

Real-Life *Kantei* of swords #12: A very interesting Shinshinto tanto with an unusual *tsukuri komi*

F. A. B. Coutinho and W. B. Tanner

Introduction

In previous articles on this series (**Coutinho (2010)** and **Tanner (2017)**) we commented how difficult it is to *kantei* swords with a *tsukuri komi* or shape that is unusual. As explained before, the purpose of the *kantei* is:

- 1) Identify when the sword was made. If a date or era can be identified then *kantei* is almost done, particularly if a sword is very old. In the majority of those cases this is the most you can accomplish.
- 2) Identify to what school the maker belonged. When the *shinsa* organizations in Japan can not do this they will add to the certificate the term *kuni fumei* (province unknown).
- 3) Identify the sword smith who made the sword. If the sword is signed this is possible. If it is not then one can only make an attribution.

To carry out the first step one uses the process referred to as SPET (Shape, Pattern, Edge and Tang). However if the *tsukuri komi* is unusual we may have trouble with the first step. Fortunately, this sword is signed, which gives us a starting place to begin our analysis. However, signed swords may be a blessing or a problem, since we don't know if the signature genuine or false? Even if genuine, the shape may not be consistent with the works of the smith, which creates suspicion on the authenticity of the sword.

The *tsukuri komi* or shape

The sword to be examined is a short and unusually thick *hira zukuri tanto*. (See Figure 1)

The Dimensions of the sword are:

Nagasa – 18.5 cm

Kasane – 0.9 cm

Motohada – 1.7 cm

Nakago length – 8 cm with *kesho* filemarks and a *kengyo* end.



Figure 1 - Picture of the Sword

Workmanship

The *omote* and *ura* are a *hira zukuri* shape with *yoroidoshi* style thickness and dimensions. The *jigane* is well forged *ko-itame*. The *hamon* is *suguha* with considerable visible activity and some *muneyaki*. There can be seen *nie*, *ashi*, *kinsuji* and *hakikake*. The *habuchi* is bright and visible. The *boshi* is *hakikake* with a pointed *kaeri* and long turn back.

The overall impression of the sword is one of very good workmanship. The sword's *jigane* appears soft for a Shinto or Shinshinto blade and the *hada* and *hamon* are visibly interesting.

A signature is cut on the *mune* of the *nakago* and reads:

Koushu Maihara Ju Fujiwara Nagamasa Saku Kore (See Figure 2)

Nagamasa is listed in the Hawley directory of Swordsmiths (Hawley - 1998, page 479) as being a Shinshinto smith from Omi and working around 1870. In the Nihonto Meikan (Homma and Ishii - 1976, page 669) he is listed as having worked at the end of the Edo period into the early Meiji period and is said to have died in Meiji 3. However, in the Tosho Zenshu (Shimizu - 1998, page 636) he is listed as a *gendai* smith without a date.



Figure 2 the signature on the mune, which is not usual

We could not find an *oshigata* of this smith; however, Tokogawa Arts (Sanmei Co.) recently listed a sword by this smith which closely resembles the sword we are reviewing. The Sanmei sword is described as "a superb Tanto work by Nagamasa in Maibara town, Koushu province. The size is neat but has an extreme thick Kasane as much as 10.6mm on base. It is quite rare that the back ridge shaved off to be flat and grained straight Masame lines. Also Muneyaki tempered on back ridge is straight well organized. From the sword smith directly [Nihonto meikan], NAGAMASA was active end of Edo/early Meiji period about 150 years ago in Maibaya-city, Shiga prefecture. During Shinto (Edo) period, besides of Sasaki-Ippo and his lineages, there were no other particular sword makers. Would guess that NAGAMASA belonged to the smith Okachiyama NAGASADA School and closely worked with NAGATOSHI in the same Oumi province." (www.sanmei.com/contents/en-us/p1346.html)

It is clear from this description that Nagamasa is not a well-known smith, but produced swords of good quality.

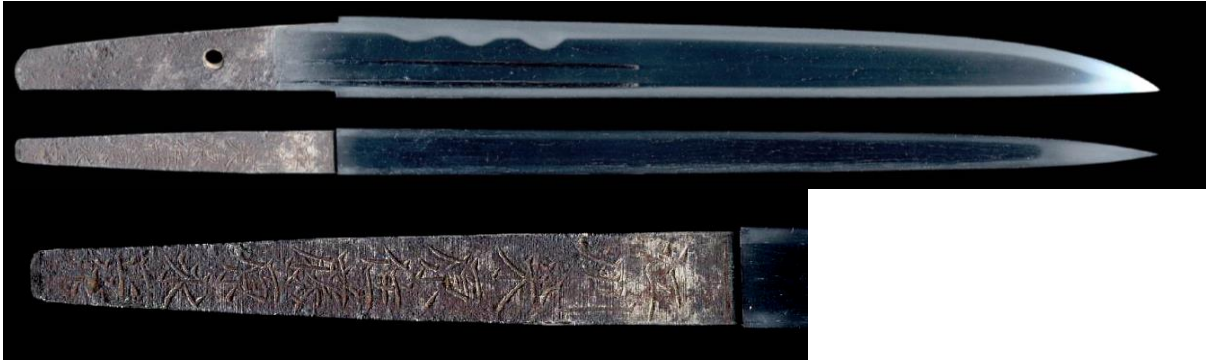


Figure 3- Nagamasa Blade on Tokugawa Arts Website - Photos from Sanmei.com with permission

The signature, shape and workmanship of the two swords are almost identical. It is therefore possible to conclude (as mentioned above) that the sword was made by a relatively unknown sword smith, working in the turbulent period just before and after the Meiji Restoration.

