

## SWORD TRADITIONS OF THE TOKUGAWA PERIOD

When the Tokugawa shogunate was founded in 1603, a long era of almost constant warfare was followed by nearly 250 years of peace. During this period the fighting methods of Japan would undergo a considerable change, from bujutsu to the budo we know now. Battlefield techniques were adjusted to the demands of the modern time and a huge proliferation of new schools and styles followed. It is often thought that Japanese martial arts developed in a linear fashion; the early *ryûha* supposedly originating as training institutes to prepare warriors for the Sengoku battlefields, only later to be transformed in ways for self-cultivation during the Tokugawa period. From Meiji times onward this transformation from *jutsu* to *dô* would then result in the development of the modern sports like kendo and judo. This traditional view however needs to be adjusted. This article focuses on the development that the Japanese sword tradition went through during the Tokugawa era, in order to shed more light on the background of the martial arts that we practice today.

### Early developments

Little is known about Japanese sword fighting prior to the 16th century. In descriptions of fights in medieval literary sources like *Heike Monogatari* and *Taiheiki* we can find the names of certain techniques, but what they looked like or how they were practiced remains unclear. It seems that training up to the Sengoku period took place in an informal and ad hoc fashion. There were no special schools, but warriors shared their knowledge and trained their skills at open places like temple grounds and empty riverbeds. The emergence of martial schools was a development of the latter part of the Muromachi period. The battle experience gained during the wars of the Sengoku era was by some experts systemized and passed on to students. The most important of these old *ryûha* are the Shintô-ryû of Iizasa Chôisai, the Kage-ryû of Kamiizumi Ise no kami Hidetsuna and the Ittô-ryû of Itô Ittôsai (based on the Nen-ryû or the Chûjô-ryû); these are also called the three source schools (*Sandai gen-ryû*), because many of the sword schools that came up during the Tokugawa era derived from these three traditions of the Sengoku period.

The traditional view that the aim of the early *bugei ryûha* schools was to train warriors for the battlefield does not do justice to the facts. By the end of the sixteenth century there were only a few dozen formal *ryûha* in existence, but the armies of this period comprised of tens of thousands of combatants. *ryûha bugei* can therefore only have constituted a fraction of the total military training. Moreover, the fact that *ryûha bugei* was not a matter of training officers or the higher elite is made clear by the fact that the founders of the early *ryûha* were bushi of lower status. A further clue is given by the curriculum of the schools. Although warfare of the Sengoku era consisted of large-scale deployment of warriors armed with pikes, bows and muskets, the kata of the early *ryûha* in most cases treat individual combat with the sword as the central weapon. But if the *bugei ryûha* did not originate as institutes for military training, how then are we to view their emergence?

In Japanese society of the Muromachi era (1338-1573) the emergence of the *ryû* ('current') can be perceived. Experts in cultural pursuits like drama, music, calligraphy, tea ceremony, ikebana and the like began to systematize their knowledge and to codify it in packages of information, which were passed on to their students by means of *kata* ('form'). This transfer was certified with diplomas and teaching licenses. An important element the different *ryû* had in common, was the concept of *michi* ('path, way'). This

notion, stemming from the Japanese merger of buddhist, taoist and (neo-) confucianist thought, is based on the idea that a universal truth underlies the practice of many activities, be it physical, artistic or religious, and that these activities can lead to a similar, higher insight. The origin of the first bugei ryûha should also be seen in this light. The founders of the earliest schools strived for a level of skill that far exceeded its military aim. In texts of the late sixteenth century we can already discern references to a deeper meaning in the practice of martial skills; a search for self-perfection. According to Friday, ryûha bugei was not so much an application, but an abstraction of military science (see Friday, 2005). This means that the transformation of *bujutsu* to a vehicle of self-realization was not, as for example Draeger stated, a later development, but this element was already present in the first traditions from the outset.

The sword training in these early schools of the Sengoku era had much in common with that of the first part of the Tokugawa period, but in time huge changes would occur. In order to give a clear overview of these developments, Tokugawa fencing is usually divided in three periods.

