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– difficulties with non typical swords and with signed
swords by run of the mill smiths.

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NEWSLETTER

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Real Life *kantei* of Swords

Part 1: A traveler's sword – difficulties with non typical swords and with signed swords by run of the mill smiths.

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Introduction:

In a recent series of articles the author, in collaboration with Barry Hennick, discussed how to improve the accuracy of paper *kantei* (Coutinho 2008 part 1 and Part 2 and 2009 Part 3). In this series of papers it was argued that one of the reasons paper *kantei* can be done at all is that the swords shown are typical. Real life *kantei* is different in several aspects. First one has to describe the sword but, more importantly, one should have access to everything including signature. The traditional steps of *kantei* are: 1) The **shape** of the sword is used to determine the age of manufacture (as far as this is possible). 2) The "**pattern**" of the *hada* including activities such as the presence of *ara nie*, *yubashiri*, etc) is established. This is a first hint to determine the School of the sword smith. 3) The **hamon** is considered next. One looks at the outline of the *hamon* and activities inside the *yakiba* or along the *habuchi*. This is a second hint to determine the School and the smith. 4) Finally, one looks at the **nakago**. The shape, *yasurime*, form of its tip and, in paper *kantei*, hints about the signature are examined. Of course in real life *kantei* one may have a signature.

Until quite recently the author believed that these were the steps that the professionals in Japan followed. However, in a recent article, Tanobe Michihiro (2009), quoting Sato Kanzan, declares that the "*above order is the one that amateurs follow. Professionals go first to the signature.*"

This is perfectly understandable. Professionals (as explained by Tanobe Michihiro in the magnificent article quoted above) have the means and experience to spot a forgery immediately. Essentially this finishes their work with regard to the sword they happen to be examining. Once the verdict is *gimei*, the professional is at the end of study of the piece.

In this article, the aim is to show how difficult this is for some of us outside of Japan to examine atypical swords.

Let's consider the first atypical sword.

The measurements are as follows – all measurements are in centimeters

Nagasa	39.3	Sori	1.0	Moto haba	2.9	Moto kasane	0.5
Saki kasane	0.5	Saki haba	2.0	Kissaki nagasa	3.0	Nakago nagasa	11.5

Description of the subject sword

The *yasurime* are *higaki*; the tip of the *nakago* is a slight *hagari kuri jiri*. There is one *mekugi ana*. The sword has *hira niku* and the *fukura* is full as can be seen in the photograph. This finishes the description of the sword.

However, as shown in **Figure 2a**, there is a signature in the *nakago* that reads *Akasaka ju Kanesada*.

When this sword was purchased many years ago, the first thing considered was the **shape**. Figure 1 shows that the sword has *saki sori*. The difference between *moto haba* and *saki haba* is small. The *kasane* is somewhat thin but not very thin. The conclusion reached was that that the sword was a late *Muromachi* sword. In addition, the *yasurime* being *higaki* points to a *sue Seki Koto* sword. The *shinogi zukuri wakizashi* swords of that period are described in the book by Nagayama Kokan (Nagayama (1977) on page 62 as "having *hawatari* of about 50 cm, *chu-kissaki*, and a narrow *mihaba*. The *motohaba* is a bit wide, and the *sori* is shallow inclining to *saki sori*." Accordingly, at the time, it was not totally unreasonable to classify this sword as *sue Seki Koto* blade.

In the *Token Bijutsu* one often finds that *sugata* leads to the period. This sword presents a *haba* somewhat large with respect to the length. The subject sword is a little like this but not quite characteristic. The sword has *hira-niku* and the *fukura* is full. This excludes **typical** Shinshinto swords. Does it exclude *Gendai* smiths? Unfortunately it doesn't.

At the time of purchase the sword was not polished. It was covered with a thin layer of rust (not bad at all) so the *hada* was not visible. The hamon was a well made *suguha*. The *boshi* could be seen and it was *suguha* having a medium *kaeri*. So it was reasoned that the sword was an **atypical** *sue Seki wakizashi*. It might be a *kazu-uchi mono* but in any case it was worth the purchase price.

