

The Myth of Chiburi?

In many iaido ryuha, chiburi is a fundamental part of kata. Chiburi, usually written 血振 in Japanese, literally means “shaking off blood,” and the image presented is that of flinging the blood of a defeated enemy off the blade with a deft movement before resheathing. Perhaps mainly due to the prevalence of Muso Shinden-ryu and Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu, some people believe that chiburi is a universal aspect of lai. However, many ryuha do not practice chiburi, and there is the opinion – which has become more widespread recently, thanks to the sharing of knowledge via the internet – that shaking off blood in this way is in fact impossible. If this is the case, then what purpose does chiburi serve? Is it pointless? Why do some ryuha practice it? And was it really ever intended to remove blood from a blade?

Chiburi is a modern reading of a word that appears in the densho of Eishin-ryu as either 血振 or 血震. The original pronunciation is most likely chiburi, which is the reading you find if you look the word up in a Japanese dictionary such as Iwanami Shoten’s *Kojien*. In his book *Koryu lai no Hondo*, the late Iwata Norikazu quotes another Eishin-ryu teacher, Morita Tadahiko, as being correct in his assertion that “chiburi” is the accurate term and that “chiburi” is in fact a mistaken reading (the word “chiburi” that appears in the dictionary actually refers a method of preparing fish). Iwata sensei also notes that both Oe Masamichi and his own teacher, Mori Shigeki, referred to the motion as “chiburi.” However, for the purposes of this article I will use the term “chiburi” as that is what most people are familiar with, and for better or worse it has become common parlance in most lai circles.

Most beginners learning iaido will be taught that the motion of chiburi is intended to fling the blood from the tip of the sword after cutting. In most books on iaido too, chiburi is described as serving this purpose. Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu and Muso Shinden-ryu also contain chinugui (wiping the blood from the blade with a cloth, paper or the fingers) in a small number of techniques in the first teaching level of Omori-ryu (Shoden/Seiza no bu). In Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu at least, this is technically done by putting one hand inside one’s hakama and using that to wipe the blade. In practice however, the shape is performed but the blade is not really wiped on the hakama. According to Mori Shigeki, this is because this because the oil used on swords in Oe sensei’s day would soil the clothes.

Despite more people becoming aware of it recently, the idea that chiburi isn’t really a practical method of removing blood from the blade is not recent – it has been expressed by teachers in Japan for a long time. Kono Hyakuren, 20th soke of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu, wrote in his book *laido Shintei*:

“Chiburui: this takes the form of shaking blood off your sword and onto the ground. However in my experience, when cutting with a sword very little blood actually gets stuck to the blade. Nevertheless, placing emphasis on zanshin and spirit through the form of chiburi makes it a useful tool for development.”

Kono sensei was not alone in his understanding of chiburi primarily as a method of developing zanshin. Nakayama Hakudo wrote:

“In batto, chiburi is always performed in each kata before sheathing the sword. This motion cannot clean blood from the blade completely, but it should be thought of as a purifying action. The period between chiburi and noto is very important in battojutsu, as it is a manifestation of zanshin in the kata. Every school of iaido has a different set method of performing this action. A few peculiar methods are as follows:

“In Kanshin-ryu, a piece of paper kept inside the kimono (kaishi, 懐紙) is used to wipe the blade clean.

“In [Shindo] Munen-ryu, the sword is pointed downwards so the blood drips off the tip. The sword is then brought around in an arc to the left side of the body, thus flicking the blood off the blade.

“In Hazama-ryu, the sword is rested on the left shoulder, and the blood wiped off onto the shoulder.

“In Fuchishin-ryu, the sword is pinched between thumb and forefinger, which are drawn from the base of the blade to the tip to wipe off the blood.

“In Hayashizaki Hon-ryu, the sword is held in the right hand and first brought in a small motion to the left, then in a large motion to the right before sheathing.

“Other schools such as Omori-ryu, Kikusui-ryu, Kaishi-ryu, Tamiya-ryu, Shingan-ryu, Tetchu-ryu, Hasegawa-ryu and so on also all perform chiburi differently. In addition, there are schools that do not perform chiburi at all. Some schools will discard the saya behind them after drawing the sword, showing the determination of the swordsman as he instills his entire being into the sword. Discarding the saya expresses the swordsman’s preparedness to die in combat (sutemi, 捨身) – once the sword is drawn, it will not be returned to the sheath. In Kyoto, I saw a man perform this kind of chiburi under the title of ‘Takayama-ryu.’ However, I look upon this as an exception to the general rule.”



Tatsumi ryu does not perform chiburi, but brings the sword to chudan, expressing zanshin before noto.

Here Nakayama sensei asserts that while not all schools practice what we would today term chiburi, all seem to have an emphasis on zanshin before resheathing, which in many schools is manifested in the simulated or actual cleaning of the blade. Schools of lai that perform chiburi largely seem to be from the Hayashizaki family of ryuha, such as Tamiya-ryu, Mugai-ryu, Suio-ryu and Shinmuso Hayashizaki-ryu. In schools that are not descended from Hayashizaki we often find other forms of cleaning the blade. A form that does not seem to appear in Hayashizaki-derived schools is kaiten chiburi, where the sword is spun in the hand and the tsuka struck. This can be seen in venerable ryuha such as Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto-ryu, Kashima Shinto-ryu and some lines of Takenouchi-ryu. Other non-Hayashizaki schools, such as Seigo-ryu/Shinkage-ryu, Hoki-ryu, Sosuishi-ryu, Tatsumi-ryu and so on may completely omit chiburi, opting instead for chinugui or, to an outside observer such as myself, apparently nothing at all. Of course third-party observation can only take us so far – for example, discussions with an experienced practitioner of Hoki-ryu revealed that while the school may seem not to have any blade-cleaning portions of its kata, chinugui motions are actually concealed in the noto itself. Despite the numerous differences between ryuha, however, I have yet to encounter a school that does not display clear zanshin – whether expressed during the act of cleaning the sword or otherwise – before sheathing the weapon.

