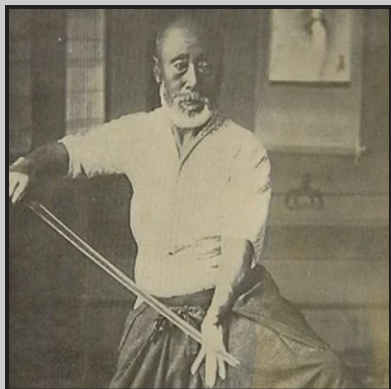


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Oe Masaji Shikei The Architect of Modern Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu

A Life at the Crossroads of Tradition and Transformation

In the annals of Japanese martial arts, few figures loom as large in the preservation and modernization of iaido as Oe Masaji Shikei (大江正路子敬, 1852–1927). Born in the final years of the Edo period in the samurai stronghold of Tosa domain (present-day Kochi Prefecture), Oe lived through the cataclysmic Boshin War, the Meiji Restoration, the abolition of the samurai class, and the nationwide ban on wearing swords. Yet he emerged not as a relic of a bygone era, but as the pivotal organizer who systematized the ancient art of drawing the sword—transforming a fragmented, secretive Tosa tradition into the structured, widely transmitted school known today as Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu (無双直伝英信流).

Oe did not invent new techniques. His genius lay in synthesis, clarification, and pedagogy. Oe unified the divergent Tanimura-ha and Shimomura-ha branches of what was then called Tosa Eishin-ryu or Hasegawa Eishin-ryu. He reduced a sprawling repertoire of some 160 waza to a coherent curriculum of sets still practiced in dojo worldwide. He gave clear names to forms that had previously been known only through direct oral transmission, making the art accessible beyond the closed circles of domain retainers. And he did so while insisting on the living heart of iaijutsu: the decisive cut that ends a confrontation before it fully begins.

Oe's life embodies the tension and triumph of budo in the modern age. A veteran of real combat at age 15, a dedicated teacher in public institutions, a recipient of the highest honors from the *Dai Nippon Butokukai*, and the headmaster who awarded *menkyo kaiden* (licenses of full transmission) to at least 16 students—thereby seeding multiple legitimate branches—Oe ensured that the direct transmission (*jikiden*) of Eishin-ryu would survive and flourish far beyond the borders of Tosa.



This biography traces his journey from the battlefields of the Restoration to the quiet transmission of wisdom in his later years, illuminating his profound connection to the art that continues to shape serious practitioners of iaido today.

Early Life in Tosa: The Making of a Swordsman (1852–1867)

Oe Masaji was born on November 21, 1852 (the tenth day of the tenth month in the fifth year of Kaei by the old calendar) in Suga village, Tosa district, Tosa province. His childhood name was Hamada Juba. He was the second son of Oe Koji. Like many sons of the samurai class in Tosa, he grew up immersed in the martial culture of the Yamauchi clan, which had long prized Eishin-ryu iaijutsu as a distinctive domain art.

Tosa Eishin-ryu traces its roots to the founder Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu in the late sixteenth century. The seventh headmaster, Hasegawa Chikaranosuke Hidenobu (Eishin), had adapted the art for the shorter katana worn edge-up through the obi, adding tatehiza techniques that became hallmarks of the school. Over generations, the art had taken deep root in Tosa, where it was valued not merely as technique but as a living expression of readiness, precision, and the samurai spirit.

Young Oe began his training early. He apprenticed in kenjutsu under the renowned Tosa swordsman Hineno Benji (日根野弁治). He also trained at the domain's Bunbukan school in the Shimomura-ha (下村派) of Eishin-ryu iaijutsu—sometimes called Muso Shinden Eishin-ryu at the time—and even in war drumming (*jin taiō*), which honed rhythm, presence, and battlefield awareness.

These early experiences instilled in him both technical facility and an appreciation for the art's deeper dimensions. Tosa's martial culture emphasized practical effectiveness over display. Iaijutsu was not sport; it was the skill of responding instantaneously to sudden violence while seated, standing, or moving—drawing, cutting, and returning the blade in one fluid, decisive action. The young Oe absorbed this ethos. By his mid-teens, the political storms gathering across Japan would test that preparation in the most unforgiving arena: actual warfare.

