simply by moving away from his old home town, changing his name to something other than “So”, which was his original, real family name; and becoming a “Yabu”. Presto! A new family named Yabu/Yabe — and since he was the founder of the line — his family was indisputably *honke*. And the interesting fact is, that after Kenpo Yabu, the families of the *chonon* of Kenpo’s line have all been considered *honke* — but with some really baffling exceptions.

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A summary of the Yabe generations goes like this:

The So family — which was the forerunner of the Yabu Family Line — was founded by Kengi (Chohei) So around 1470. There were 5 generations of the So Family, but Kenpo So was the second son in the 5th generation, so around 1740 he changed his name to Kenpo Yabu and became the founder of the Yabu Line.

When Kenpo split, there had been 4 generations of So before him; and although he was of the 5th generation, he was no longer counted as a 5th generation So — because he became the 1st generation Yabu when he founded his own family line. The So Family of course continued on without Kenpo.

Altogether there have been 11 generations of Yabe to date, including Kenpo Yabu, the Founder. In the United States, the 11th generation is represented by *Yonse* (fourth generation), such as Lauren, Elizabeth and Conrad Carter; Tazi Flory; Mari and Danny Hayman; Zachary and Ryan Hubbard; B.J. Kenny; Maia and Devan Wiitala; Marcella Yabe; Athena Kiyu Yabe-Cordova; and Amanda and Justine Yasui, Kanako Yabu — Kenjiro and Shigeko’s daughter — is the last of the Yabu in Shuri of child-bearing age, but she is of the 10th — not the 11th — generation.

These 11th generation American Yabe may well be the last of the *honke* line of Yabe, because there are no males left to carry on the family name. There are close relatives named Yabu who live in the Yaeyama group of islands of Okinawa, and there is a related family of Yabu living in Shizuoka-ken, Japan, but in both instances their progenitor appears to have been *bunke*.

The Yabe can claim 15 generations of descent (4 So + 11 Yabe), covering 536 years of recorded family history. Whether or not they have descended from Okinawan Royalty, Nobility, or Hereditary Aristocracy is a moot — but very interesting — point.

What the Yabe certainly DO HAVE, is an unusually deep connection with the past. And they have a marvelous story to tell.

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