### **The early period of Tokugawa fencing (beginning until middle of 17th century)**

With his victory at Sekigahara in 1600 Ieyasu established his hegemony over the other warlords and the foundation of the Tokugawa shogunate three years later rushed in enormous changes in Japanese society. That this constituted the beginning of more than two centuries of peace was however anything but clear at the time. As long as the son of Hideyoshi remained alive and at large, he would be a rallying point for forces hostile towards the *bakufu*. A major campaign in 1615 resulted in the final downfall of the Toyotomi camp and two decades later there was again heavy fighting during the Shimabara rebellion on Kyushu. The continuous threat of war during the first half of the 17th century kept the bushi focussed on keeping up their martial skill, in order to be prepared for the expected resumption of hostilities. Talented warriors were hired by experienced daimyo as instructors for their troops and also the first Tokugawa shoguns stimulated military training by assigning martially skilled men to important posts. During the Muromachi period a spirit of competition had arisen among the bushi. They endeavored to excel in the use of weapons, which resulted in the emergence of dueling. These duels were fought for different reasons. Revenge for injured honor could be a motive, or the urge to prove oneself. Defeating many opponents could result in a lucrative appointment to a daimyo. The Sengoku bushi were skilled in the use of several weapons and it was not uncommon for warriors to meet each other in a duel using different arms. The well-known spear master Hôzôin Inei for example, once defeated the archer Kikukuni Nii Munemasu in a duel. The sword, which during the Sengoku battles had never been more than a last resort back-up weapon, started to play a more central role. In fights of this period sharp swords were usually used (*shinken shiai*), often with deadly outcome. Replacing these with blunted weapons (*habiki*) or wooden practice swords (*bokutô* or *bokken*) made the duels somewhat safer, but an encounter could still lead to serious injury or death. There were no rules or limitations. A good example of the use of tactics that would later be regarded as unfair, was the duel of the founder of Kashima Shintô-ryû Tsukahara Bokuden. Prior to the fight he sent out his followers to retrieve information on the favorite techniques of his adversary. When it turned out this man made use of a special method of thrusting, Bokuden notified him by letter that this was a cowardly technique that should not be used. This didn't stop his opponent, but the psychological goal was achieved: Bokuden defeated him by cutting his head in two with a single blow.

By the end of the Muromachi period a customary way to find adversaries for a duel was the *musha shugyô* (or *kaikoku shugyô*). In late medieval Japan mendicant ascetics were a common phenomenon. These *hijiri* or *yamabushi* were usually not part of the buddhist establishment, but they performed all kinds of religious services for the rural population. They cultivated their powers by venturing into the mountains to perform ascetic and meditative training (*shugyô*) based on a combination of taoist, esoteric buddhist and shintoist practices. In the same way bushi started to travel around on a warrior quest. Some subjected themselves to a harsh training regime in nature, but others took to the road in a luxurious fashion, accompanied by a large retinue of followers. A good example of the latter is the above mentioned Tsukahara Bokuden on his third *musha shugyô*. Bushi traveling around on a *musha shugyô* knew much about the situation in the domains (Jap: *han*) they visited, making them valuable sources of information for the daimyo geared for war. Arriving in a new town a notice board was customarily set up in busy spot, challenging local swordsmen to a fight. When this challenge was met by anyone, an appointment was made by letter, stating time, location and weapons used, after which the duel could commence. In fights like these between exponents of different ryû (*taryû jiai*) a warrior could prove his skill and build up a reputation, but they also served to learn new techniques and stimulated the proliferation of schools in the late Sengoku and early Tokugawa period. Sword schools that emerged during this time were, among others, the Shinkage-ryû, Nitô-ryû, Ono-ha Ittô-ryû and Jigen-ryû. In 1714 the book *Honchô Bugei Shôden* appeared, giving for the first time an overview of the bugei ryûha in existence in Japan at the time. The emphasis in this work is already on kenjutsu and it contains descriptions of the founders and most important exponents of the existing ryû (for a translation of the chapters on sword schools, see Rogers 1990).

### **The second period of Tokugawa fencing (mid 17<sup>th</sup> until end 18<sup>th</sup> century)**

When in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the gunsmoke of the last major campaigns cleared, Japan had become a country of peace and stability. The Daimyo were kept on a tight leash by the Tokugawa bakufu and the bushi were slowly but surely transformed from martially skilled landowners to a caste of landless professional soldiers who were garrisoned in Edo or in the castle towns of their daimyo, where they mainly performed administrative tasks.

