

Real Life *Kantei* swords 14: A much loved sword

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Introduction

In the *Token to Rekishi* number 562 the late Yoshikawa Kentaro *sensei* (**Yoshikawa-1988**) describes a sword by Yasuyoshi. He finishes the description and the lecture by writing, "Incidentally, this work has a splendid gold, double *habaki* with an open *kiri mon* (paulownia crest) that has a two character signature on the *mune* reading Mitsutake (Goto Etsujo). It is indicative of the esteem in which this blade was held long ago". From the photograph of the *oshigata* of the sword, the sword appears very health in spite of its age. One could therefore conclude that the owner of this sword cherished it and maintained it in an excellent state of preservation.

In a previous article (**Bottomley-2015**), we described another cherished sword in the following way: "Some of us think that collectors can be a little too pre-occupied and dismissive of swords with flaws. For example, we know of a *tanto* mounted in an ebony hilt elaborately carved all over with chrysanthemums and a brocade covered scabbard that contains a very early blade signed Yoshimitsu. The blade had been polished so many times that there is no *hamon* remaining, yet whoever owned it thought it sufficiently precious to mount it in an expensive *koshirae*." Therefore some swords are loved and cherished despite having flaws due to age and use.

Some time ago, we had the opportunity of seeing a *wakizashi* which was formally owned by a famous swordsmith in Brazil and kindly presented to us by its present owner for examination. This *wakizashi* was kept in a very well made *shirasaya*, with an ivory *mekugi* and ivory lined *mekugi-ana*. The sword also had a beautiful signed *shakudo habaki*. It is clear the owner put great effort and expense into dressing the sword, yet upon examination of the blade itself, one could question why?

This article is an attempt to *kantei* this *wakizashi* which was apparently loved and cherished by its former owner. However, as we begin examining and describing this sword, we find it is not that easy and is typical of many real life *kantei* situations.

Examining the Sword

We will describe the sword using the traditional approach of SPET (Shape (*sugata*), Pattern (*hada*), Edge (*hamon* and *yakiba*) and Tang (*nakago*)).

1.) Study of the shape

In *Figure 1* we compare the shape of our subject sword (on top) to that of another *hira zukari wakizashi*. The *wakizashi* below is a NBTHK papered Hirotsugu Muromachi era sword and the dimensions of these two similar swords are in the table below.

	<i>Nagasa</i>	<i>Sori</i>	<i>Motohaba</i>	<i>Moto-Kasane</i>	<i>Nakago Nagasa</i>
Subject Sword	36mm	25mm	32mm	5.5mm	138mm
Hirotsugu	36mm	6mm	30mm	4.5mm	98mm

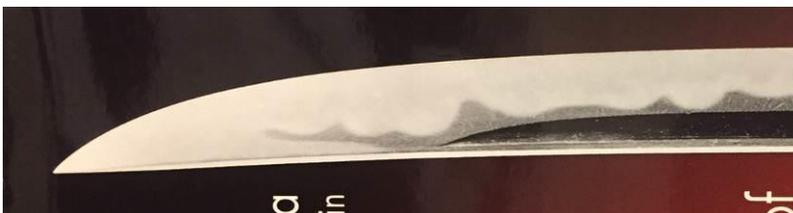


Figure 1 - Sugata of the subject sword compared with a muromachi piece.

From this figure we can see that our subject sword has a very pronounced and unusual curvature. This suggests that our subject sword is *saiha* (re-quenched) blade. Also, its size is similar to that of a *sunnobi tanto* or *ko-wakizashi*, which tends not to have such a great curvature; therefore we should be careful when trying to use its shape to determine the production time of this piece.

A good description of this type of *tanto* or *ko-wakizashi* is given in a book by Y. Hiroi and K.lida (1983 - page 101 of the translation) that we quote in part here. Describing a *tanto* made by Hasebe Kuninobu the authors say "*The sun-nobi [31cm] which is hira-zukuri and chu sori (chûkan -sori), is a sugata that began in the Nambokucho period. Tanto with this same form can be seen in the Momoyama and late Edo period. But these are ones that take the sugata of the Nambokucho period as a pattern.....The kasane being thin.....which is something not seen in the Momoyama and late Edo period.*"

We should explain here that *chukan sori* means curvature throughout the blade. (This term was coined by Hon'ami Kozan. (See Nakahara-2010, page 61). Another very striking characteristic of this blade is a *fukura* that is not full (*fukura-kaku*). This means that the blade is not rounded near the tip but pointed. A good picture of such a blade can be found on the cover of the book by Nakahara Nobuo (Nakahara (2010)).