After polish, the result was that the *hada* turned out to be a very well-ordered *mokume hada* - nothing special but well made. It is very important to note that the quality was not very good. Although it was not terrible, neither was it at all great. There were no defects, a very nice *nie hamon*, and very consistent *hada*. This type of *hada* is not typical of *sue Seki* swords even if they are *kazu-uchi*

mono. No buyer remorse here as the blade was rusted when purchased. The decision to purchase has been discussed by the late Han Bing Siong (Siong 1980). He published a series of



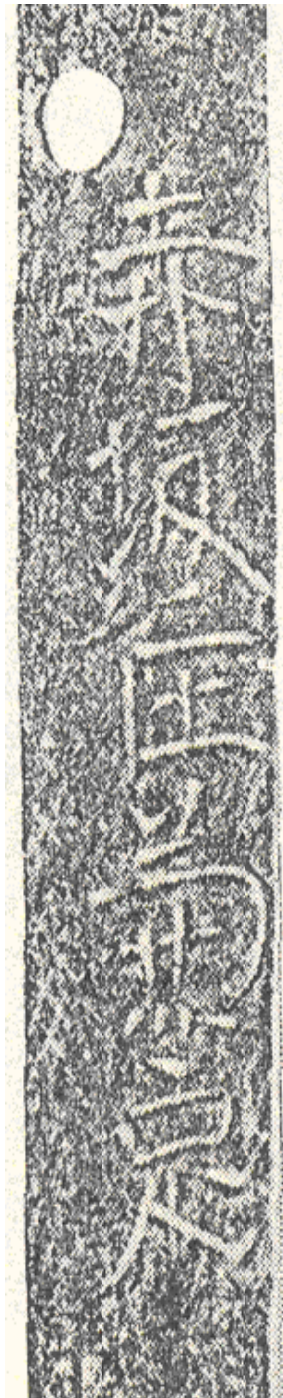
Figure 1

articles about the dilemma he faced in Europe during the eighties. His conclusion (after a long series of well-written articles) was that one should go to the signature.

Accordingly, the signature was considered next. Tanobe's professional approach would be to start at the signature. The signature was found in Hawley (1981), in the book by Shimizu Osamu (2005) and that an actual *oshigata* was printed in the book by Tokuno (1971). The photograph of the *mei* and a copy of the *oshigata* found in the book by Tokuno is shown in figures 2a and 2b.



2a



2b

The *oshigata*, somewhat enlarged for comparison, is printed in **Figure 2b**. In spite of the tremendous efforts by Gary Condell, over the years, to teach us how to distinguish true from false signatures this continues to be a trying exercise. A major reason is that the signatures of run-of-the-mill smiths vary a lot. See the appendix for another example of the nightmare that a run-of-the-mill smith can cause. Troubled by this dilemma, an *oshigata* of the *nakago* of this sword was sent to the NBTHK. The result was that this sword is “*obviously false*”. The conclusion was obvious to experts, but not obvious to typical collectors. A request for further explanation resulted in a very polite reply from the NBTHK stating that the experts at the Museum thought that they “almost knew” the smith who made this sword. Now, in retrospect, having read the article by Tanobe Michihiro mentioned above, one can understand that professionals can “feel” when a signature is wrong. At the time, the need to know was strong as was unhappiness at the lack of an explanation. A second opinion was sought from the NTHK. After considering the *oshigata*, their response was that “this type of signature was used in *Shinto kazu-uchi* mono swords.”

Professional opinion based solely on the *oshigata* could conclude that the sword was a *Shinto kazu-uchi mono*. The blade looked to be *Koto kazu-uchi mono* so the expert opinion is all the more enlightening.

Conclusion

The story on this sword is at an end. Rather than selling the blade as one might, the blade was mounted with high quality fittings and kept. Although most Japanese strongly dislike *gimei* blades, some occidentals have difficulty selling *gimei* blades. Perhaps keeping such a sword serves as a close reminder about what one must look for.

Lessons to learn:

1. There are *gimei* swords with signatures of smiths that are not highly-rated. Although non-Japanese think that it is not worthwhile to falsify a run-of-the-mill smith, the smith may not have been run-of-the-mill in the time frame and location in which he was working.
2. The shape of the sword can eliminate some periods of manufacture, suggesting that it was not made before a certain date. Nothing can prevent a smith from copying the shape of a much earlier sword – that is, **nothing but fashion and fighting style**. However, deviations from both can be tolerated in peaceful times such as from *Genroku* to *Tempo*.
3. Look for quality if possible. If the sword is not in polish and signed, then examine the quality of that signature and pray for good luck. One might argue for opening a window to look at the quality of the *jigane*. However, this is only possible once one owns the sword.

