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F.A.B Coutinho



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For Information Write:
JSSUS, 427 W. Dussel Dr. #128 Maumee, OH 43537-4208 U.S.A.

Real-life *kantei* of swords, Part 7: Small mysteries

F. A. B. Coutinho

Faculdade de Medicina da USP

Av. Dr. Arnaldo 455 São Paulo - SP 01246-903 Brazil

e-mail: coutinho @dim.fm.usp.br

Introduction: Previous articles – **Coutinho (2010-a)**, **Coutinho (2010-b)**, **Coutinho (2010-c)**, **Coutinho (2011-d)**, **Coutinho (2011-e)** and **Coutinho (2011-f)** -- discussed some problems that are encountered when examining unusual swords. This article considers yet another problem: small mysteries on the identification of swords.

This article was inspired by a recent article in this newsletter by **Farrel (2011)**. In this article the author asks how a sword described in the classical book by B. W. Robinson (**Robinson (1961)**) as a *Nanbokucho* blade was sold in auction by Sotheby (**Sotheby (1993)**) as a *Shinshinto* blade. Discussion of this question will be addressed in the first mystery section below.

First Mystery

To present this mystery in a more comprehensible form it will be considered in two parts. **First:** is the blade a *Nanbokucho* blade or is a *Shinshinto* blade and how this can be determined? **Second:** if the blade is *Shinshinto*, then in the words of Robert Farrel.

"Why do so many "experts" *kantei* the blade as genuine 14th century Akihiro and is subsequently judged to be a *Shinshinto* copy?"

The sword has the inscription *Soshu Ju Akihiro* and is dated *Oan* 2nd year (1369).

The answer to the first question is straight forward. The sword is *gimei* (false signature) and the date was put on the sword with the purpose of deceiving people. This may be verified as follows: if the sword were *mumei* (unsigned), with an old attribution, answering the first question would be much more difficult. Since, however, the sword has a signature, an *oshigata* (tang rubbing) or a digital photograph) of the *nakago* (tang) can be compared with *shin-mei* (genuine signature); the rubbing or photo can be compared to those found in books or sent to one of the associations in Japan (NBTHK, NTHK- NPO or NTHK club) for study. The latter option is preferable because those associations have a huge number of *shin-mei oshigata* with which to compare the signature of

the subject sword; the legitimacy of the sword would be established very readily. Presumably this was the path followed by the experts from Sotheby.

Contemplation of the second question must include a brief consideration of the progress of the study of Japanese swords since the book by Robinson was written in 1961. Robinson's approach may be predicted according to his book (page 29). The mnemonic SEPT is suggested when confronted by a sword as a guide for the steps to be followed. The first step is to examine the **shape (S)**. While this can be a challenge, the photograph of the blade (page 33 of the Sotheby catalogue and plate 15a of Robinson book) coupled with the measurements given in the catalogue of Sotheby show a blade that can be from the *Nanbokucho* period (1336-1392), from the *Keicho Shinto* period (1596-1615) or from the *Shinshinto* (1781 -1868) period. Without access to the *kasane* of the sword it is difficult to say more than this. So from the first step Robinson might have concluded that the sword was in fact from the *Nanbokucho* period. The next two steps suggested by Robinson would be to examine the **edge (E)**, that is the *hamon* and then the **pattern (P)** that is the *hada*, of the blade. Nowadays it is normal to invert these two steps and to examine first the pattern, that is, the *hada* of the blade and then the *hamon* (E from edge). To justify this interchange it is good to quote from the book by Nagayama Kokan (**Nagayama (1997)** page 33):

"The difference between *Koto* and *Shinto* blades is best determined by examining the steel of a blade and its surface-grain pattern."