Book cover from Nakahara's "Facts and Fundamentals of Japanese Swords"

To summarize, this size and style of *wakizashi* or *sunnobi tanto* were produced in great numbers during the Nambokucho era. They are in fact small *wakizashi*. There were also *sunnobi tanto* produced in the Muromachi period, in the Edo period (very few) and in the Shinshinto period, but with the exception of

Soshu school blades, they have a thicker *kasane* than *Nambokucho* era blades. If we examine the book by Suzuki (Suzuki-1969), we find that among the 12 illustrated *tanto* of the *Nambokucho* period four are over 30cm in *nagasa* and many others are very close to 30cm. By contrast, the *tanto* of the *Muromachi* period have only one, a *Soshu Hiromitsu* (Suzuki-1969, page 163) among the twenty six illustrated that is over 30cm in *nagasa*. In the *Momoyama* period there are only four among the twenty five illustrated *tanto* with *nagasa* over 30cm and all have relatively thick *kasane*. In the *Edo* period, the book lists eight pieces and two are over 30cm. However, they are also very thick. The next period in the book is the end of the *Edo* period (*Bakumatsu*). There are eight pieces illustrated and only one has a *nagasa* greater than 30cm. All the *tanto* with more than 30cm, except those in the *Nambokucho* period and one *Soshu School* example (*Hiromitsu*) have a thicker *kasane* than our subject sword.

In order to really see what this sword should look like, we tried to figure out the shape and how long it would be before being curved by the *saiha* process. This is show in Figure 2.



Figure 2 – An attempt at virtually straightening the subject sword (a virtual *sorinaoshi*)

After considering thickness, length and the reshaping caused by *saiha*, we concluded that the sword is either *Nambokucho* or *Muromachi* from the *Soshu School*.

2.) Study of the Pattern (*hada* of the sword)

The *hada* of the subject sword is entirely *masame* with profuse *chikei*. There appear some wavy patterns with in the *hada*; however everything is linear with no vertical activity. A photo of the *hada* is shown in Figures 3 and this type of beautiful *masame* can be seen throughout the blade. Because of the poor polish the *masame* is sometimes difficult to see, but the *chikei* is very pronounced.



Figure 3 - These figures show the *hada* of the sword.

Considering the construction of the blade is *masame* we need to determine who or what school produced *masame* in the *Nambokucho* period. According to Darcy Broadbank (Darcy Broadbank n/d), "*Though masame is strongly identified with Yamato, it is usually seen in its pure form in the Hosho school. Senjuin, Taima, Shikakke, etc, all tend to have a mix of itame or mokume*". Our sword is pure *masame* and therefore to be coherent with the study of the shape it should be Hosho. If we elaborate a bit more about this and consider that the sword is of *Nambokucho* manufacture with a *hada* entirely in *masame*, then it is natural to assume it is a Yamato Hosho School piece. However, as we will discuss latter, there are significant discrepancies to this logic in respect to the *hamon* of this sword.

3.) Study of the Edge (*hamon* and *yakiba*).

The subject sword has multiple visible layers of *hamon* present, which is most likely due to the re-quenching process. It is difficult to tell which would be the original *hamon*, since none of the patterns are distinct, but appear cloudy and intertwined. There are three basic patterns of *hamon* that appear. The most recognizable pattern is a *chu-suguha* composed of *nioi*, the next recognizable pattern is of fine *gunome choji* in *nioi*, in many cases reaching more than half way to the *mune*. The last pattern is a little more difficult to describe. It appears as if the blade is tempered in *hitatsura*, but not completely. There are random and irregular patches of tempering throughout the blade, particularly as you get closer to the *boshi*. These can be easily seen in *Figure 3*. It is difficult to see the *habuchi* of the various *hamon* structures, but enough is present to assume that at one point the blade had a well-defined *choji* structure. You can also see that at one point the *hamon* was a straight *chu-suguha* done in misty *nioi* with a muted *habuchi*. The *boshi* appears to have both *yakitsume* with *hakikake* reminiscent of the Yamato schools, and *suguha* in *o-maru* with a small turnback. As mentioned before it is difficult to see exactly what is old versus new *hamon*, but all the *hamon* patterns (in its present state) clearly lack definition, clarity and vibrancy.

Assuming this blade was re-quenched, it appears to not have been executed very well. The original *hamon* should have been completely erased. Also, in our opinion, as explained by Nakahara (Nakahara-2010) the *hamon* should agree with the *hada*. We think, but have no proof, that *masame hada* does not agree with *choji gunome* or *hitatsura*, the kind of *hamon* that appears on this blade. In the book by Kosu (Kôzu-1992, page 225 and 226) there are two *oshigata* by the famous Shinto master Kunikane, who claimed that he was the last descendent of Yamato Hosho Sadamune and produced very good *masame*. The sword on page 225 is pure *masame* and has a *suguha hamon* and *yakitsume boshi*. The sword on page 224 has *hamon* that is *gunome* but the *hada* is *itame* mixed with *masame*. Swords by the *nidai* and *sandai*, present in the same reference on pages 226 and 227 are *masame* with the *hamon* in *suguha*. In the book by Fukunaga (Fukunaga-1985, page 241 and 242) we have examples of swords by Sendai Kunikane and Hosho School. They are similar with *masame* and *suguha hamon*. It is our conjecture that *masame hada* and *suguha hamon* are best paired together. It seems that the attempt to successfully re-quench a *masame* blade with other overtly active *hamon* styles will be difficult at best and most likely fail.

