

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

July 2026



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Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Evolution and Adaptation

Our training with Nicklaus Suino Sensei of the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is our third attempt to train in Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu (MJER) Iaido (the earlier attempts were in the first decade of this century). Until recently, despite the extent of our previous experience, I would have referred to Eishin-ryu as “the art of drawing the sword to an immediate, defensive technique,” but that is an incomplete understanding. As I’ve learned, the longer phrase that is the reference for the term *iai* is “*Tsune ni ite, kyu ni awasu*” (常に居て、急に合わす). This translates roughly as, “Being constantly in the moment, and swiftly adapting to respond.” That philosophy serves as the foundational concept for Eishin-ryu, representing a deep state of mental awareness and the capacity for instant physical reaction. Iaido is training to become fully present in every moment and provides physical and mental tools to restore harmony in the face of disruptions. The art in its earlier forms was a *sogo-bujutsu*, a comprehensive warrior art intended to ensure that the samurai of the Tosa domain would prevail in the face of adversity.

The samurai of the Tosa domain (present-day Kochi Prefecture on Shikoku) stood among Japan’s most formidable warriors, renowned for their fierce independence, rigorous martial discipline, and unyielding loyalty to both clan and Emperor. As a strategically vital domain with a proud history of resistance and reform, Tosa cultivated a warrior class that prized practical combative excellence over mere ceremony. Within this environment, Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu flourished as a quintessential *otome ryu*—a closely guarded, domain-affiliated transmission reserved primarily for trusted retainers and inner-circle practitioners. This comprehensive bujutsu system, deeply rooted in Tosa soil through the pivotal influence of the 7th headmaster Hasegawa Chikaranosuke Eishin and later refined by Oe Masaji, equipped Tosa samurai with far more than elegant solo drawing and cutting forms. Its full curriculum integrated precise iaijutsu, powerful paired *kumitachi*, and auxiliary grappling traditions. Together, these elements forged warriors



capable of seamless transitions from drawing the blade to close-quarters combat, grappling, disarms, and decisive resolution—skills honed for real battlefield efficacy while nurturing the profound mental discipline that defined classical Tosa swordsmanship.

Eishin-ryu stands as one of Japan's oldest extant classical sword schools, tracing its roots to Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu in the mid-16th century. Through generations, particularly under the 7th headmaster Hasegawa Chikaranosuke Eishin (with strong Tosa/Kochi ties) and the pivotal 17th headmaster Oe Masaji (1852–1927), the art developed a comprehensive curriculum. Oe reorganized roughly 160 techniques into structured sets: *Seiza no Bu* (Shoden, drawing from Omori-ryu influences), *Tatehiza no Bu* (Chuden, Hasegawa Eishin techniques), *Okuiiai* (Okuden, advanced standing and seated forms), and crucially, multiple paired sword forms such as *Tachi Uchi no Kata*, *Tachi Uchi no Kurai*, *Tsume Ai no Kurai*, and rarer advanced jujutsu sets like *Daisho Zume* and *Daisho Tachi Zume*, and the *Dai Kentori kumitachi*. These paired forms incorporated not only sword-versus-sword engagement but also grappling, striking, disarms, and close-quarters elements. Auxiliary traditions, including elements of Natsubara-ryu *yawara* (a grappling/ujutsu art with dozens of kata), were integrated or referenced in advanced transmission.

This full spectrum—solo forms for precision, power, and *zanshin* (lingering awareness) alongside paired combative applications—embodied classical *bujutsu* within a broader *budo* framework. After Japan's defeat in 1945, however, the Allied Occupation profoundly disrupted transmission. The story of MJER's reemergence reveals not uniform revival but sharp regional divergences: in the Tokyo area, advanced kumitachi and integrated grappling/ujutsu elements were largely de-emphasized or dropped in favor of solo iaido forms reframed as introspective self-cultivation; in provincial and especially the Tosa/Shikoku lineages, more of the complete classical curriculum endured.

These differences stemmed from the intensity of Occupation oversight in the capital, philosophical and practical adaptations for survival and legitimacy, and the relative insulation of rural traditions.

The Allied Occupation and the Effective Suppression of Budo

Following Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), led by General Douglas MacArthur, implemented policies aimed at demilitarizing and democratizing Japan. Directives such as SCAPIN 178 (October 22, 1945) prohibited the dissemination of militaristic and ultra-nationalistic ideology and ended all military education and drill. Companion orders in January 1946 (Directives 548 and 550) mandated the purge of militaristic and ultra-nationalistic persons from public life.

