

## The History of Nihonto in Hakkoku (Brazil) - W.B. Tanner

### Introduction

When the first Japanese immigrants set foot in Brazil (*Hakkoku* as they referred to it) in 1908, they had no intention of staying, let alone making this a base of Japanese culture and community. The first 781 immigrants that disembarked from the *Kasato Maru* were fleeing an economically challenged Japan in search of jobs and a way to send money back to their families.

After the Japanese Russian war in 1905, Japan had proved her might as a newly industrialized nation by defeating one of the great European powers of the day. Her entry in to the Western industrialized world and economic zone would now be assured. However, this came at a great sacrifice to many of her people. The Meiji era (1868-1912) was a turbulent time of immense change. Many of the great fiefdoms of the Tokugawa era (1600-1868) were divided up and reassigned. Farm land was divided and reallocated and farming techniques changed as the industrial era swept through Japan. Now, many peasants, mostly farmers were left without a way of supporting themselves. Migrations to the Cities and abroad was their only alternative. The Meiji government established treaties with many South American countries encouraging and even assisting in the migration of Japanese people to those countries. Brazil received the most immigrants, over 178,000 between 1908 and 1941. (1,2)

The Brazilian migration took place in two distinct phases. The first phase between 1908 and 1925 was primarily unskilled farm labor coming into the country to support the coffee plantations and other agricultural industries. During this time, over 29,000 immigrants arrived, with over 74% settling in the state of Sao Paulo. The second wave of immigrants was much larger and more important to the story of Brazilian *nihonto*. Over 149,000 immigrants arrived between 1926 and 1941 and within this group of immigrants there were many wealthy and educated Japanese, some who came under false pretense (a), with the intent of investing in Brazil and mobilizing the large and formidable community of Japanese who had already been established. There were many notable families that came during this time including several prominent political families and relatives of the Emperor. When the Emperor visited Brazil in 1967, 1978 and 1997, he was reported to have visited relatives living in Sao Paulo. (The member of the family purportedly visited, but not verified, was Higashi kuni no miya Toshihiko (東久邇宮俊彦), who immigrated to Brazil in 1947. He then changed his name to Toshihiko Tarama (多羅間俊彦). His father, Prince Higashi kuni no miya Naruhiko ō (東久邇宮 稔彦王), was the prime minister of Japan very briefly from August 17 to October 9, 1945. World War II ended on August 15, 1945.)

Some of the wealthy immigrants purchased coffee plantations, cattle ranches, mines, and other assets, sometimes on behalf of elite families back in Japan or with the support of the Japanese Government. These immigrants also assisted in setting up Japanese schools, cultural institutions

and developing new industries, particularly in agriculture. Today the Japanese-Brazilians are some of the wealthiest and most cohesive communities in Brazil. It is the largest Japanese community outside of Japan with over 1.6 million Japanese-Brazilians currently residing in Brazil, primarily in the Sao Paulo Area. (1)(2)

The second wave of immigrants also brought the vestiges of the Samurai Culture. Some families brought their swords and ceramics; others established dojos and other Japanese cultural institutions. A replica of the Golden Temple in Kyoto (*KinKakuJi* – photos below) was built on a mountaintop 40 Km outside the city of Sao Paulo. This temple is used as a place of meditation, ceremonial worship, and a mausoleum. The remains of several prominent Japanese families are stored in assigned family drawers inside the temple.



*Replica of Golden Temple..... Buddhist grotto with Virgin Mary.....Catholic Alter in Shinto Shrine...*



*Family Mon on ash repositories in Golden Temple..... Christian Cross .....Buddhist Shrine in Temple  
Photos courtesy of W.B.Tanner*

You will also find statues of Catholic saints cloistered in a Buddhist grotto, a Catholic altar stands next to a Shinto shrine and a large crucifix is in the middle of a Shinto/Buddhist cemetery. The Japanese in Brazil have merged the Brazilian and Japanese cultures.