Baptism by Fire: The Boshin War and Sakai Incident (1868)

In 1867–1868, as the Tokugawa shogunate crumbled and imperial forces advanced, Tosa domain played a crucial role in the coalition against the old regime. Oe, then 15 (or 16 by some counts), was called to service. In late 1867 he was ordered to Kyoto for defensive duties. In January 1868 he participated in the pivotal Battle of Toba–Fushimi, a decisive engagement that routed shogunate forces and effectively ended the Edo period.

Tosa troops, alongside Satsuma and Choshu, fought under the imperial banner. Oe served in units connected to the secret Satsuma-Tosa alliance against the *bakufu* (military government). His duties included guard posts at Yodo Castle and later Sakai after Osaka opened. While specific personal exploits are sparsely recorded, his presence on these battlefields at such a young age placed him among the last generation of Japanese warriors to experience large-scale combat with traditional weapons before the full advent of modern firearms and conscript armies.

Even more starkly revealing of the era's violence was Oe's involvement in the Sakai Incident (堺事件) of February 23, 1868. Following clashes between Tosa samurai and French sailors in the port of Sakai, several Tosa men were executed by beheading as a diplomatic concession to France. Oe performed *kaishaku*—the role of the second who delivers the final, merciful cut after the initial blow. This grim duty, carried out with precision and composure, underscored the harsh realities of samurai responsibility and the weight of life-and-death decisions.

These experiences forged in Oe a profound respect for the practical, life-preserving purpose of iaijutsu. The art was never abstract; it prepared one to cut decisively when every instant mattered. This grounding in real violence would later inform his insistence that forms retain their combative integrity—that they not become empty dance or mere physical exercise.

The Meiji Crucible: Decline, Revival, and the Search for Mastery (1869–1890s)

The Meiji Restoration brought sweeping changes that threatened the very existence of classical martial arts.





The 1871 abolition of the domains dismantled the samurai class structure. The 1876 *Haitorei* (sword abolition edict) forbade the wearing of swords by anyone except military and police in uniform. Suddenly, the katana—the soul of the samurai and the central tool of iaijutsu—became, in the eyes of the new government, a symbol of feudal backwardness.

Many koryu declined or went underground. Teachers lost students and income. The old *otome-ryu* (domain-exclusive, secret transmission) model became untenable.

Yet, in Tosa, a determined effort emerged to preserve the unique iaijutsu tradition. The influential statesman Itagaki Taisuke (板垣退助), a Tosa native and key Restoration figure, reportedly declared that Tosa's Eishin-ryu iaijutsu was something “that cannot be copied anywhere else in Japan” and must not be lost. His advocacy helped create space for continued practice.

Oe, now a young man navigating the new order, pursued mastery across multiple traditions. He studied Tanimura-ha Eishin-ryu under Goto Magobei Masasuke (後藤孫兵衛正亮, d. 1898), the sixteenth headmaster. He deepened his understanding of the Shimomura-ha branch. He also trained in *bojutsu* (long staff) under Itagaki Taisuke himself and explored other kenjutsu schools such as Kokuri-ryu and Oishi Shinkage-ryu.

This breadth of study was crucial. The two main branches of Eishin-ryu had diverged after the eleventh headmaster, developing different emphases in technique, nomenclature, and even the manner of drawing the sword. Oe became intimately familiar with both traditions, positioning him uniquely to bridge the differences.

Oe's early career reflected the unsettled times. He held teaching posts at the Chidokan, served as a kendo

instructor and pit overseer at a Mitsubishi coal mine in Nagasaki (1884–1891), taught at various schools in Kochi and even Ishikawa Prefecture, and worked with police forces. These roles kept Oe connected to the martial arts while demonstrating the adaptability required of budoka in the Meiji era.