4.) Study of the Tang (*nakago*)

In the book by Nakahara (2010) it is stated that a *saiha nakago* deteriorates a lot during the process of re-quenching. The *nakago* of our subject sword looks like the ones that Nakahara uses to exemplify his point. The iron of the *nakago* is rough and with a flaking surface. The patina appears artificial and dry and has the appearance of excessive rust damage. In fact it is possible to see that the sword originally had a three kanji signature above the *nakago ana* that has deteriorated and now is impossible to decipher. (*Figure 4*)

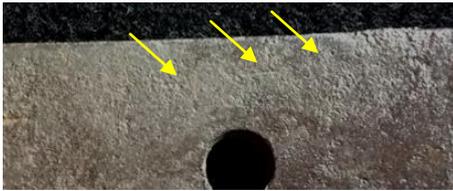


Figure 4 – deteriorated signature

If this is what happens during re-quenching then what happens to the *nakago* when the sword is originally quenched? This question is important because a blade can be re-quenched three to five times if the resulting *hamon* is not considered good (Kapp-1987, page 93). The answer is very simple. The *nakago* is re-finished after the final quenching. Nakahara informs us that through re-quenching the original *nakago* is again modified and apparently, rarely re-finished. We don't know why this is, but assume that through reshaping, it would become too thin.



Figure 5 - The *nakago* of the subject sword – under artificial light (top) and sunlight (bottom).

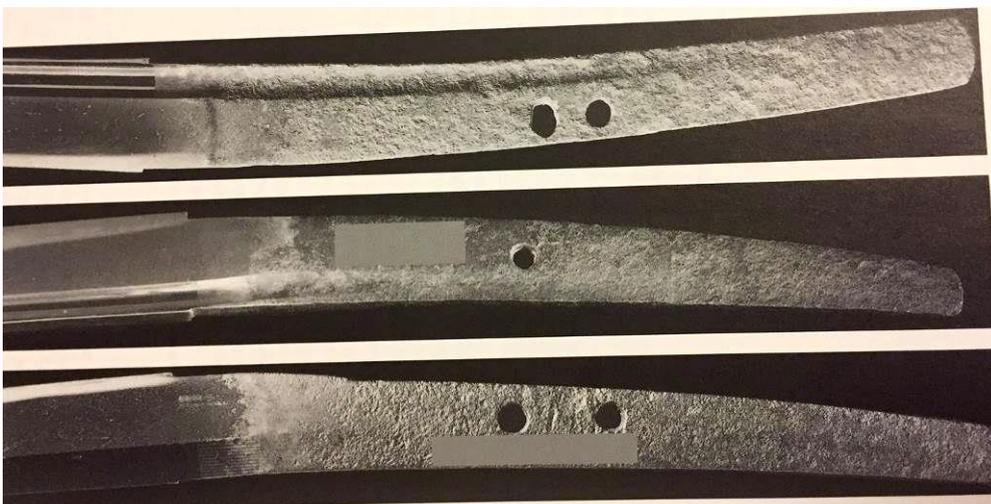


Figure 6 - The state of a *nakago*, after *saiha* (re-quenching) as shown on page 86 of Nakahara (2010)

The Habaki

We believe the signature shown in *Figure 9* reads Goto Toshinori. Most likely this is the Meiji Waki Goto artist Morimiya Toshinori (1830-1897). Whether this is the artist or not, the *habaki* is an excellent piece. The *habaki* is made of solid *shakudo*. This is rarely used for *habaki* design (Kapp-1987, page 132) therefore this is a special order *habaki*. It has a gold Japanese dragon inlay design on the *omote*, a gold and copper fortuitous cloud inlay design on the *ura*, and it is signed on the *mune*. It is most likely a special order Bakumatsu production piece made specifically for this sword.

The *habaki* is presented in the figures 7, 8 and 9.



Figures 7-9 – Special order Habaki

Conclusion

Our study of this sword leads us to speculate that the subject sword is probably of Nambokucho era origin. It appears to be *saiha* (re-quenched) with multiple *hamon* styles being attempted. Today most Westerners and Japanese think that re-quinching is a negative that ruins the sword. However a slightly different opinion is expressed by Nakahara and he reminds us: "Nowadays everybody dislikes *saiha* blades, but it should be taken in account that they were used as practical tools in the past, and when a blade lost its cutting ability due to fire, this was the usual way to restore it. However, as they are presently for appreciation only, I think that *saiha* blades as historical data should be avoided." We do not know the full history of this blade, or when the re-quinching was performed, however, the owner found reason to keep it and we assume appreciated it very much.

We conclude that the sword is old and probably having belonged to a family, for many generations. It may have even been a family heirloom that was loved by its previous owner. However, the question still exists why was the blade re-quenched? Since the previous owner of this blade was a well know swordsmith, did he perhaps re-quentch the blade? Was this some sort of experiment he was attempting, or did he inherit the blade in its current condition? We will never know the answer, but the sword in spite of its exaggerated *sori* and multiple *hamon* patterns is agreeable to look at. Its present state of polish is not good, but we think the blade could be repaired, have its shape restored and re-polished. However, the cost would be prohibitive and the original owner has long since passed away.

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