The intriguing thing is the shape of these *tanto*. Was *yoroidoshi* a typical shape for this period? The fact that we found two almost identical examples of the sword seems to point out that there was a market for *yoroidoshi* at this time. Therefore we have to investigate three questions:

- 1) When was *yoroidoshi* in general use?
- 2) Was this shape of the *yoroidoshi* (with very thick *kasane*) common for this period?
- 3) Why were they were shaped like this?

The *yoroidoshi*, according to most authorities was used mainly in the *Muromachi* era (*Sengoku jidai*) due to its specific function of penetrating armor. Since armor was seldom used in the Edo *jidai* one is entitled to be curious about this piece. In fact according to Dr Ken Goldstein in an article for Scribd (**Goldstein nd**) he writes:

"After 1603, the beginning of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Samurai no longer wore full armor on a daily basis. The most common knives were the *tanto* (with full guard), *hamidashi* (half guard), and *aikuchi* (no guard), any of which might be used to supplement the *katana* and *wakizashi*. By the late Tokugawa period when *yoro*i was seldom worn, many schools of *tanto-jitsu* began to emphasize the blade-forward, cut-and-disable style of knife fighting over the older method of finishing with an ice-pick stab through armor"

However, we found on the internet several examples of this kind of *yoroidoshi* made at the end of the Tokugawa period. In a post by SAI-JO-SAKU on the Nihonto Message Board (NMB)(<http://www.militaria.co.za/nmb/topic/5205-yoroi-doshi-tanto/>) he discusses a *yoroidoshi* signed Yoshiteru and dated 1865. It has a very thick *kasane* of 12.7mm (see figure 5 below) In the course of discussion many other Shinshinto *yoroidoshi* are displayed and discussed and it is clear that these types of Shinshinto *tanto* are not unusual.



Figure 4 - Yoroidoshi signed Yoshiteru and dated 1865 (NMB Website discussion)

Many other examples can be found on the various Internets web stores. On such example is on Ted Tenold's Legacy Arts website. (http://www.legacyswords.com/fs_ant_daito47.htm) This example is a Shinshinto *yoroidoshi* signed So Chu Ju Yasuchika measuring;

Nagasa: 25.8 cm

Motohaba: 2.5 cm

Kasane: 8.8 mm

In the Nihonto Message Board (NMB) discussion on Shinshinto *yoroidoshi* found at (<http://www.militaria.co.za/nmb/topic/5205-yoroi-doshi-tanto/>) a theory is proposed that they were used at the end of the Tokugawa period to perforate chainmail that may have been worn by high ranking Samurai underneath their clothing. However, since this topic was not discussed or recorded by historians or authorities in Japan we are not sure of the validity of this theory. There is no doubt that many *yoroidoshi* were produced in the late *Shinshinto* era. They certainly could be used to perforate some kind of protective garment. However, only by examining the literature of that time period can we validate this use of *yoroidoshi*. What is recorded and well known is that many *Shinshinto* smiths made copies of older style swords and the revival of different *tsukuri komi* swords was typical for that era.

Examining the *koshirae*

The subject sword came in a *koshirae* of dubious origin. (See figure 5 below) It is an *aikuchi* style with Tokugawa family *Mon* painted on it.



Figure 5 – *Koshirae* for subject sword

The *koshirae* is of poor quality, but may be of Japanese origin. It is entirely made out of painted wood with no metal fittings. However, the *menuki* are of solid silver and represent some type of fowl. The *menuki* may be antique, but the rest of the *koshirae* is modern painted wood. The Tokugawa *Mon* are carved into the *saya* then painted gold, as are the *fuchi-kashira* and other ornamentations. The paint is not typical Japanese lacquer (*maki*), but seems to be of a more recent vintage and thinly applied. Based on the light color of unpainted interior wood, it is possible the *koshirae* was made sometime in the last 75 years. This *tanto* and *koshirae* were acquired from a Japanese family in Brazil who immigrated to Brazil prior to World War II. It would not be surprising if the ensemble was purchased by the family as a memory of Japan and was produced as part of the tourist merchandise common during that era.

Conclusion

The subject sword is a diminutive *yoroidoshi*, made in the early Meiji era, which could easily be carried by women in their *kimono*. As described in the book *Classic Weaponry of Japan*, (Mol (2003) pages 24-27) "wives and daughters of warriors studied the use of daggers for self-defense". Our subject *yoroidoshi* appears to be a type of dagger is known as *kaiken* (or small *aikuchi*) and this name refers to a fold in the kimono (*futukoro*) used as a pocket but that could hide a a weapon. When a young woman of the warrior class married and entered into their husband's family they generally brought with them with them a small *kaiken* known as *omamorito* (Protection knife). Why carry a *yoroidoshi*? We ask this because this *Yoroidoshi*, although usable for defense, is a powerful attack weapon. Also according to *Classic Weaponry of Japan* (Mol (2003)) the schools of the period focused on defensive techniques for daggers not attack techniques.

Since the current *koshirae* is not original to the sword and it is unknown what the original one looked like, it is difficult to ascertain what the purpose of this sword was. However, as mentioned above, it is of the size of sword carried by women and often presented to them at the time of marriage.

We were able to find many examples of *shinshinto yoroidoshi* but we are not sure why they were produced and who bought them. Theories about them are numerous. They could have been used for piercing chainmail, carried by women in their *kimono*, or simply a *Shinshinto* revival of an older style sword. This is another Japanese sword mystery we may never solve.

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