It is not known if the sword was in good polish when first examined by Robinson in 1961. As will be argued later on, it is possible that the polish was not so good; therefore this second step **pattern (P)** could not be properly followed. The *hamon* (next step, E from **edge**) is described in the Sotheby catalogue as being *midare hamon* of *nioi*. Again, if Robinson examined this blade without proper polish this might be difficult to see clearly. Assuming that the blade was in good polish when examined by the Sotheby experts, the fact that the *hamon* is of *nioi* does not point to a *Soshu* blade. Finally the last step is to examine the **tang (T)**; the tang must be examined independently of the signature. It is difficult from the photograph to see *yasurime* (file marks) and the general condition; however, the blade has both just one *mekugi ana* (not expected with a blade of the age the signature claims) and the tip of the *nakago* do not seem to be consistent with *Akihiro*. Nevertheless as will be argued next this type of information (about the type of the *nakago* and the *yasurime*) was not available to Robinson in 1961 or for that matter in 1970.

Since the book was re-printed in 1970, it is fair to compare the situation faced by Robinson with the situation faced by Japanese sword students in the USA some time latter. Note this quote from an article by Hartman (**Hartman (2008)**).

"Locally in 1981, swords were still fairly plentiful and cheap. *Gendai-To* were often found but if *out-of-polish*, they had limited interest to me. As editor for the JSS/Us Newsletter in those days, I probably wrote a brief article on the interesting *nakago* inscription. Later, a member in Oslo, Mr. Per Tarje Norheim, contacted me and expressed interest in purchasing my sword and soon after he became its new keeper. In those days it was very difficult to have a sword polished without having some connections. Money was short in those days and a polish was expensive (by 1981 standards)."

In 1961 there were very few books available in English (in fact Mr. Robinson was one of the first printed) and even much later the available books did not had enough information for a really good *kantei*. This serves as an explanation for why so many "experts" *kantei* the blade as genuine 14th *Akihiro...*" At the time there was no reason to assume that the blade was a fake and it would be very difficult to properly *kantei* the blade because it was probably out of proper polish. The situation of a Western Japanese sword student was very difficult 40 years ago. What is perhaps surprising is to know that not much before that the situation of Japanese sword students was not very different in spite of their proximity to the sources. To show this a brief summary of the situation of Japanese sword studies follows.

The necessity of catching up with the West during *Meiji* times made a great impact on Japanese life. Here is what Bashford Dean says about this (**Bashford (1915)**, page 113):

"Young Japan, indeed, took no pains to preserve armor and arms, still less to record the great body of ancient military precepts; and with complete change of interest the sons of samurai grew up, knowing nothing of the training in technical matters which their fathers and grandfathers regarded as of real, even vital importance. I remember meeting a nobleman, *de jure*, of the highest class, whose forbears included some of the most distinguished personages in the ancient wars of Japan, and whose father, he told me, had borne armor, but who himself knew as little about it as thought it had become extinct centuries ago. I met samurai who did not know the manner of wearing swords of their fathers ..." . further on he says "to know the names of celebrated sword-artists and their

work was apart of the regular training of the samurai. And the study is so difficult that few, indeed, there are today who have mastered it. Thus a great expert in Tokyo, high in the sword society (To-ken Kwai) there, declares that no one should buy a blade who has not studied the best examples throughout Japan for at least ten years!."

More recently in a series of articles by Ogawa Morihiro entitled *Kuzan Dialogue* the opinion is offered on the evolution of knowledge of swords in Japan by *Homma Junji Kunzan*. Through a series of dialogue excerpts:

(Ogawa (1979) page 28):

"You ought to realize how lucky you are to be living in the age when chances of appreciating really good examples of fine swords are readily available. Decades ago, when we were still engaged in examining National treasures objects (*Kokuho*), we had to go around and visit the residences of various owners such as *Daimyo* (feudal lords) and *Kuge* (court nobles). Ordinary people seldom had a chance to look at them. Having come through this period I remember my experiences well when I encountered exciting examples."

(Ogawa (1980)-a page 31)

"The Tokugawa family, descendent of the *Shogunate* had made a rule not to let the outsiders to see their swords. As a member of the national treasure investigation office, I was lucky enough to be the first to investigate their collection."

(Ogawa (1980-b)

"*Kunzan*: Let me tell you another interesting instance testifying how difficult it had been for us to look at real masterpieces and therefore to recognize what long-treasured important swords look like. It may sound incredible to the swords students trained in recent years, but when the famous *Tokuzenin Sadamune* was for the first time in history exposed to the public appreciation several decades ago, many swords students of expert status quite seriously argued that it had to be *Yasutsugu* or *Horikawa Kunihiro* , both of whom are *Shinto*-makers."

