

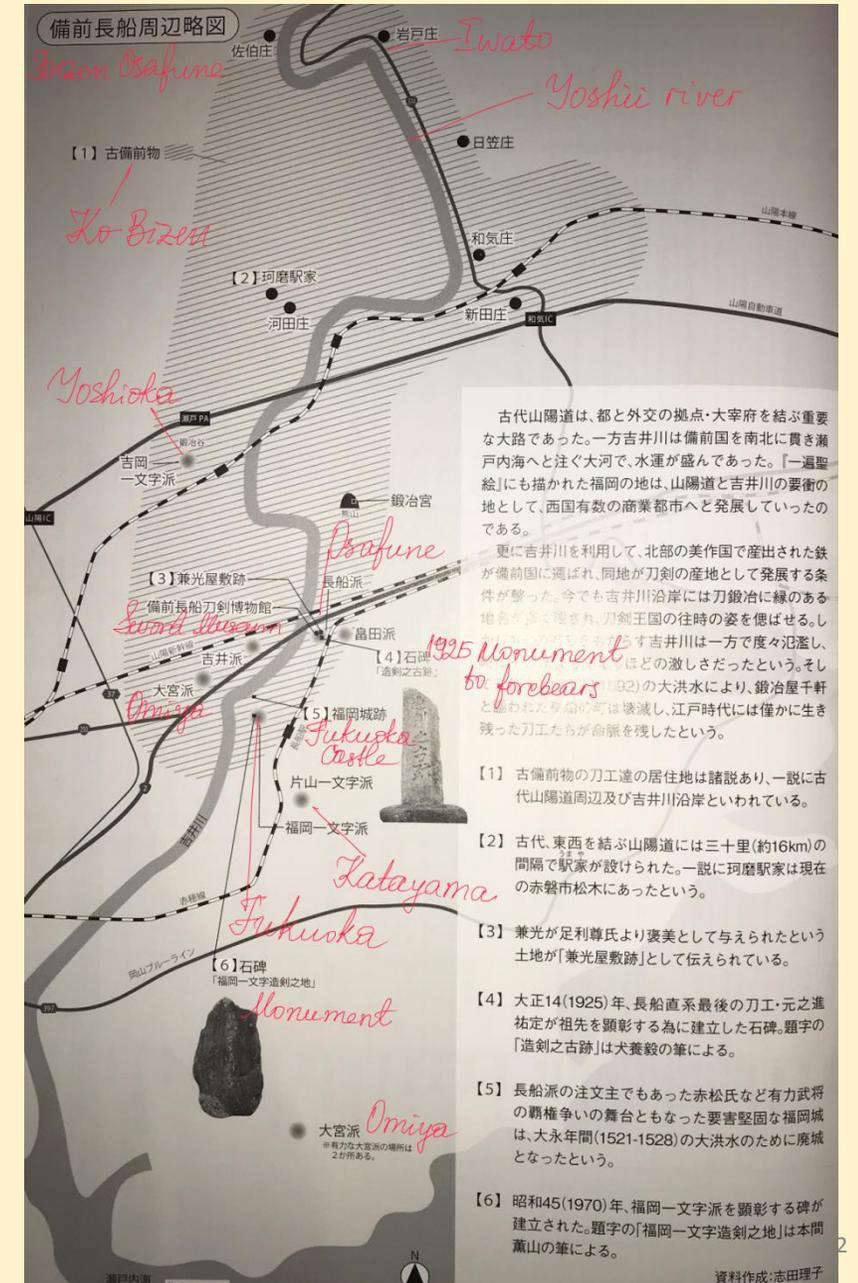
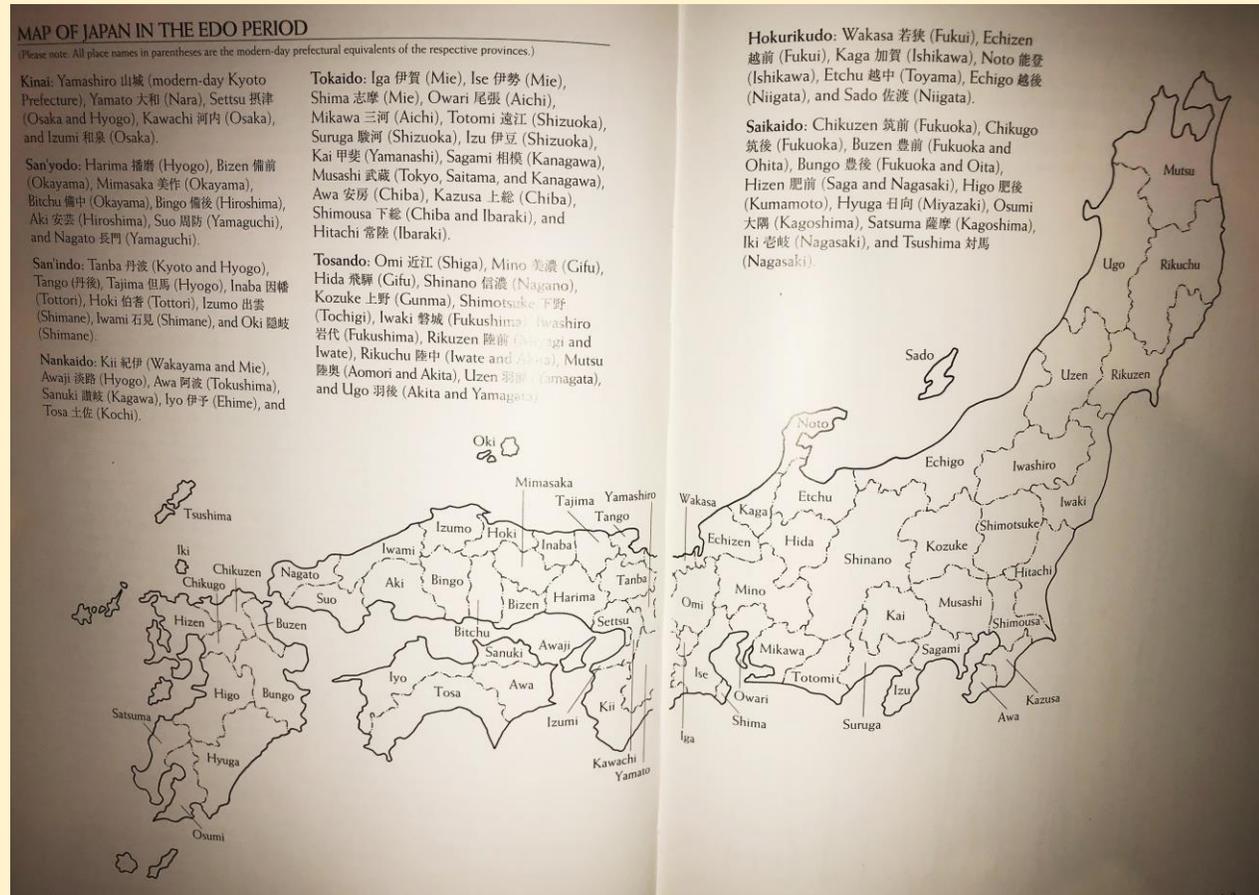
# Appreciation of Koto Bizen – focus on Ichimonji