A result of peace was that fighting techniques could not be tested on the battlefield anymore. When the bakufu had consolidated its power and started to keep an eye on the daimyo through the use of an extensive network of spies, the daimyo imposed a ban on leaving the domain (*dappan*, fleeing the *han*) and strangers were kept out. This made it much more difficult for individual warriors to wander around freely and to go on a *musha shugyô*. In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the bakufu and fiefs (and later also many ryûha themselves) forbade *taryû jiai*, by which the last possibility for samurai to engage in deadly fighting disappeared. The absence of actual combat situations caused a diminishment in the martial ability of the warrior class. Other developments subsequently contributed to the transformation of battlefield techniques in ryûha bugei.

A considerable influence in this process has been the emergence of a civil culture. Although bushi already in Kamakura times propagated the concept that military (*bu*) and civil (*bun*) skills should be cultivated in a harmoniously balanced way (*bunbu Ryôdô*), for many of the, often illiterate, warriors this proved too high an ideal. During the Tokugawa era however, the bakufu adopted Neo-Confucianism as the system to model its society on and consequently literacy and study among the bushi increased rapidly. The Neo-Confucianistic emphasis on investigation resulted in an enormous

output of texts on a myriad of topics, among which the code of the warrior class, bushido. Essays appeared on the theoretical foundations of war methods. Some of these texts described a particular school, while others dealt with philosophical or moral aspects of bugei, often using religious concepts and idiom to make their point. Depending on the background and perspective of the writer, *michi*, the higher principle of budo, could in this way be formulated in Shintoist, Buddhist, Taoist and/or Confucianist phrases. This founding of martial technique on a framework of mental and philosophical principles was an important step towards the development of bujutsu into a vehicle of self-perfection.

Another important element in the history of budo is the emergence of professional teachers. The *ryûha* that had materialized in the different cultural fields from the Muromachi era onward operated as schools within which a line of teachers, often tied by kinship and under the leadership of an *iemoto* ('origin of the house'), transferred a certain package of knowledge. Sometimes they formed large networks that bound their students for long periods of time to the *ryû* by means of oaths. In Tokugawa times a huge proliferation can be discerned of bugei *ryûha*. Many of these schools followed the usual pattern and eventually became hereditary within a single family. In the urban areas dojos were opened where professional instructors in exchange for entrance fees taught martial arts classes. The fighting techniques were structured by these professionals in extensive systems of *kata*, divided in different levels of transmission. The *ryûha* system ensured that the information was kept exclusive for the own group. To make sure that other people would not get hold of the knowledge of the *ryû*, many of the school described the techniques in their *mokuroku* with names that were derived from literary or religious sources. This also happened with more abstract concepts like the right frame of mind, way of looking et cetera, which wrongly caused some of these notions to become related to religious currents like for example zen.

During the Tokugawa era the nature of threats changed; massive battles made way for small-scale fights between individuals or small groups, encounters with robbers or cases of revenge. Horses and armor fell into disuse and specialization came up. Although in the earlier *ryûha* generally more than one weapon were used (many taught the entire range of battlefield weapons), now schools emerged that focused entirely on the use of a single weapon. These changing circumstances greatly influenced the way fighting methods were practiced. Swordfighting in everyday clothing (*suhada kenjutsu*, 'bare-skin' or 'uncovered body' *kenjutsu*) offered possibilities that would have been impossible while fighting in armor. Absence of armor resulted in quicker and more flexible movement and the use of techniques that would otherwise have been difficult to execute, like for example cuts from *jôdan no kamae*. More targets became available, but larger vulnerability also gave a higher priority to evasive movement.

The most important means of transference of knowledge within the Tokugawa era *ryûha* was the *kata*. In order to master the techniques of a school, these set forms were to be repeated endlessly under the guidance of the teacher. In some *ryû* however, in time *kata* emerged that were impractical, using techniques or *kamae* that looked impressive, but that were of little use in real combat situations. Such *kata* training would become known as *kahô kempô* ('flowery fencing'). Another problem that occurred was inflation in the value of certificates. As dojo leaders became financially dependant on their students, certificates of mastery came to be given to

persons who didn't really qualify for the level. For many students, obtaining ranks and certificates became more important than realizing actual proficiency. The consequence of these developments was a noticeable decrease by the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in martial skill among the warrior class. Some bushi criticized their contemporaries in no uncertain terms on this fact. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they judged severely teachers who talked too much but who had little talent and who made martial skill into child's play. Although the bakufu many times endeavored to stimulate the bushi to serious martial training, the general view of mid-Tokugawa swordsmanship is one of decrease in level. The banning of taryû jiai for a long time made it impossible for swordfighters to interact with practitioners of other schools and according to some the emphasis on formalistic and sometimes unrealistic kata practice led fencing further away from realistic fighting.