"*Ogawa*: That seems to prove how scarcely available those intact examples of famous *Koto* blades were not only for sword students in general but even for authorities at the time."

"Kunzan: We came through such a miserable period of lacking study material of superb quality. It is only after we acquired access, for the purpose of investigation to designate *Kokuho* objects, to the collections of great significance such as those belonging to the ex-*shogun* and other major *Daimyo* families, when even the then established *Nihonto* authorities at last gained knowledge and understanding of real master pieces at first hand."

From the above dialogue it can be concluded that only recently the study of the Japanese swords became firmly established in Japan. So we may forgive Mr. Robinson oversight in 1961. Nowadays the study of Japanese swords has progressed tremendously and the kind of mystery described above will tend to disappear.

Second Mystery: a collection of examples

A. Several small mysteries appear throughout various Sotheby sales. Some examples are offered. In Lot 11 of the same sale an item is described as:

"A finely mounted *Aikuchi*. Blade after *Sadamune*, 19th century. Illustrated in B. W. Robinson, *The arts of the Japanese Sword*, pl. 11b"

The book identifies the signature as *Sadamune* (1264-1343); once again this signature and workmanship were judge by the Sotheby's experts as a *Shinshinto* blade. In this case this cannot be declared positively as a forgery because there is no date given and the sword may have been signed by a *Shinshinto* swordsmith called *Sadamune*.

B. In another sale by Sotheby's (**Sotheby 1982**), eleven lots belonging to the Major Festing collection were sold. Lot 26 is described as

"A very finely mounted *Daisho*: Shinto blade with *Kinzogan* attribution to *Masamune*. The description of the *Sho* blade is: " *Soshu*-style *Tanto* blade ascribed to *Yukimitsu*."

In this case the mystery is heightened because the *Dai* has a *Kinzogan mei* (inlaid gold attribution) and this blade was "reputed to have been presented to Lord *Inaba* by *Ieyoshi* (12th Shogun), 27th December, 8th year Tempo (1837), having "transfer documents from Ex Viscount *Inaba*." This blade has "provenance". The *sho*, is contained in a "silk bag with *Honami* appraisal dated *Genroku* 10th year (1697) 10th month, 3rd day." and "reputed to be from the collection of the *Tokugawa Kishu* family." It has even more impressive provenance documents.

These blades are also illustrated in the book by Robinson (**Robinson (1961)**) (The *Dai* on plate 14a and the *Sho* on plate 14b) and fetched GBP 13 200. In spite of the high price, the Sotheby's experts considered that the two blades are not from the *Masamune* and *Yukimitsu* respectively. Given the explanation above by *Homma Junji* about how recent is the serious study of important Japanese blades in Japan, it is not surprising that these swords were considered from *Masamune* and *Yukimitsu* in old times. Even considering the provenance and associated documents, the swords are better judged as being well-made *Shinto* blades.

Third Mystery

The third mystery involves a *tsuba* that is illustrated in Fig 1. This *tsuba* was from the collection of R. B. Caldwell that was described in **Caldwell (1993-a)** and **Caldwell (1993-b)**. This *tsuba* is also illustrated in the book prefaced by J. Harding and B. W. Robinson (**Syz (1993)**).

This *tsuba* is described in the articles by Caldwell by being very mysterious when he first acquired it. In his own words:

"When this *tsuba* was purchased in London at an auction in the middle sixties, no one could classify it as to origin and purpose. It remained a 'copper *tsuba*' no doubt. Even when I took it to Tokyo, there was much head-shaking and blank stares. As usual, no one would admit "we don't know" only " *Kagemishi, Muromachi*". "But why is it so light, hollow and of *Ro*?" "It cannot be used in battles, it's too light." "Ah so".