## Introduction



## Where it started

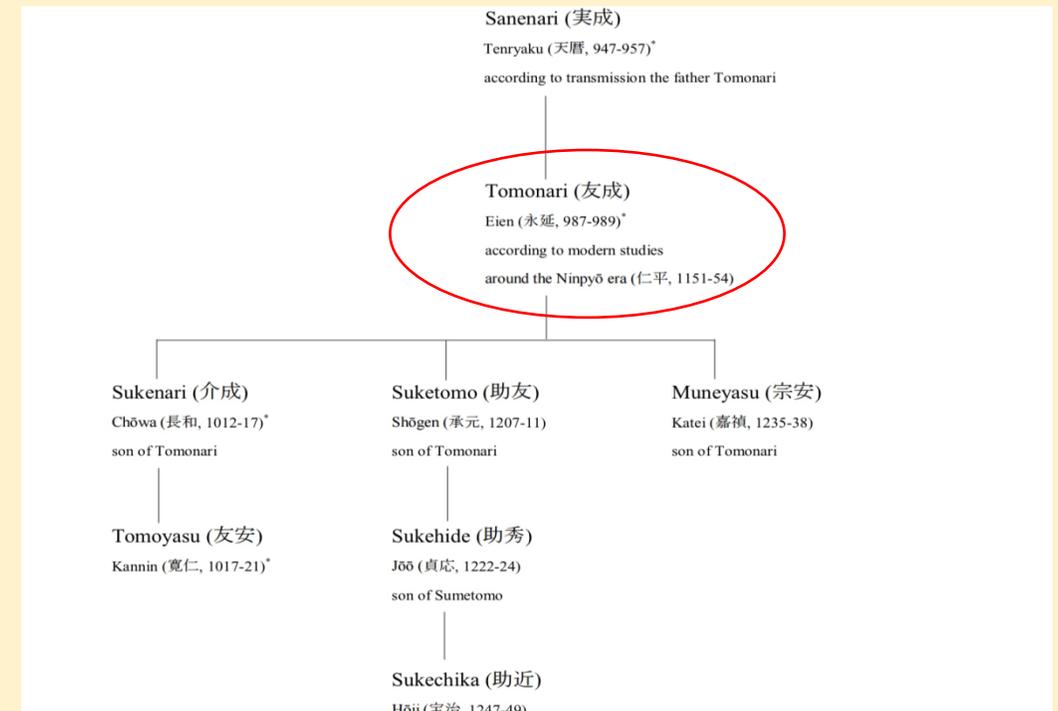
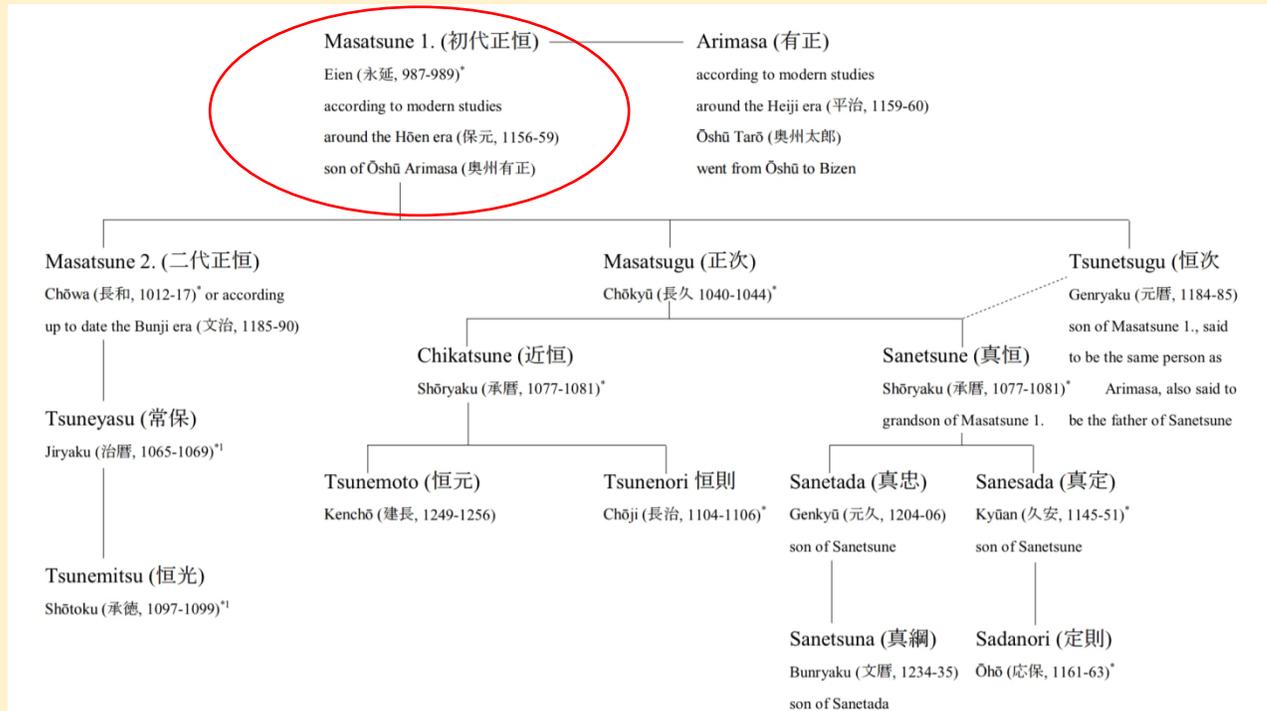
- Bizen (situated along the Sanyodo road/ "sunny mountain region") flourished on the banks of the river Yoshii, which was both the fecund source of iron sand and livelihood but also of natural calamity (various floods). This is the region which for over 400 years, from late Heian until the 1590-91 inundation, produced most swordsmiths and blades in the history of ancient Japan
- The area is reasonably compact, with a diameter of around 30km