During World War II the Japanese suffered considerably under the Brazilian government. After Brazil aligned with the Allied forces in 1942, prejudice against Japanese-Brazilians increased dramatically and many were subject to property seizure, isolation, violence, and forced internment. (Similar with the experience of the Japanese in the USA) During this time a Japanese terrorist organization called Shindo Renmei was organized. Shindo Renmei (League of the Way of the Emperor's Subjects) started as a pro-nationalist group around 1942 and their mission was to instill patriotism into the Japanese and cleanse the “dirty hearts” of those who did not believe in or accept the

superiority of the Japanese Empire. They believed that there were two types of Japanese in Brazil, the *kachigumi* and *makegumi*. The people collectively known as the *kachigumi*, were convinced the stories of Japanese surrender and defeat were propaganda created by the Americans and vigorously defended the Japanese Empire and its superiority to other nations. Those who believed in the stories of defeat and later surrender of Japan were referred to collectively as the *makegumi*, or those with a “dirty heart”. The *makegumi* were loathed by supporters of Shindo Renmei.

In the Wikipedia description of Shindo Renmei, the following is recorded;

*“Shindo Renmei's members believed that the news regarding Japan's defeat was false, and they created a communication system to spread the "truth" that Japan had won. Underground Japanese-language newspapers and magazines pushing this view were published, and clandestine radio stations were established.*

*The group also wrote lists with the names of the makegumi who should die for betraying the emperor.*

*Shindo Renmei's killers, or tokkotai, were always young people. Before a murder, they sent letters to their intended targets, urging them to commit seppuku – ritual suicide by sword – so that they could "regain the lost honor". The letters started by saying: "You have a dirty heart, so you must have the throat washed", this essentially means to be cut by a katana.*

*The killers often surrendered to the police soon after their crimes, explaining that they had nothing against Brazil or its people, and that they were not common criminals, for they killed only as part of their duty. “It was officially reported that between 1946 and early 1947, Shindo Renmei killed 23 and wounded 147 Brazilian Japanese.” (3)*

During 1946 the influence of Shindo Renmei peaked with around 80 branches, over a hundred thousand members and its message reaching over 90 percent of Japanese-Brazilian population. From this time on as assassinations continued and its leaders arrested, Shindo Renmei's influence began to wane. However, Shindo Renmei would remain until 1955, at which point 100 demonstrators protesting in the city of Sao Paulo petitioned the Japanese consulate to be repatriated to a victorious Japan, much to the amusement of the Brazilian population. (4, 5)

The *katana* sword was often a weapon of choice for cleansing the hearts of the *makegumi* and its appearance imparts negative impressions in parts of the Japanese-Brazilian community. However, it is the stories of Japanese swords that we find most interesting. Unfortunately, it is difficult to break into the Japanese-Brazilian community and have them share their treasures and secrets. Among the older generation there are still negative feelings about World War II, Shindo Remei and the violence associated with the Japanese sword. I know that many swords of varying quality exist in Brazil. I have seen several and examined what appears to be a signed *Ko-Aoe tachi* from Tsunatsugu. Also, there were three traditionally trained swordsmiths from Japan known in the Sao Paulo area, who produced many swords. I will focus our story on these three smiths.

## The Three Traditionally Trained Smiths

There were three traditionally trained swordsmiths from Japan that I was able to identify in Brazil. All of them came to Brazil in the second wave of immigration and are now deceased. Although there are no known traditionally trained smiths left in Brazil, the three I am writing about left many artifacts and stories to share.

The first swordsmith was a man by the name of Kikuchi Tatsukuni. F.A.B. Coutinho, a well-known sword collector in Brazil, first encountered this name when he was presented with a sword by an older Japanese-Brazilian gentleman. The sword was signed “Kikuchi Enju Tatsukuni”. It was of an unusual shape and looked to be *Keicho Shinto* with a well carved signature. However, the swordsmiths name could not be found in the standard *Meikan* of swordsmith names. The owner of the sword explained that the sword was made in 1946 by a swordsmith in Brazil when he was 70 years old. He also manufactured Iron *Tsuba*, one of which was shown to F.A.B. Coutinho.