It should also be noted that in the quotation above, Nakayama Hakudo uses the word chiburi to refer to methods of cleaning that technically fall under chinugui, and even terms the act of discarding the saya in Takayama-ryu a kind of chiburi (albeit a rare and unusual one). This suggests that perhaps chiburi has in the past been used as something of a blanket term covering all kinds of sword cleaning, ritual purification or other acts expressing zanshin prior to resheathing. If so, this may have contributed to the myth of chiburi being ubiquitous.

To return to the ryuha with which I am a little more familiar, I would like to examine chiburi in Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu and Muso Shinden-ryu. In these very closely-related schools, chiburi takes two basic forms (with some variations). The first type that students will encounter is the signature chiburi of Omori-ryu. This is commonly referred to as o-chiburi (大血振), meaning ‘large chiburi,’ and is performed by bringing the sword’s tsuka to the right temple and swinging the tip in an arc as if cutting down the migi kesa line. Depending on the teacher, the exact path of the blade and the point where it finishes its swing varies, but fundamentally the motion is the same. The other form of chiburi is commonly called yoko-chiburi (横血振) or kochiburi (小血振), and is done by moving the sword to one’s right with the blade parallel to the floor, edge pointing to the right. This motion is usually done sharply, although again it does depend on teacher and lineage. Despite a sharpness of motion however, it should be apparent that yoko-chiburi is not practical for removing blood. O-chiburi, according to the quotations above, is also impractical; but it is less of a stretch to imagine it working to some extent. Yoko-chiburi on the other hand is quite clearly never going to remove blood from the blade.



Masaoka sensei

So why is this motion called chiburi? The truth is that the large swing done in Omori-ryu has been called chiburi for a considerable length of time. Consulting the Omori-ryu sections of Edo-period densho from both Shimomura-ha and Tanimura-ha Eishin-ryu proves this. However when we move on to Hasegawa Eishin-ryu (Chuden and Okui) itself, the word suddenly vanishes from the densho. In descriptions of both Omori-ryu (where it appears twice) and Hasegawa Eishin-ryu (where it appears in every waza), what is commonly referred to today as yoko-chiburi is called “opening” (開き) or “opening to the right” (右に開き). It is not once referred to as chiburi. The idea of this motion as “shaking blood off the blade” may have originated later, perhaps as a conflation of the two. Masaoka Katsutane, 18th generation Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Kongen no Maki (Menkyo Kaiden), wrote about this in his book *Muso Jikiden Eishin ryu laiheiho Chi no Maki*:

“In Omori-ryu, before noto chiburi is performed in the form of a large sweep of the sword from over the head. In Eishin-ryu however, before noto you ‘open to the right,’ as in the Omori-ryu waza Yaegaki.

“This ‘opening the right’ has today come to be referred to as a ‘small chiburi.’ One day after the war I was teaching iai to children in Kochi when one child asked, in the direct way children do: ‘sensei, would that really shake the blood off the blade?’ I thought about it a great deal, and re-read all the densho I had in my possession, and found that nowhere in any densho is this motion referred to as chiburi. Instead it is called ‘opening to the right.’ Therefore I came to the conclusion that Omori-ryu chiburi is a combination of shaking blood from the blade, expressing zanshin and preparing for noto, and from Eishin-ryu onwards the motion is for zanshin and noto preparation only.”

Further examination of the surviving pre-modern densho of Tosa Eishin ryu reveals that while there is a distinct lack of references to chiburi, there are some parts in high level documents that

describe special methods for quickly cleaning a sword when it needs to be resheathed swiftly. Significantly, these methods are variants of chinugui. This stands out in contrast against the form taken in kata, where in almost all cases the sword is immediately returned to the saya following chiburi or “opening to the right.” Chinugui, as mentioned above, is seen by many as a practical way of cleaning the sword, and it seems that practitioners of Eishin-ryu in the Edo period were under no illusions otherwise. It is quite plausible that in Eishin-ryu chinugui was advocated for blade cleaning in real situations, but was simply omitted from the majority of kata. The major cultural shift away from carrying swords in everyday life, and the subsequent change to the modern structure and teaching approaches of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu and Muso Shinden-ryu could easily have led to this knowledge becoming lost to most practitioners.

Looking at this evidence, we can conclude that what we today term chiburi was probably not originally intended to be a practical cleaning method. As the sensei I have quoted from above all seem to agree, it is far more likely that the form of chiburi that appears in most iai waza was developed in order to cultivate zanshin. This is also supported by available historical evidence. In some cases perhaps chiburi is also a kind of ceremonial purification, or perhaps it also acts as a placeholder for chinugui in the context of formal waza. This is of course not a surprising conclusion – I am sure most people realise this already. However I hope that by providing some historical context, we can come a little closer to understanding the true purpose behind the actions we are learning.

Sources: 『古流居合の本道』 岩田憲一著 スキージャーナル株式会社発行 2002年 『居合道真諦』 河野百錬著 1962年 『中山博道剣道口述集』 中山博道著 堂本昭彦編 スキージャーナル株式会社発行 2007年 『無雙直傳英信流居合兵法地之巻』 政岡壹實著 無双直伝英信流居合兵法大江派湖刀会本部発行 1974年

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