The *Dai Nippon Butokukai*—the powerful prewar umbrella organization overseeing kendo, judo, kyudo, and iaido—was dissolved. Martial arts were removed from school curricula. While SCAP did not enact a blanket prohibition on all private budo practice, the cumulative effect was severe curtailment of open training. Public demonstrations, organized classes, and anything associated with the wartime military apparatus carried real risks of scrutiny, property confiscation (including swords in some cases), or social ostracism.

Many practitioners, fearing reprisal, ceased visible activity. The policy reflected broader goals of eliminating ultra-nationalism rather than eradicating cultural practices outright, yet the atmosphere of suspicion hit combative or paired training hardest.

Sword arts like iaido and *battojutsu* faced particular pressure because of their historical and wartime associations with military officer training (e.g., Toyama Academy *gunto soho* and Butokukai-derived forms). Techniques involving paired combat, grappling, or “gruesome” finishes could easily be interpreted as remnants of the very militarism SCAP sought to eradicate.

Reemergence after 1952: Reframing Iaijutsu as “Iaido”

The formal end of the Occupation in April 1952 with the Treaty of San Francisco allowed budo organizations to reorganize. The *Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei* (All Japan Kendo Federation) formed in 1952, incorporating iaido elements. The *Zen Nippon Iaido Renmei* (ZNIR)



emerged in 1954 under figures like Kono Hyakuren (a key MJER lineage holder). The first major iaido *taikai* (“great gathering” with tournaments/demonstrations) occurred in 1955.

Revival required reframing. Prewar and wartime budo had often carried explicit combat or nationalistic overtones. Postwar leaders emphasized budo as a path of self-cultivation (*kokoro no shugyo*—training of the heart/mind), ethical development, and cultural heritage rather than battlefield technique.

The very term shifted: many dropped “battojutsu” or “iaijutsu” in favor of “iaido,” highlighting mental presence and personal growth.



Nakayama Hakudo (1872–1958), the towering Tokyo-based figure who had studied Eishin-ryu lineages (including Shimomura-ha influences) and founded/popularized Muso Shinden-ryu (MSR), exemplified this shift. He altered techniques to soften aggressive endings (e.g., replacing certain finishing stabs with a more “merciful” *todome*—留め, a decisive, finishing strike) and promoted an introspective, accessible style suited to broader postwar society.

Many postwar practitioners gravitated toward Nakayama’s MSR or similarly adapted lines, viewing them as enlightened and less tainted by wartime associations. Standardization efforts, including the later development of ZNKR *Seitei Iai* (drawing selectively from MJER and MSR solo forms), further prioritized clean, solo performance suitable for federation events and public perception.

Why the Tokyo Area Dropped Advanced Kunitachi and Jujutsu Elements

Tokyo, as the seat of SCAP headquarters and the center of new national federations, experienced the strongest pressures toward adaptation. Several interconnected factors explain the de-emphasis or outright dropping of the advanced paired sword forms with their inherent grappling, striking, and disarming components and associated jujutsu/yawara elements in many Tokyo-area or Tokyo-influenced MJER lines:

- **Scrutiny and Legitimacy:** Any training that looked overtly combative or involved prolonged paired engagement risked being labeled militaristic. Solo *seiza* and *tatehiza* forms—precise drawing, cutting, and *noto* (resheathing)—could be more readily presented as meditative cultural practice or “moving Zen.” Paired kunitachi, by contrast, required partners, space, and realistic intensity; they inherently evoked battlefield or police/military applications.
- **Philosophical and Practical Reforms:** Nakayama Hakudo and like-minded reformers consciously restructured curricula to reduce “gruesome” or hyper-aggressive elements across various Eishin-ryu *ha* (branches). Postwar *iaidoka* (iaido practitioners) often migrated to these sanitized versions. The goal was survival and growth in a society eager to distance itself from wartime trauma. Advanced grappling-integrated sets (or references to auxiliary yawara) were either omitted or allowed to fade because they complicated the narrative of iaido as pure self-refinement.
- **Federation and Demographic Realities:** New organizations centered in or heavily influenced by the Kanto (Tokyo) region prioritized accessible, standardized solo curricula that could be taught widely, judged consistently in *taikai*, and transmitted to a new generation of students who were not descendants of samurai or





prewar military men. War deaths had already thinned transmission lines; simplified solo practice was more practical for rebuilding numbers. Tokyo lines of MJER (sometimes distinguished in lineage charts) aligned more closely with this *gendai* (modern) budo model.