Unifying the Lineage: Leadership of the Tanimura-ha and the Birth of MJER

By the 1890s, Oe had risen to prominence within the Tanimura-ha. Upon the passing of Goto Magobei, he inherited leadership as the seventeenth headmaster. Rather than simply perpetuating one branch, he undertook the monumental task of synthesis. He combined the technical riches of the Tanimura-ha with insights from the Shimomura-ha. More importantly, he restructured the entire curriculum for clarity and transmission. Where previously there had been a vast, somewhat chaotic collection of perhaps 160 individual waza—with variations, alternate versions (*kaewaza*), and secret teachings passed only orally—Oe organized them into logical, progressive sets:

- **Seiza no Bu** (正座之部), drawing on the seiza iaijutsu tradition associated with Omori-ryu and ninth-generation influences, provided an accessible foundation. Students learn fundamental *nukitsuke* (drawing cuts), *kiritsuke* (finishing cuts), *chiburi* (blood removal), and *noto* (resheathing) from the formal kneeling posture. These forms build posture, breathing, focus, and the initial calm-before-action mindset.

- **Tatehiza no Bu** (立膝之部) preserve and clarify the distinctive tatehiza techniques of the Hasegawa Eishin core. From the half-kneeling posture—practical for sudden



encounters while seated on the floor or in armor—these forms develop the explosive yet controlled power characteristic of Eishin-ryu. The posture itself trains stability, hip mobility, and the ability to rise into action without telegraphing intent.

- **Okuiiai** (奥居合) represent deeper transmission: more advanced standing forms (*tachiwaza*) and refined *iwaza* variations. Here the practitioner explores greater subtlety in timing, distance, and the psychological dimensions of confrontation. These forms demand mature *zanshin*—the “remaining mind” or lingering awareness that persists after the decisive cut, ensuring one is not vulnerable to a second threat.

- **Kumitachi** (組太刀) paired forms—*Tachiuchi no Kurai*, *Tsumeai no Kurai*, and related sets—are especially precious. These bring the art to life through interaction with a training partner. Oe retained and clarified these, recognizing that solo forms alone could drift into abstraction without the reality check of live engagement. The paired practice drills *maai* (combative interval), timing, and the ability to read and respond to an opponent’s intent—skills directly transferable to genuine self-defense.

Oe also incorporated or clarified supplementary training methods such as *hayanuki* (rapid successive cuts), *Bangai no Bu* (supplementary or “outside” forms that could be demonstrated publicly without revealing the *riai*—the underlying essence—of the art), and various *henka* (variations) and *kaewaza* (changing techniques). These prevented rigidity and kept the art adaptive.

Crucially, Oe changed names when helpful for understanding without altering the techniques themselves. What had been known only by obscure or inconsistent labels now had transparent designations that guided the student’s comprehension. This “textbook” approach made group instruction feasible while still honoring the traditional one-to-one depth for advanced transmission.

The result was (and remains) a curriculum that supports both the beginner’s entry and the advanced practitioner’s lifelong refinement. It is this structure—still the backbone of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu practice at dojo such as the Japanese Martial Arts Center and Itten Dojo—that allows the art to be taught consistently across

generations and continents while retaining its combative soul.

During the Taisho era (1912–1926), Oe began formally referring to this reorganized school as Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu—the “Peerless, Direct Transmission, True-Faith School.” The addition of “Jikiden” (直伝) emphasizes the direct, person-to-person transmission that remained the heart of the tradition, even as the art opened beyond its former closed-door exclusivity.

This was not innovation for its own sake. It was preservation through intelligent organization. Oe understood that for the art to survive in a world without samurai stipends or domain schools, it needed a clear, teachable structure that serious students could grasp without decades of piecemeal revelation. Yet he never diluted the combative reality or the cultural depth.

Public Service and Institutional Recognition: The Butokukai Years

Oe’s commitment to transmission extended beyond the koryu circle. In 1900 he began teaching kendo and Eishin-ryu iaijutsu at the Kochi branch of the Dai Nippon Butokukai (Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society), the semi-official organization established to promote and standardize martial arts in the modern state. He later served as kendo professor for the Kochi branch and held various instructional positions at middle schools and normal schools.

In 1911 he was awarded the title of *Kyoshi* (instructor) in kendo by the Butokukai. In 1924 he received the prestigious rank of *Hanshi* (master instructor) in iaido—the second person ever to be so honored, following Nakayama Hakudo. These titles represented official recognition of his stature within the broader Japanese martial arts establishment.