A final twist: Do not despise a snake for having no legs for who is to say it will not become a dragon. (This old Chinese proverb is apparently enjoyed in Japan.)

Prologue

However the story does not end here. Recently the Japanese community in Brazil commemorated 100 years since the arrival of the first immigrants from Japan to Brazil. The Emperor of Japan visited Brazil as did an accompanying real sword expert. Meeting him and showing him the blade was an irresistible temptation. After a few seconds he said: "This is a traveler's sword". He explained that people, when traveling around Japan, sometimes bought specially made souvenir swords usually signed with big names. This is what this little sword is – a traveler's sword. The number in Japan or in the USA and the probable date of manufacture are unknown. A likely answer is the *Shinto* era. The visiting expert should have been asked. It is possible that this is a modern forgery but not likely.

If this were a *mumei* sword, proper examination would have led to a good guess. There could be many good guesses. The *mei* added to the difficulty. The *mei* did not appear *gimei* as the smith was not famous. Relating back to the Chinese proverb, the sword did not become a dragon but at least expert opinion has given new satisfying information.

Appendix - a second run of the mill sword.

Figure 3 shows both an oshigata of the blade and a drawing taken from the book *Shinto Bengi Oshigata* (1975).

The signature appears to be different from the one given in *Shinto Bengi Oshigata*. However the sword is genuine. This illustrates again the difficulties with unexceptional smiths. With pedestrian blades one often has no *oshigata* to compare. The argument that unexceptional smiths are not copied is not true as argued above for forgeries done long ago. The smith may be ordinary today. How did he compare with neighboring smiths while working?

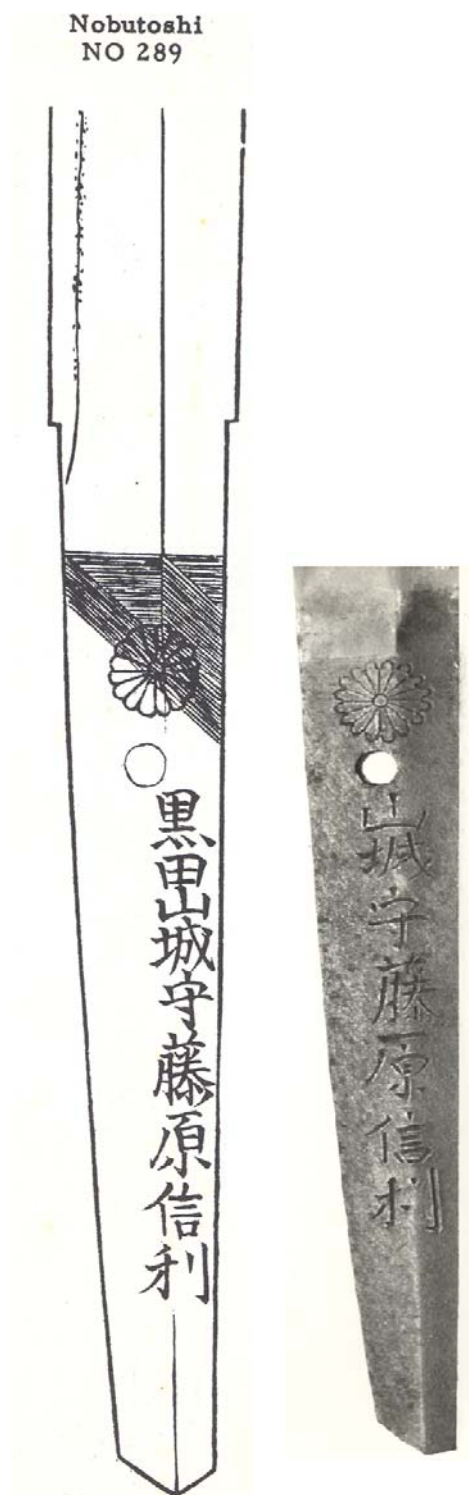


Figure 3

Acknowledgments

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Final note:

If the reader has a "traveler's sword" please do not hesitate to contact the author with details.