The result was that many practitioners in the Tokyo area encountered MJER primarily through its solo Shoden and Chuden sets, with Okuden standing forms retained selectively but advanced paired kumitachi and explicit grappling components minimized or absent from regular curricula.

Provincial and Tosa Preservation: Continuity of the Classical Whole

In contrast, lineages rooted in Tosa (Kochi Prefecture, Shikoku) and other provincial or rural areas preserved the fuller classical curriculum, including advanced kumitachi and integrated combative elements. Several reasons account for this resilience:

- **Lower Occupation Pressure:** Rural Shikoku and other peripheral regions experienced far less direct SCAP oversight than Tokyo. Practitioners could more easily maintain discreet or private training during the ban years.

- **Strategic Withdrawal and Return:** A prime example is Masaoka Kazumi (1896–1973), a Menkyo Kaiden holder under Oe Masaji and a central figure in the Masaoka-*ha* of MJER. During the Occupation period he returned to Shikoku and worked as a farmer before resuming teaching in Kanazawa after 1952. This pattern—temporary return to rural roots—allowed transmission chains to survive intact. Masaoka later authored detailed manuals covering the full Oe curriculum and served in national iaido organizations while advocating fidelity to traditional principles.
- **Commitment to Koryu Integrity:** Tosa had been the heartland of Eishin-ryu since Hasegawa Eishin's era. Local practitioners viewed the complete art—solo forms *plus* paired kumitachi with their grappling and close-quarters realism—as essential to authentic transmission and the development of serious *deshi* (disciples). These sets were not optional add-ons but the capstone testing combative application, zanshin, and integrated skill. Auxiliary yawara/grappling references persisted longer in these lineages because they were embedded in the classical whole rather than viewed as separate “militaristic” baggage.



- **Cultural and Demographic Continuity:** Provincial dojo often retained smaller, more dedicated groups less influenced by federation standardization or urban public-image concerns. When revival accelerated after 1952, these lines simply continued what had been preserved privately. Today, traditional MJER dojo (especially those tracing to Tosa or direct Oe students outside the most centralized Tokyo networks) still teach kumitachi to advanced students, preserving the high incidence of grappling, disarms, and paired intensity that characterized Oe's reorganization.

Natsubara-ryu Yawara

The previously integrated art of Natsubara-ryu Yawara provides an example of what was a major component of the sogo-bujutsu. Natsubara-ryu Yawara was a traditional Japanese grappling art (yawara being an older term for what is now commonly called jujutsu) that served as an auxiliary or subsumed subsystem within the Tosa lineage of Eishin-ryu, which evolved into MJER.

It is primarily documented in the writings of Masaoka Katsutane (also known as Kazumi or Ikkan, 1896–1973), a key 18th-generation figure in the MJER/Masaoka-ha lineage and author of *Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Iai Heiho Chi no Maki* (often called the “*Chi no Maki*” or *Earth Book of MJER Iai Heiho*). Masaoka describes it as one of two auxiliary arts historically practiced alongside the core Tosa Eishin-ryu swordsmanship.

Relationship to Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu

Natsubara-ryu Yawara complemented the main iaijutsu/kenjutsu curriculum by providing unarmed or lightly armed grappling skills for close-quarters combat scenarios. These included situations where the sword might be lost, impractical (e.g., in armor, confined spaces, or after an initial draw and cut), or when transitioning to grappling after a disarm or in follow-up engagements. It addressed practical battlefield or self-defense needs beyond pure sword drawing and cutting—such as standing fights, kneeling/seated positions, and rear attacks.

This reflects the broader, more comprehensive nature of classical Tosa Eishin-ryu as a bujutsu system rather than solely a solo iaido practice. The school's historical curriculum encompassed solo forms (*waza*), the previously mentioned paired sword forms, and these auxiliary arts. When including the auxiliaries, the total number of techniques in the full historical system reportedly exceeded 200 *waza*.

Yawara was practiced alongside the sword art in the Tosa tradition. A companion auxiliary art was *Itabashi-ryu Bojutsu* (staff techniques: five kata of bo vs. bo and eight kata of bo vs. sword). Masaoka's book also references other supporting skills like *torinawa* (rope tying) and *jojutsu* (short staff techniques).