## The forefathers

- KoBizen is the forebear of Bizen den - it is defined by the leading smiths Tomonari and Masatsune, whose swords were reputedly worn by the Taira and Minamoto daimyo (c.f. Gempei wars, also known as the Genji-Heike wars)
- Key characteristics are: **narrow but “wild”, naturalistic** hamon with plenty of **kinsuji, sunagashi, chikei** activities **BUT** unlike later Bizen, the hamon is rendered in **ko-nie**. Also **jifu utsuri** is common (sometimes even mizukage utsuri) on **itame** jihada. **Sugata is graceful**, with **koshizori** and **funbari**



## Historical side note

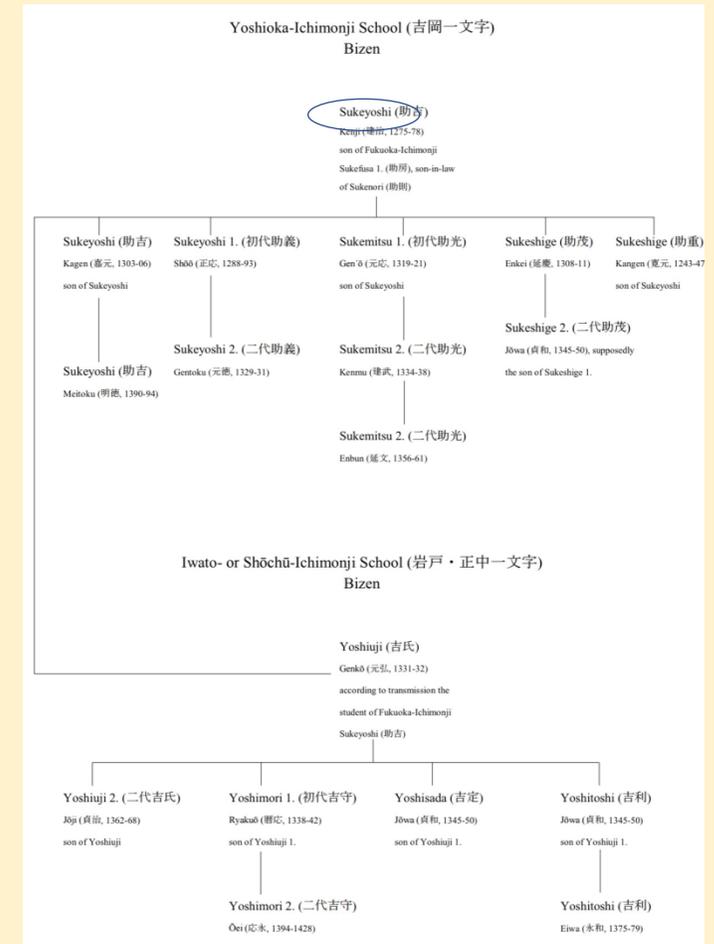
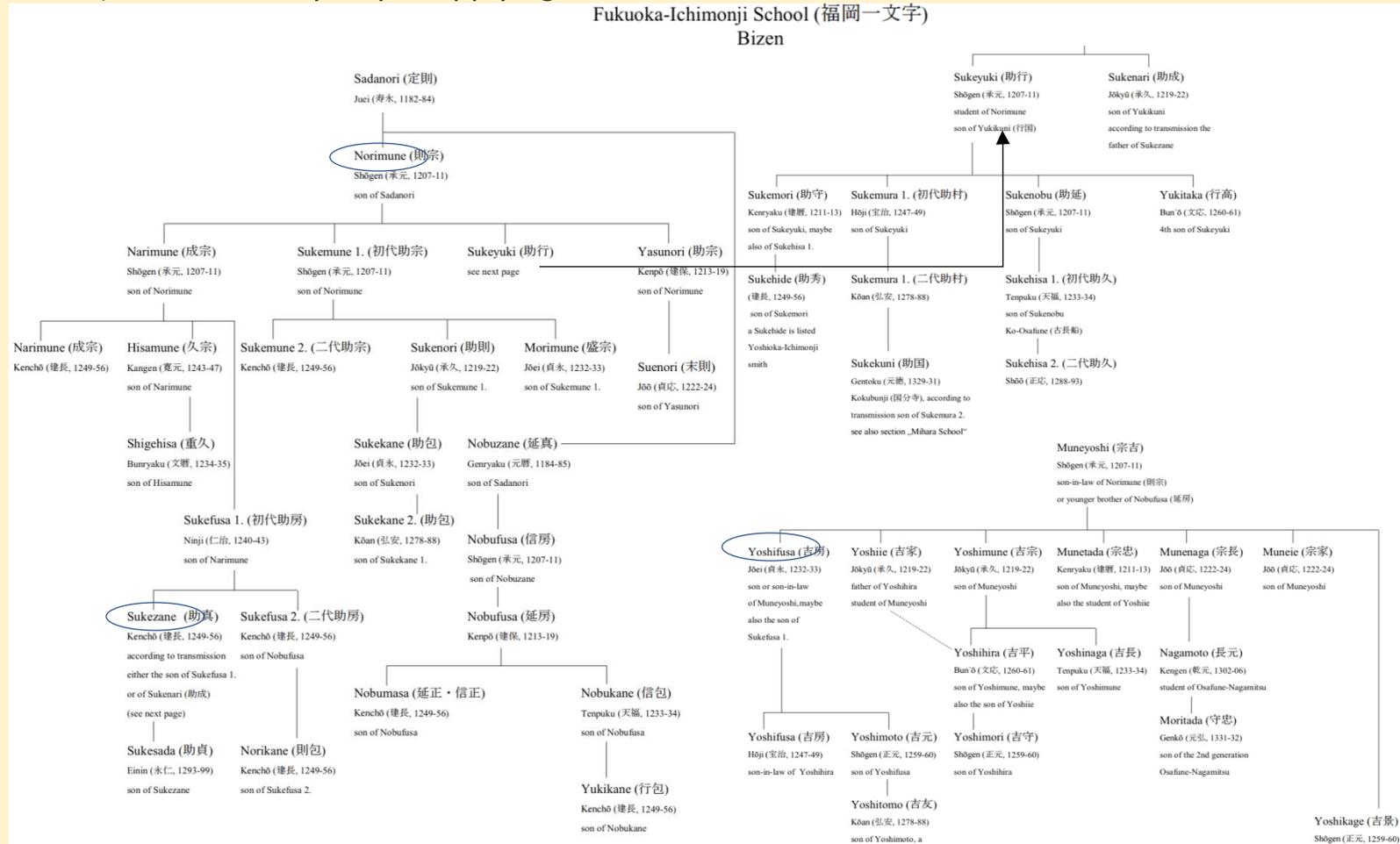