Oe also authored a practical text, *Kendo Tegotoki* (*Introduction to Kendo*, 1918), demonstrating his role as an educator who could bridge classical technique and modern instructional needs. His approach was inclusive without being populist. He opened the art to dedicated students beyond the old domain elite, yet he maintained rigorous standards. The *deshi* (apprentices) who received full transmission from him carried the art across Japan,



establishing dojo far from Tosa and ensuring regional diversity within the school.

Students, Branches, and the Multiplication of Transmission

One of Oe's most consequential decisions was the generous awarding of menkyo kaiden (or the Eishin-ryu equivalent, *Kongen no Maki*). At least 16 students received this highest license. While this led to the natural development of multiple legitimate branches—each with its own emphases and subsequent headmasters—it also ensured the art's survival and vitality.

Notable students and lines descending from Oe include:

- Hokiya Namio (18th generation in one numbering)
- Fukui Harumasa
- Yamauchi Toyotake (Yamauchi-ha)
- Masaoka Katsutane (Masaoka line, leading to influential teachers such as Miura Takeyuki and Shimabukuro Masayuki)
- Yamamoto Harusuke (whose students contributed to the development of ZNKR Seitei Iai)
- And many others who spread the art nationally and, eventually, internationally.



Parallel to Oe's work, Nakayama Hakudo had studied the Shimomura-ha and went on to found Muso Shinden-ryu, which became the most widely practiced iaido school in Japan. The two schools—MJER and MSR—remain sister traditions, sharing deep common roots, with many practitioners today appreciating both. The Shinbukan

Dojo, where Itten Dojo members trained when visiting the Hayashizaki Jinja, is a Muso Shinden-ryu dojo.

Oe's model of multiple authorized transmitters prevented the art from depending on a single fragile lineage. It embodied a living, branching tree rather than a single trunk—a fitting metaphor for an art centered on decisive, adaptive response.

Later Years, Death, and Memorial

In his final decades, Oe continued teaching in Kochi, supported by the respect of the martial arts community and his own students. He lived to see the art he had organized take root across Japan.

Oe Masaji Shikei passed away on April 18, 1927 (some sources list 1926; Japanese records indicate 1927), at the age of 76, in Enokuchi, Kochi City. He was buried at Hikkiyama (筆山) in Kochi, south of Kamikoshi Pass.

60 years after his death, a memorial stone was erected in his honor on Mount Godaisan, recognizing his foundational role in preserving Tosa's iaijutsu heritage.

His family life included his wife, Oe Kane, son Mizuho, and daughter Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, whose marriage connected the family to international circles. Descendants include notable figures in Canadian arts and culture, illustrating the unexpected ripples of a Tosa swordsman's life.

Legacy: The Enduring Jikiden Spirit

Oe Masaji's greatest gift to posterity was not a new technique or a personal style, but a clarified, living curriculum and a model of responsible transmission. By organizing the art "like a textbook" while preserving every essential cut and principle, he made it possible for future generations—far removed from the samurai world—to encounter the authentic depth of Eishin-ryu.

Today, in dojo from Japan to North America and beyond, students bow in, draw their swords in the precise sequences Oe codified, and strive to embody zanshin, precision, and the calm readiness that defines classical iaijutsu. Whether practicing the foundational seiza forms, the dynamic tatehiza techniques, the profound okuiai, or the paired kumitachi that reveal the art's combative heart, they walk a path Oe helped keep open.



Oe's life reminds us that preservation often requires intelligent adaptation. In an age when many traditional arts faded, Oe Masaji looked squarely at the challenges of his time—the loss of social structure, the weapon bans, the need for broader access—and responded with clarity, fidelity, and organizational brilliance. He did not compromise the art's essence; he gave it a form in which that essence could travel safely into the future.

For practitioners of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu and all who value the classical Japanese sword arts, Oe Masaji Shikei stands as a model of the *deshi* who becomes a steward: one who receives the transmission whole, refines its presentation without altering its soul, and passes it onward with both rigor and generosity.

The direct transmission continues.

Zanshin and the Inner Dimension

Oe Masaji understood that *iaijutsu* was never merely physical technique. The forms trained *zanshin*: the state of relaxed alertness that remains after action, the mind that does not collapse into relief or distraction once the immediate threat is resolved. In paired practice and solo forms alike, he emphasized this lingering presence. A cut executed without *zanshin* is incomplete, regardless of technical correctness.