Modern MJER kumitachi retain elements of grappling, striking, disarms, and close-quarters work, which likely preserve influences or direct remnants from Natsubara-ryu Yawara and similar integrated training. However, the dedicated yawara curriculum itself is not actively taught as a separate subsystem in most contemporary lineages.

Structure and Techniques

According to Masaoka (via documented references), Natsubara-ryu Yawara consisted of six sets totaling 63 kata. It emphasized practical grappling in varied contexts: standing (*tachiai*), kneeling/seated, from behind/rear attacks, and other scenarios.

A more detailed breakdown of the sets (again, drawn from Masaoka's documentation in secondary sources) includes:

- *Yawara no Kata*: 10 forms (core or foundational grappling techniques).
- *Tachiai Kaisogake*, *Yawara no Kata*: 10 forms (standing engagements or “kicking/engaging” variants).
- *Kogusoku*, *Yawara no Kata*: 11 forms (seated grappling; both participants often in *iaigoshi* posture—on their toes with the left knee down and right knee up, a practical samurai ready/seated position distinct from full *seiza*).
- *Ato Tachiai*, *Yawara no Kata*: 11 forms (rear or “behind” attack/engagement variants).
- *Kogusoku Wari*, *Yawara no Kata*: 10 forms



(variations or “breaking/separating” techniques in the kogusoku/seated context).

- *Honte no Utsuri, Yawara no Kata*: 11 forms (main/direct hand transfers or variations).

These forms focused on realistic, combat-oriented grappling rather than sport or purely philosophical training, aligning with the koryu emphasis on practical application.

Current Status

Natsubara-ryu Yawara appears to be no longer extant—or in any case extremely rare—as a standalone or actively transmitted art within MJER or elsewhere. It has been described as “subsumed” or lost over time due to the disruptions of the Meiji-era sword bans (*haitorei*), postwar changes, and the natural attrition of transmission in auxiliary arts. That being said, a friend that lived for more than a decade in Japan told me this: “At a demonstration in Osaka a group from Tosa came and did a demo of yawara as well as bo. Afterwards I asked them if they trained with Kuroda Tetsuzan, as it had that atmosphere about it. They giggled and said, ‘No, it was the yawara and bo of MJER.’ It was very cool!”

While core MJER lineages (especially traditional Tosa/Masaoka-influenced ones) preserve advanced paired kumitachi with grappling elements, dedicated training in the full 63-kata Natsubara curriculum is not commonly practiced or documented in publicly available modern dojos. Online discussions in martial arts communities occasionally inquire about videos or remaining practitioners. Some lineages may retain fragmentary influences through the paired sets of techniques.

In summary, Natsubara-ryu Yawara represents the integrated, multi-weapon/comprehensive martial heritage of classical Tosa Eishin-ryu that fed into MJER. It underscores how the school historically prepared practitioners for a full spectrum of combat beyond solo sword drawing—something partially echoed today in the advanced kumitachi sets of traditional MJER dojo. For the deepest primary reference, Masaoka’s *Chi no Maki* remains the key source, though full English translations or detailed technique manuals are limited.

Enduring Legacy and Contemporary Practice

The postwar divergence left MJER with multiple legitimate branches and ha. Some emphasize the solo iaido forms that became dominant in federations and international spread, while others—particularly those maintaining strong Tosa or koryu orientations—continue to transmit the full spectrum, including advanced paired sets. This mirrors broader patterns in postwar Japanese martial arts: a tension between adaptation for mass accessibility and public legitimacy versus fidelity to classical depth and combative heritage.

The Occupation did not destroy MJER; it forced a reckoning. In Tokyo and central networks, survival and growth favored a reframed, introspective solo practice stripped of elements that could evoke the then-recent past. In the provinces and the Tosa heartland, insulation and cultural rootedness allowed the art’s richer, paired, and integrated dimensions to endure. Both paths contributed to the art’s survival. The complete classical MJER, with its kumitachi and grappling-informed sets, remains a living testament to the resilience of peripheral traditions that quietly safeguarded the whole when the center adapted for a new era.