- Cloistered Emperor Gotoba (後鳥羽天皇, 1180-1239, r. 1184-1198), in his exile following an unsuccessful endeavour to overthrow the bakufu government after the death of the third Kamakura shogun, invited the best smiths in the country to teach him sword-forging in his so-called „*goban-kaji*“ (御番鍛冶) project, starting in 1208
- The first group included 13 smiths, from Yamashiro (x3 Awataguchi smiths), Bitchu (x3 Aoe smiths) and 7 Fukuoka smiths: Norimune, Nobufusa, Sukemune Muneyoshi, Yukikuni, Sukenari and Sukenobu
- Norimune was the first smith (month of January) and his disciples (Sukemune, Narimune, Muneyoshi) are often referred to as Ko-Ichimonji. The most notable Ichimonji smiths thereafter are Yoshifusa, Norifusa, Sukezane, Yoshihira, etc.

- From the beginning of the Kamakura period and through the middle of the Kamakura period, the centre of the Ichimonji production was in the area called **Fukuoka** (福岡)
- From the end of the Kamakura period and into early Nanbokucho, likely due to exhaustion of resources, production moved to **Yoshioka** (吉岡)
- Around the Shochu era (1324-1326) another branch of the Ichimonji school emerged in Iwato (岩戸). This branch is called the **Iwato Ichimonji** (岩戸一文字) or sometimes **Shochu Ichimonji** (正中一文字)
- Around 1225, **Norifusa** founded **Katayama Ichimonji** school (片山一文字) when he moved to Katayama (片山) from Fukuoka (福岡)
- **Sukezane** of Fukuoka would also leave Bizen entirely for Sagami on order of the Shogun, and create **Kamakura Ichimonji**, and is followed by Suketsuna (first pure Soshu-based Bizen descendant)