This perspective aligned with the broader budo values Oe embodied—discipline, humility, precision, and the integration of training into daily character. His own life, marked by early combat, institutional teaching, and patient organization, modeled the perseverance and clarity he sought to transmit.

In the postwar era, as Japan rebuilt and *iaido* reemerged under Allied Occupation policies that initially restricted martial arts, the students and “grand-students” of Oe played vital roles in the art's revival. The standardized curriculum he left behind provided a stable foundation that could be shared openly, helping classical *iaijutsu* transition from a near-extinct domain art into a living practice embraced by serious students worldwide.

Conclusion: The Direct Transmission Continues

Oe Masaji Shikei did not seek to become a legendary swordsman in the romantic sense. He sought to ensure that

the profound art he had inherited from Tosa's lineage would not perish with the samurai class that birthed it. Through organizational brilliance, fidelity to technique, and a generous yet rigorous approach to transmission, he succeeded beyond measure.

Today, when a student at Itten Dojo steps onto the mat, draws the sword in the precise sequence of *Mae* or *Ukenagashi*, or engages a partner in *Tsumeai no Kurai*, he or she participates in a chain of transmission that passes directly through Oe Masaji, to Hokiya Namio, to Yamamoto Takuji, to Ota Tsugiyoshi, to Yamaguchi Katsuo, to Nicklaus Suino. Oe's decision to name, order, and clarify did not dilute the art—it gave it wings.

The “Peerless Direct-Transmission” school lives because one man, forged in the fires of the Boshin War and tempered by the upheavals of Meiji Japan, chose stewardship over innovation and clarity over secrecy. Oe's legacy is not a museum piece but a living path of self-mastery, precision, and presence.

For those who train sincerely in this tradition, the proper response to Oe Masaji's life is continued practice: to receive the transmission whole, to refine one's own understanding, and to pass it onward with the same integrity and generosity he exemplified.

The sword is drawn. The cut is made. *Zanshin* remains.

A Note on Practice Today

For contemporary students at dojo like Itten Dojo—under the guidance of teachers committed to classical transmission—Oe Masaji's legacy is not abstract history but daily reality. The forms he organized are the same forms practiced with precision and mindfulness. The emphasis on *zanshin*, on combative integrity, on the *deshi*'s humble perseverance: these values echo through every class, every repetition of *nukitsuke* and *noto*, every paired engagement.

Oe's life invites modern practitioners to reflect: How do we, in an age of distractions and options, embody the same clarity and dedication? How do we ensure that the direct transmission remains direct—not diluted by commercialization or ego, but deepened by sincere, long-term practice?



The answer lies in the forms themselves and in the spirit with which we approach them. Oe Masaji showed that preservation requires both fidelity and intelligence. May his example continue to guide all who draw the sword in the Eishin-ryu tradition. ㊦

Sources and Further Reading

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Butokukai historical records and texts on the Meiji-Taisho martial arts transition.

Lineage and technical documentation preserved by Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu federations and individual teachers worldwide.

Contextual histories of the Boshin War, Tosa domain, Itagaki Taisuke, and the Sakai Incident.

This biography, compiled with the help of SuperGrok, synthesizes the most reliable available accounts to offer an accurate, narrative portrait of Oe Masaji's life, times, and contributions to Eishin-ryu. Minor variations in dates, generational numbering, and specific details appear across sources—a common feature of koryu historiography. The central facts of his organizational achievement and its lasting impact are consistent.

Readers are encouraged to cross-reference with primary Japanese materials and the guidance of qualified teachers for the deepest understanding.



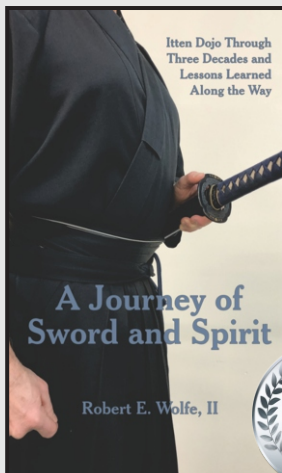
Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as 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.



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