Today, students seeking the fuller expression often travel to traditional dojo or study under teachers committed to the original vision, while the solo forms continue to introduce countless practitioners to the profound discipline of the Japanese sword. The story of MJER’s reemergence thus illustrates not only historical rupture and recovery but also the enduring power of regional identity in preserving the deepest layers of Japan’s martial heritage. 🌀



Major Sources for the Essay

Here is a curated list of the primary, most influential sources used by SuperGrok in researching and writing core elements of this essay. These references provided historical details on MJER lineage and curriculum, SCAP/Occupation policies, postwar revival mechanics, key figures (Oe Masaji, Nakayama Hakudo, Masaoka Kazumi), and the regional divergences in curriculum preservation (especially kumitachi and grappling elements). Sources are prioritized by reliability, depth, and direct relevance:

1. “History and Genealogy of Tosa Iai” (Sakura Budokan)

- URL: <https://sakurabudokan.com/history-and-genealogy-of-tosa-iai/>
- **Why critical:** Detailed account of Tosa/MJER lineage, Oe Masaji’s reorganization (including kumitachi), Masaoka Kazumi’s activities (farming in Shikoku during the ban, full curriculum manuals, postwar role), SCAP ban effects, and revival organizations. Strong emphasis on Tosa preservation vs. broader adaptations.

2. “A Short History of Batto-jutsu in America (Part 1)” (Brooklyn Batto Do / Zentokan Dojo)

- URL: <https://www.brooklynbattodo.com/reading/6-1-2023/a-short-history-of-batt-jutsu-in-america-part-1>
- **Why critical:** Excellent coverage of the 1945–1969 rebirth period, SCAP directives and their practical impacts, alterations to waza (removal of gruesome/aggressive techniques in MJER *ha* and MSR), migration to Nakayama’s introspective style, and the shift from *bujutsu* to *budo*/iaido. Contextualizes Tokyo-centered adaptations.

3. Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Wikipedia Entry

- URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mus%C5%8D_Jikiden_Eishin-ry%C5%AB

- **Why critical:** Comprehensive lineage, Oe Masaji’s curriculum restructuring (solo sets + *kumitachi* details, including grappling/striking/disarms in paired forms), auxiliary yawara/jujutsu references, branches (*ha*, including Tokyo lines), and modern variations. Essential for technical accuracy on what was preserved or dropped.

4. “JCS: Documentation Regarding the Budo Ban” (EJ Mas / Journal of Combative Sport)

- URL: https://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_svinth_1202.htm
- **Why critical:** Primary-source documentation and analysis of SCAPIN directives (178, 548, 550), Butokukai dissolution, school curriculum removals, and the distinction between formal policy and effective suppression of public/combative budo practice.

5. Additional Supporting Web Results on Nakayama Hakudo, Postwar Adaptations, and Curriculum Changes (from targeted searches)

- Key examples include discussions of Nakayama’s reforms to MSR (reducing aggressive elements, term shift to iaido), Toyama-ryu truncations, and contrasts between Tokyo federation influences and provincial koryu continuity. These reinforced the Tokyo vs. Tosa/regional divergence theme.

These sources were cross-referenced for consistency and formed the factual backbone. Secondary mentions (e.g., general Occupation histories or Facebook/Itten Dojo posts on paired practice) provided supporting context but were not foundational. For deeper research, start with the Tosa Iai history page and the Brooklyn Batto Do article, as they directly address the essay’s emphasis on postwar regional differences.



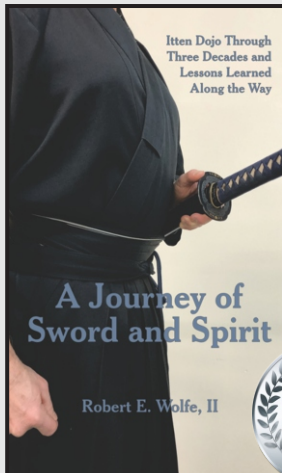
Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*. He is the author of two books: *A Journey of Sword and Spirit — Itten Dojo Through Three Decades and Lessons Learned Along the Way* and *Budo Renaissance Man — The Martial Arts Journey of Nicklaus Suino*, and a 2025 inductee to the PA Karate Hall of Fame.



Available from Amazon.com

A Journey of Sword and Spirit

“In an age that has largely lost touch with many of the traditional values that built the world we all currently inhabit, this work (and the dojo from which it sprang) serve as a welcome oasis of wisdom, strength, and serenity.”



Winner of Second Place in the Fall 2025 BookFest® Awards, in the category of Nonfiction-Memoirs-Transformational

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