# "Muteki" Ichimonji

- **Fukuoka Ichimonji** developed the **flamboyant choji hamon** with **vivid midare utsuri** across **mokume-itame** jihada. The vivid style emerged in the Goban-kaji work (7 out of the first set of 13 smiths selected by Gotoba were Ichimonji)
- **Yoshioka** followed in its footsteps, with **slightly smaller choji**, some **more gunome** and **occasional togari** elements. Kamakura Ichimonji also has togari, and even smaller gunome choji but more chikei and more nie
- The **jigane appears "soft"** (as opposed to nie-laden jigane like Soshu or Mino), the nioiguchi is nioi-based and that overall softer kawagane (skin steel) is hardened by way of applying utsuri

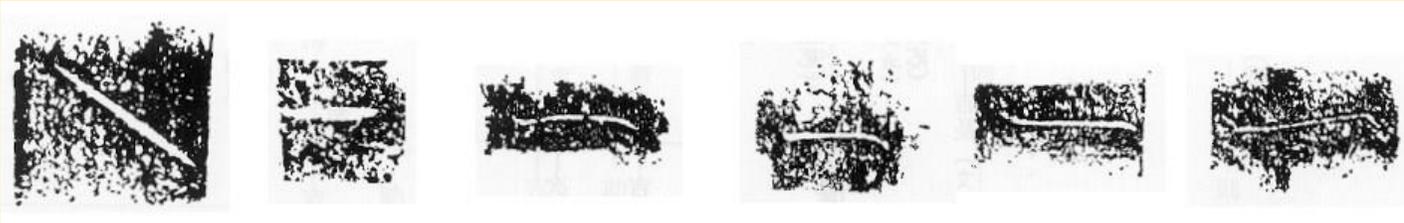




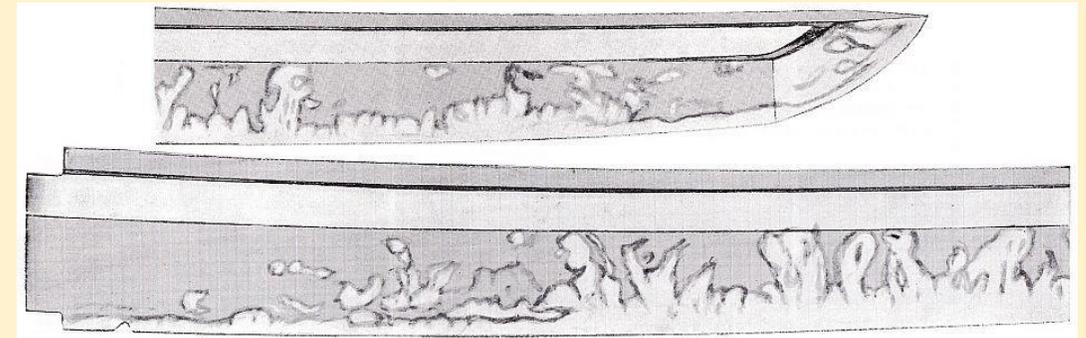
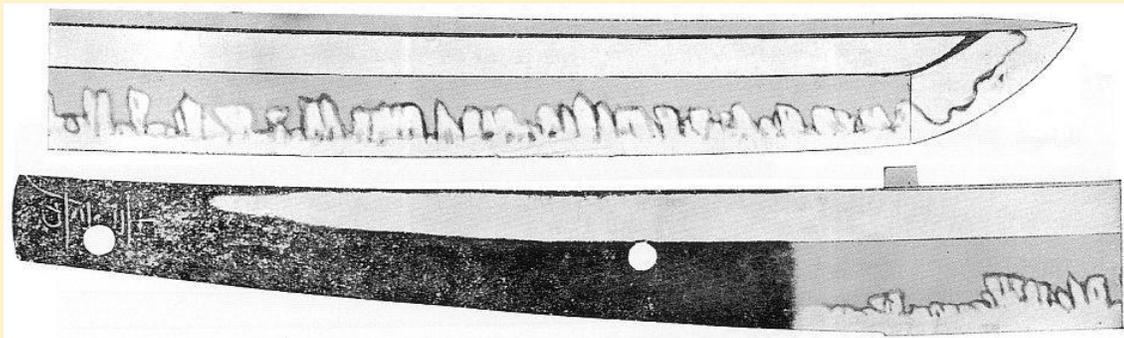
## Key features of the Ichimonji school

## Some key characteristics

- Origin of the name of 'Ichimonji': often smiths of this group used just 'One' or 'Ichi' (一, in Chinese character or a horizontal line) as a smith name. There are smiths who used their smith names in addition to 'Ichi' also smiths who used their smith's name without 'Ichi'. It is uncertain if 'Ichi' that looks like a diagonal line and is seen in the mei of early Ichimonji smiths (Ko-Ichimonji smiths) is a character or a mark
- The meaning is symbolic, indicating they are "number one", "supreme", beyond comparison