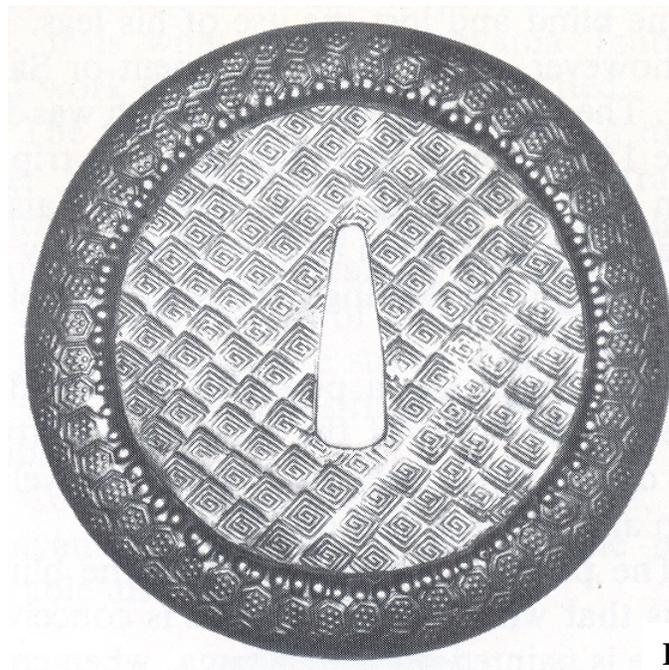


Figure 1

Finally a consensus was worked out to please everybody. When on the march, a heavy iron *tsuba* added to the weight of a heavy *nagamaki* or *yari* (pole arm or spear) at the end of a nine or eighteen *shaku* pole, which became extremely tiring at the end of a long's day march.

In addition to the *tsuba*, a rain-resistant covering had to encase the weapon at its most vulnerable extremity. This would be heavily waxed paper or brocade and accumulated moisture and weight as the day wore on. As a substitute for the heavy iron and weathe-proofing, this hollow copper *tsuba* was substituted during long marches. Later in *Edo Jidai* this type of *tsuba* became standard to the dreaded stay in *EDO* or *Sanki Dodai* as it was known. These "traveling *tsuba* became standard equipment in parades or other ceremonial displays." "The next year these *tsuba* began to appear in the *Juyo* annuals." As a result this *tsuba* was classified as a "travelling" *tsuba* and mostly used during the Edo period (1596-1868) according to the article by Caldwell.

In the book by Syz (**Syz (1994)**) this *tsuba* shown on page 9, is described as a *Fujiwara Kanagu*, and is attributed as being from the *Fujiwara/early Kamakura* period (Fujiwara (806 – 1184)/Kamakura (1185 – 1219)). Further this *tsuba* is accompanied by a *Tokubetsu Kicho* certificate from the NBTHK. (1969).

Three other references where similar *tsuba* can be foundvqre cited in the book; the books by *Torigoe, Tsuba Kanshoki* and the books by Durand -Ruel, Collection T.Hayashi and finally the book by *Wakayama, Toso Kodogu Koza*. On page 376 of the book by *Torigoe* there is a very similar *tsuba*; however, *Torigoe* attributes this *tsuba* to the late *Muromachi* period (late *Muromachi* 1467-1596).

It is not known if the NBTHK attribution (presumably to the *Fujiwara/early Kamakura* period) was explained in earlier numbers of the *Token Bijutsu*; an attribution to three such different periods is indeed remarkable. Two aspects of this mystery should be considered.

First: The NBTHK document is said to date form *Showa* 44 (1969). This is earlier than the article by Caldwell that appeared for the first time in Arts of Asia in January 1993. It is probable that the date of this document is not 1969 but later than the article by Caldwell. In fact this document is said to be the certificate number 930 dated *Showa* 44 as mentioned above. However in the next page of the book there is another papered *tsuba* (a *Muromachi Kanagu*) said to have a *Tokubetsu Kicho* certificate number 35, issued by the NBTHK, and dated *Showa* 55 that is 1980. It is probable that

the document of the subject *tsuba*, number 930, is much later than the document of this other *Muromachi Kanagu* , number 35, and dated 1980.

Second: On considering the reference in *Torigoe's* book the question arises whether Caldwell knew of this early attribution or not. It is concluded that indeed he did not know about this example that is in fact very similar to his *tsuba*. The surprise is that authorities in Japan did not know of it either.

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