### **The third period of Tokugawa fencing (end of 18<sup>th</sup> century until beginning of Meiji 1868)**

The stimulation of education during the Tokugawa era resulted in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the founding of schools in many of the domains. These *hankô* ('domain schools') offered the young samurai of the han, apart from theoretical classes, also the opportunity to hone their martial kills in the *embujô*, the military part of the school. This institute often housed within one compound dojo of different disciplines and ryû. In the embujô of the domain school of Tsû for example, there were four rooms for jujutsu, three for musketry, one for archery, three for horsemanship, one for strategy, three for spearfighting, three for swordsmanship and one for naginata. Bushi in the domains were largely dependant on these hankô for their martial training, which sometimes resulted in limitations. Each discipline was generally represented by only a few ryûha (in some domains just one school was practiced: *ikkoku ichiryû*) and the mode of instruction was conservative, with an emphasis on kata training. In many domains the line of instruction was hereditary within certain families. The prestige of the position of kenjutsu instructor left little room for taryû jiai or for new developments in fencing. The observing of differences in rank and status among bushi of the same domain furthermore hampered the organizing of matches.

All this was very different in the big cities where schools, founded by professional sword teachers, opened their door to everyone interested in fencing. In these dojos bushi from all over Japan trained together with increasing numbers of commoners. In the fading class differences of the late Tokugawa era wealthy farmers and successful merchants started picking up habits formerly reserved to the samurai, like fencing. The bushi frequenting these schools were often ambitious samurai of lower rank, drawn in by the competitive spirit of these places. But their zeal also went beyond martial arts; especially the Edo dojos of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became breeding grounds of pro and anti Tokugawa sentiments that produced many of the prominent players of the bakumatsu era political climate.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese fencing went through major changes. Although formal kata training was maintained in many schools, other ryû fell under the spell of sporting competition. Especially the urban dojos offered samurai and commoners alike the opportunity to meet each other in matches. Vigorous bouts were made possible with the implementation of protective clothing and the bamboo sword. The development of the first *fukuro shinai* (strips of bamboo, covered in a leather sleeve) is attributed Kamiizumi Ise no Kami Hidetsuna, but many adjustments

were necessary to arrive at the shinai currently used in kendo. The evolution of protective clothing has also taken up a considerable amount of time; no standardized set existed and depending on dojo or practitioner different combinations of items could be used. (For an extensive description of protective armor and weapons, see Mol, 2010). The new art of fencing, that was called *shinai uchikomi keiko*, started to spread among various schools in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was met by heavy resistance from the more traditional ryûha, that claimed this kind of training lacked a sense of realism. Other schools also started organizing matches, but held on to the use of the bokken, making it imperative to control one's strikes. The advantages and disadvantages of shinai uchikomi keiko provoked a heated debate within the Japanese swordfighting realm, but by the end of the Tokugawa era many of the ryû had adapted to this form of fencing. An end to the ban on taryu jiai eventually made it possible to fight opponents of other schools again. Some warriors carried this opportunity to the extreme by making a sport out of barging into dojos and challenging everyone present; striking examples of this *dojo yaburi* ('dojo crushing') can be found in *Musui's Story*, by Katsu Kokichi.

### **Fencing in the Meiji period**

The arrival in Edo harbor in 1853 of Commodore Perry sent a shock through the world of the samurai. The modern firepower of his black ships showed the Japanese that their centuries of seclusion from the rest of the world had burdened them with an enormous disadvantage. The ryûha bugei as it had developed during the Tokugawa period could not live up to the military demands of the modern times and the samurai class was woken up to the frustrating reality that they were no longer able to defend their own nation. Subsequent political developments resulted in the overthrowing of the shogunate and in the Meiji restoration. In the spirit of the saying 'if you can't beat them, join them' the new country hastened to fashion itself after its Western enemies. With disastrous consequences for the samurai: within the space of a few years the domains, the system of financial stipends and the right to carry swords were all abolished, which amounted to the elimination of the samurai as a distinctive class. By this turn of events many of the warriors were reduced to poverty, and the ensuing dissatisfaction gave rise to several revolts, of which the 1877 Satsuma rebellion under Saigô Takamori was the largest. These rebellions were all suppressed however by the new conscript army that was modeled on its Western examples.