Kikuchi Tatsukuni was born around 1876 into a family of traditional swordsmiths from the Enju area. He is believed to have immigrated to Brazil in 1934 and adopted the family name of Azuma. He lived in the city of Sao Paulo area of Pereira Barreto and was officially listed as a manufacturer of agricultural tools. (6) In researching his background, I discovered a family of *Yari* makers in Enju who were descendents of the Nobukuni Swordsmiths and known as the Kikuchi School. Kikuchi Tatsukuni came from that lineage and carried the traditions with him to Brazil. Tatsukuni’s family in Enju would have struggled to make money in the Meiji era, due to the *haittoei* edict of 1876 banning the wearing of swords and the end of Samurai dominance. Most likely they adapted their skills to the making of agricultural tools, which is where Tatsukuni learned his trade.

Kikuchi Tatsukuni was a *kachigumi*. He was part of the group of Japanese-Brazilians that did not believe Japan was defeated in World War II and undoubtedly supplied swords to its followers. Below is an image of a *Tsuba* he manufactured in 1946 with a poem carved on it. The poem is a patriotic death poem by the Japanese scholar Norinaga Motoori. It is from this poem that the four *Kamakazi* squadrons derived their Unit names; *Shikishama*, *Yamato*, *Asahi* and *Yamazakura*.

The direct translation reads:

“If someone asks about the Yamato Spirit of *Shikishima* (another name for Japan) it is the flowers of *yamazakura* (mountain cherry blossoms) that are fragrant in the *Asashi*” (rising sun).

敷島の 大和心を 人間はば 朝日に匂ふ山桜花

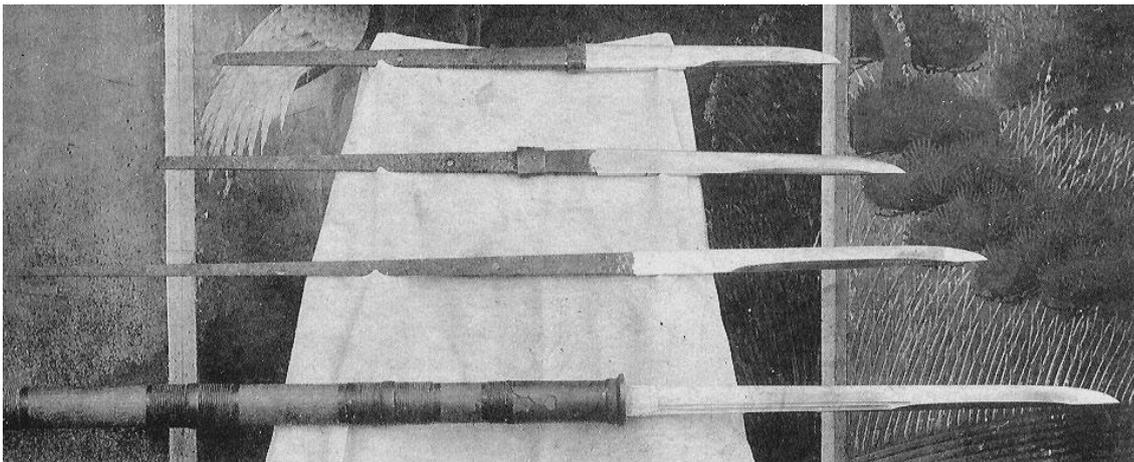
It could also be translated as:

“Asked about the soul of Japan, I would say that it is like wild cherry blossoms glowing in the morning sun.”  
(7)