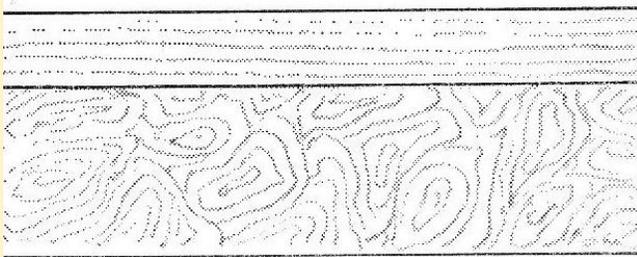
- Key characteristic of the hamon is the presence of choji (clove shapes) as illustrated by the two kokuho meito below Okazaki-giri Fukuoka Ichimonji Yoshifusa and Sanchomo Ichimonji



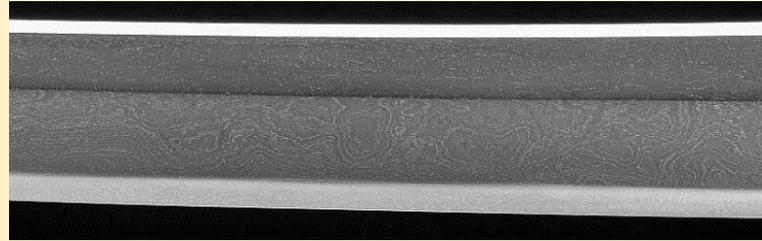
## Some key characteristics (cont.)

- Another tell-tale feature of Ichimonji is the predominantly **mokume** (wood-burl-like) or **mokume-itame** (wood grain with ovals/arcs) jihada

Itame – mokume



Itame – mokume

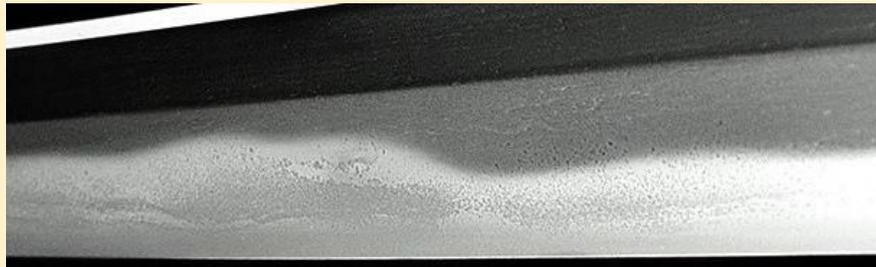


Mokume



- The hardened edge is rendered in **nioi** (smaller martensite crystals appearing as a haze or mist) as opposed to the more visible, larger **nie** crystals

Nie / ara-nie



Nioi



## Some key characteristics (cont.)

- **Utsuri** (literally “reflection”) is additional hardening of the top layer of the skin steel above the hamon to provide torsional rigidity
- A mixture of ground bone and charcoal or of leather, hooves, salt and urine was used
- The temperature must not be very high and should stay under the melting point of iron. The longer the temperature is held, the deeper the carbon will diffuse into the surface, with a typical depth of case hardening with this method is up to 1.5 mm (that is why utsuri still can be seen after several polishes but gets weaker and eventually disappears when too much material is removed)
- The dark areas between the nioiguchi and the border of the utsuri are called **antai**



- According to the pattern in which utsuri appears, we differentiate between bō-utsuri or sugu-utsuri (棒映り・直映り, straight utsuri), chōji-utsuri (丁子映り, chōji-shaped utsuri), midare-utsuri (乱映り, irregular utsuri), nie-utsuri (沸映り, ji-nie based utsuri), shirake-utsuri (白け映り, shirake-based, white-ish area utsuri), botan-utsuri (牡丹映り, peony-shaped utsuri), and dan-utsuri (段映り, utsuri which consists of different layers).

## Some geometry observations

- Longer, slender shaped Heian/Ko-Bizen blades with koshizori gave way to more robust, toriizori blades
- Kokissaki (earliest blades) evolved to chukissaki into early Kamakura and then ikubu (square-ish) into mid-Kamakura
- Into Nanbokucho, the blades became even bigger, with larger kissaki, lost some of their funbari and niku when compared to Kamakura blades