In an attempt to stimulate military skill, the bakufu in her declining years founded the Kôbusho. This institute, opened in 1856, was comparable with the martial part of the domain hankô. Instruction was given in western-style gunnery, fencing and use of the spear, with a large emphasis in the first discipline. Under pressure of some of the more traditionally oriented vassals archery and jujutsu were added to the curriculum, but not much later removed again. Training focused on practical applicability and this had consequences for the way fencing was practiced. With the use of protective clothing shinai uchikomi keiko was executed under guidance of instructors selected for their progressive approach. More prestigious teachers, like the Yagyû and Ono fencing instructors of the shogun, who still used kata-based training methods, were ignored. By making secret techniques public and pitting fencers of different ryû against each other in matches, the Kôbusho contributed much to the opening up of the secretive and closed world of the fencing schools. The fixing by this institute of the maximum length of the shinai was a next important step in the development of what would later become kendo. The Kôbusho was disbanded in 1866.

In the urge to modernize as quickly as possible, the Meiji government took up a negative position with regards to the classical martial arts. The carrying of swords was abolished and urban dojos were closed, depriving many of the instructors of their livelihood. The public opinion furthermore became more and more focused on the West and traditional Japanese values became to be considered anachronisms. Ryûha bugei was rapidly becoming in danger of getting forgotten in the tide of history. Sasakibara Kenkichi, former Jikishin Kage-ryû teacher at the Kôbusho and fencing instructor of shogun Iemochi, was searching for a way to stop this process. In 1872 he founded the Gekken Kaisha, an organization that arranged demonstrative fencing matches modeled on sumo tournaments. An announcer called combatants of Eastern and Western direction together in a ring, where matches were fought with different weapons. It was a huge success. The people of Tokyo pored in to behold the spectacle and soon other companies followed suit, organizing Gekken shows throughout the country. Sasakibara and his companions received much criticism however. They were accused of selling their budo for profit; the martial arts should not be embellished in shows in order to lure in spectators and to serve as public amusement. The essence of bugei was bound to be corrupted. Proponents objected however that the Gekken shows stimulated interest in fencing and other martial arts in a time when these were about to disappear forever. Bringing the martial arts under the attention of the general public this way may very well have been their rescue, it was said.

In 1874 the Tokyo Metropolitan Police was founded by Kawaji Toshiyoshi. This former Satsuma samurai fought Saigo's rebels during the Satsuma rebellion. In one encounter police troops vanquished a group of rebels in fights with swords and spears. It made Kawaji realize the importance of fencing as a skill for law enforcement and he endeavored to incorporate it in basic police training. When his proposal was adopted and in 1879 a number of well-known fencers was attracted to act as instructors, it turned out that their backgrounds in different ryûha hampered training. Consequently, a series of ten kata was formed, taken from these ryû, which was a first major step in systemizing technique and training. This practice would continue in the Dai Nihon Butokukai and would eventually bring forth modern kendo.

## **Conclusion**

The early bugei ryûha developed when bushi started to search for a depth in their martial training that went further than preparation for the battles that were waging all around them. But the swordfighters of the Sengoku and early Tokugawa era were molded by those very battles; their skill with the sword was based on and honed by mortal combat. The lessons they left were, as in other cultural pursuits, handed down to future generations by means of kata. These later generations added their own findings and spurred an enormous proliferation of schools. But the bushi of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a dilemma: although their social position dictated that they ought to be martially skilled, there was no opportunity for these warriors to actually test their skill in real combat. Some schools must have succeeded in preserving the essence of their tradition, as it was laid down in their kata, but in other schools kata training deteriorated into a formalistic exercise that had moved far away from the realities of mortal fighting. Halfway the Tokugawa period a new wind started to blow through the bugei when a spirit of competition and sportsmanship entered the arena. Protective clothing and safer practice-weapons allowed for full power and safe training. Although the more traditional ryû remained loyal to kata practice, this new form of keiko would spread widely and ultimately result in the materialization of modern

forms of budo we know today.

Ryûha bugei of the latter part of the Tokugawa period is often criticized as a watered down version of the martial prowess that the bushi exhibited during times of war, but here we are probably selling the Tokugawa samurai short. Although these warriors may have been occupying themselves with a form of personal development rather than realistic training in preparation for warfare, their perception was colored by many decades of peace; the individualistic training within the ryûha had long replaced any other form of military training and with that also the realization that martial arts and military skill are not one and the same thing. The fact that ryûha bugei from its very outset had contained an element of self-realization, may have been an important reason why it was able to spread so successfully during the Tokugawa period.

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