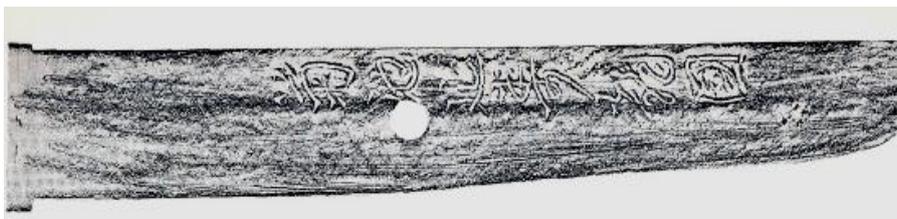
Poem on above Tsuba reads; “shikishima no yamato gokoro o hito towaba asahi ni niou yamazakura bana”

Kikuchi Tatsukuni’s swords were made in the style reflective of a Kikuchi Yari. This is an obscure, but known type of Yari that came from the Enju area and were the specialty of the Kikuchi Family. These Yari had a peculiar shape that looked part *naginata*, part *tanto* and part *yari*. Below are some examples of typical Kikuchi Yari.



Pictures of Kikuchi Family produced swords – the Kikuchi Yari (8)

In addition to the Kikuchi Yari, he also produced *katana* on request. Below is a partial *oshigata* of a katana that was commissioned by the Japanese-Brazilian community for theatrical use in 1946. The signature reads kikuchi enju tatsukuni.



Oshigata of Kikuchi Tatsukuni sword – courtesy of F.A.B. Coutinho

Unfortunately, we do not have access to existing Kikuchi Tatsukuni swords; although within the Japanese-Brazilian community I am confident many exist.

The second swordsmith is Oura Yoshisuke who signed his swords with the name Sukemune. Oura Yoshisuke was born in 1905 in the Japanese province of Miyagi. He came from a family of traditional swordsmiths spanning over 500 years until the *haittorei* edict of 1876 banned the wearing of swords. After that time his family business shifted to the making of agricultural tools. Oura Yoshisuke was also trained in traditional Japanese medicine, which he practiced among the Japanese-Brazilian community, in addition to being a swordsmith. He received his swordsmith training from the Horii family of *gendai* swordsmiths in the Muroran area of Hokkaido. During his time in Hokkaido he was mauled by a bear and lost one eye and much of the movement in one of his arms. His loss of one eye led to his nickname of “one eyed dragon”. It is interesting to note that “one eyed dragon” was the nickname of the Daimyo Masamune Date, who had a famous retainer named Sukemune. Most likely this is where Oura Yoshisuke derived his swordsmith name of “one eyed dragon sukemune”.

Oura-san emigrated from the Hokkaido region of Japan sometime before 1936 to the Suzano Township in the greater city of Sao Paulo area, where he worked at a Coffee plantation as a blacksmith making tools. (9) In 1938 he began producing swords and accepting orders from the Japanese-Brazilian community, particularly the practitioners of *laido* and *kendo*. He himself was an avid practitioner of *kendo* and the first person in Brazil to receive the *kendo* title of 8<sup>th</sup> *dan hanshi*. He produced swords in the traditional Japanese manner using a combination of steels folded together as well as using a single piece (*maru-gitae*). He is known to have used varieties of Swedish and Brazilian steel in his sword production. His swords are of good quality showing distinct *hada* and *hamon* and reflect the style of the Horii family who trained him. He produced mostly *wakizashi* and *katana*. *Tanto* were disliked by the Brazilian police and restricted by the Brazilian government, so very few were made. He may have also sold swords to Japan.

Oura Yoshisuke was also a traditionally trained sword polisher and *saya* maker. His sword production ceased during World War II, since the Brazilian government put harsh restrictions on the Japanese-Brazilian community, but slowly restarted after the war and he produced swords until he stopped accepting commissions in 1972. Oura Yoshisuke died in Sao Paulo in 2000 at the age of 95.



Foto de 11/02/1946, o sensei Oura é visto ao centro com seu grupo de praticantes de kendô na cidade de Suzano.

*Oura Yoshisuke and his kendo dojo which he founded in 1946 – Kendo Suzano Website (b)*



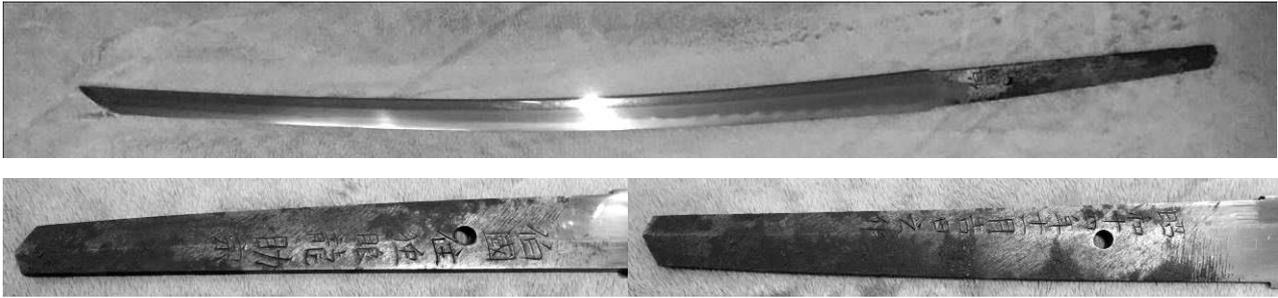
*Oura Yoshisuke at work in his forge and his polishing stones. - (10)*



*Examples of Oura Yoshisuke wakizashi, katana and rare tanto signed sukemune– (10)*



*Oura Yoshisuke katana signed nanbei hakkoku ju dokugan ryo sukemune (south american brazil one eye dragon sukemune) – (10)*



*Oura Yoshisuke katana signed hakkoku ju dokugan sukemune (brazil one eye dragon sukemune) dated a lucky day in November Showa 14 (1939) – (11)*

The third swordsmith is Oda Kunio who signed his swords with the name of geshoan kunihiro. Oda Kunio was born in 1912 to a prominent Japanese family. He claimed that his family was in the swordsmith business for more than 4 generations and he learned to make swords from his grandfather in 1930 at the age of 18. (12) Oda Kunio came to Brazil in 1957 as an agricultural worker in the state of Sao Paulo. He later moved to the city of Sao Paulo and settled in the predominately Japanese neighborhood of Liberdade. He began making swords for the Japanese-Brazilian community in 1968 and was assisted by his son. During that time, he started signing his blades geshoan kunihiro. *Ge-sho-an* literally means “the workshop of the peaceful shining moon” and kunihiro was in honor of several famous swordsmiths by that name. Although I don’t know why he gave himself this name, Oda-san loved Brazil and would often sign his blades with this name and the phrase “a place in the sun”.

Oda Kunio’s shop fabricated *katana*, *wakizashi* and *yari*. The construction of his swords utilized 1020 or 1045 steel bar forged as a single piece (*maru-gitae*) and quenched in the traditional manner with clay-ash coating and a water bath. He typically used a *gunome* style of *hamon*, but also produced *notare* and *suguha*. The *sugata* of his blades resembled *sue-bizen*, with a *chukissaki*, a *ha-agari kurijiri nakago* butt-end and *sujikai* file marks (*yasurime*).

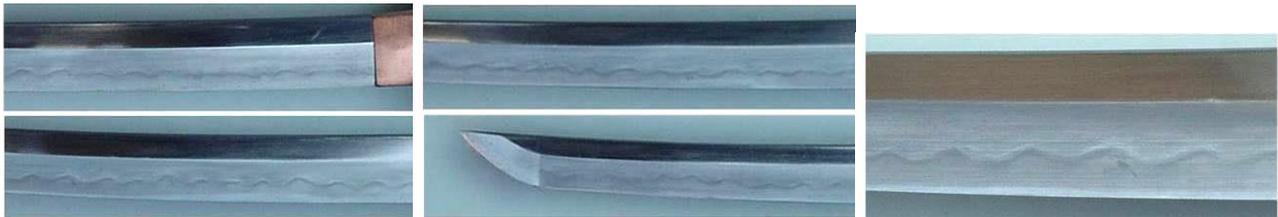
In his 24 years of sword making activity it is believed he produced around 350 swords. (12) Oda Kunio died in 1992 at the age of 80.



*Oda Kunio portrait with his family presenting a katana to the Sao Paulo state governor Laudo Natal in 1968 – (10)*



*Oda Kunio Katana and nakago signed geshoan kunihiro shaku. He produced the koshirae and fittings as well – (10)*



*Composite of an Oda Kunihiro Katana – (10)*

There was a fourth swordsmith in the Sao Paulo area that deserves mentioning. Although he was not trained in the traditional Japanese manner, he was a disciple of both Oda Kunihiro and Oura Yoshisuke. Tomizo Ishida like many other Japanese immigrants in the state of Sao Paulo immigrated to Brazil with his parents in 1933 to work in the agricultural industry. In 1949 at the age of 25 he moved to an area near the city of Sao Paulo and opened his business as a watchmaker and goldsmith. Several years later in 1962 he developed an interest in *nihonto* and began producing sword fittings and experimenting with the forging of swords. He became a disciple of both Oda Kunihiro and Oura Yoshisuke and learned much of his trade from them. Tomizo Ishida produced swords in the same style as Oda Kunio using 1045 bar steel forged as a single piece (*maru-gitae*). He was well respected by the Japanese-Brazilian community for his work, particularly sword fittings. Tomizo Ishida was a prolific swordsmith who is believed to have produced over 300 swords. He also produced many custom blades and fittings on commission. In 1988 he created one of his crowning achievements, a 78cm *nagasa katana* masterpiece honoring the 80 years of the Japanese in Brazil. It is on display in the Bunkyo Japanese Cultural Association Center in Liberdade Sao Paulo. He officially stopped production of swords in 1992, but is greatly revered by the Japanese-Brazilian community and was given the designation by the Japanese Government as a “*National Treasure outside Japan*”. (13)



Tomizo Ishida with his masterpiece and in his forge circa 1988 – from Bunkyo Japanese Cultural Center Sao Paulo

Another *Nihonto* Story relates to the brother of Kotoken Kajihara, a well know Japanese polisher and expert on Japanese swords. Even though his brother, the eldest son of Kajihara senior, wanted to carry on the family tradition of sword polishing his father decided that he should serve in the Japanese military and turned the business over to his younger son. The eldest son became a bomber pilot for the Japanese air force during World War II. After the war, he immigrated to Brazil where he set up a successful business making instruments of high carbon steel. Even though he was trained as a polisher by his father, he only polished blades for himself.

Currently I know of no living traditionally trained swordsmiths in Brazil. The same is true for *sayashi*, *togishi* and other *nihonto* supporting craft artisans. The sword smithy legacy of the above individuals was not passed on to their children nor was the love of collecting *nihonto*. There are many *nihonto* in Brazil, but I fear most are tucked away quietly rusting into oblivion or used exclusively for *laido*. Although *Kendo* and *laido* are very popular and even experiencing resurgence among the youth, the practitioners I know of are neither concerned nor interested in the preservation of traditional *nihonto* production nor in the admiration of *nihonto* artistically. Hopefully by capturing stories of traditional *nihonto* in Brazil we can spark the interest of a new generation of Japanese-Brazilians who will revive and keep the art of *nihonto* alive for another generation.

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*(a)During this time, Brazil was primarily accepting unskilled immigrants to work in areas of agriculture.*

*(b)The translation of the caption of the photo in Portuguese reads: Photograph made on 11/02/1946 [February 11]: Sensei Oura is at the center of his group of kendo practitioners in the city of Suzano.*