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Battle and in individual conflicts.

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Some comments on various topics about Japanese Swords. Part 3: Using the sword in Battle and in individual conflicts.

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Introduction: In one previous article **Coutinho (2009)** the hypothesis that *Hizen* swords were made with *wootz* steel was discussed. This hypothesis provoked some questions that were partly discussed in two other articles: **Coutinho (2011-a)** and **Coutinho (2011-b)**. The discussion continued on another forum, the Nihontomessageboard, where one of the participants, Eric Hugelshoffer, raised some interesting questions. The following URLs provide links to the ongoing threads of this discussion:

<http://www.militaria.co.za/nmb/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=8526&st=0&sk=t&sd=a&start=5>

<http://www.nihontomessageboard.com/nmb/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=8325&st=0&sk=t&sd=a&sid=300c2342969f5b9074181c00a5bad0a3>

The aim of this article is to answer questions about possible conflicts between Japanese and Europeans during the so-called "*The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*" (**Boxer (1993)**). It is very difficult to imagine that some conflicts did not take place because the Europeans of the 16th and 17th were among the most nervous people in the world. The following citations suggested that these Europeans needed little provocation to draw their swords.

According to Hutton (**Hutton (2003) page 75**)

"The period of the rapier was, in good truth, the most quarrelsome period in History [European History]; the "point of honour" was carried to such an extreme point that men would fight to death for almost any trivial reason, and sometimes even without any reason at all, but from pure light-heartedness, for the mere fun of the thing and nothing else."

According to Rush (**Rush 1964 page 55**) among Elizabethans:

"...usually Rapiers were out and the quarrel was settled in the street without the formality of arranging a duel."

Also in the beginning of the 18th century ((**Rush 1964**) page 67)

"swords were drawn on the slightest excuse, and often two men quarreling would be joined by Twenty."

Finally, according to Loads (**Loads (2010)** page 246):

"By 1570 dueling had reached epidemic proportions amongst belligerent young men looking for excuse to prove their skill with swords."

According to Baldik (**Baldik (1970)** page 52) no fewer than 4000 gentlemen were killed in duels between 1589 and 1607 in France. The reactions of Japanese in these situations, while not quite as extreme ran a close second to the Europeans. According to João Rodrigues who lived in Japan from 1577 to 1610 and wrote a book *This Island of Japan* (**Rodrigues (1973)** page 282):

"In the court of Myako, the capital of Tenka, the [fencing masters] put up a writing notice board at, for example, the entrance of the main gate in the public square or street of the city where everybody passes by and it reads: " So-and -so of such-and-such place, the most skillful swordsman in all Japan, or Tenka, lives in such-and-such a street or house. Anybody denying this and desiring to challenge him to test him with either real or practice swords, should go and seek him out"

When this is published and nobody searches him or challenge him, his claim is confirmed because there was nobody in the capital of Tenka who dared to contradict him.."

Duels and Schools of fencing in Japan are described in two articles by John M. Rogers (**Rogers (1990)** and **Rogers (1991)**)

Europeans walked in Japan armed with rapier-swords and it is important to note that before the sword ban implemented by *Hideyoshi*, in 1588, almost all Japanese walked around armed with Japanese swords. After this so-called sword hunt, only soldiers could carry weapons.

The sword-rapier and the *Sue Koto* swords were very different and meant to be employed in different ways. The *Sue Koto* sword was mainly a slashing weapon whereas the sword-rapier was a cutting/thrusting weapon.

In view of these differences, the outcomes of these conflicts may not really be compared on the basis of the quality of the weapons or the quality of the swordsman for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the sword is not used in battle in the same fashion as it is used in individual conflicts; consequently, the results of a mass conflict (as in a battle) can be very different from a conflict between two individuals or even from a small conflict among a group of a few individuals.

Napoleon Bonaparte, widely regarded as an expert in warfare and strategy recorded his

observations of the use of swords in battle.

At the end of the 18th century, France's Directory authorized a campaign in "The Orient" to protect French trade interests and undermine Britain's access to India. To this end, Napoleon Bonaparte was to lead an army to land in Egypt in 1798.

In Egypt, the French soldier confronted an elite troop called Mamluks. It should be noted that the French foot soldiers used bayonets while the cavalry used mass produced sabers. The Mamluk weapon was similar to the shamshir – a scimitar-like hand made blade. According to Napoleon in such a conflict 2 Mamluks would surely defeat 3 Frenchmen; the fight between 100 Mamluks would result in a draw with 100 Frenchman. However 300 Frenchmen would beat 300 Mamluks and 1000 Frenchman would surely defeat 1500 Mamluks.

Napoleon's superior tactics resulted in a win over the Mamluk army in the Battle of the Pyramids. Even superior weapons loose with inferior tactics on the battle field.



Figure 1

From the modern-day vantage point, it is sometimes difficult to understand why some weapons of the past were preferred in their day. One such weapon, the *Pata* (**Figure 1**) is the focus of the second example under examination. While common in all India, the *pata* was used mainly by the *Mahrattas*, a people of the Indian sub-continent. According to **Stone (1928)** this weapon has the following defects:

"The unusual form of the hilt, particularly with straight blades, makes it difficult to use by any of the methods commonly employed in handling swords. The straight blade makes it impossible for the draw cut, which is the one generally used by Orientals. The close-fitting solid Gauntlet and cross grip deprive the swordsman of the use of his wrist which is the most valuable means of controlling the sword in either cutting or thrusting. In fact the only way of using it is by straight thrust made much as a boxer strikes. Its great length of blade and inflexible gauntlet make it impossible to draw from the scabbard as any other sword is drawn. It was a horseman's weapon, and, if the user was lucky enough to run his enemy when charging, it would be almost impossible for him to have cleared his sword without great danger of spraining or breaking his wrist."

Stone concludes that:

"In spite of these serious defects it was very popular in the seventeen and eighteen centuries and was largely used throughout the greater part of India.....For a weapon to have been used over such a large an area and by people of as many diverse races it must possessed advantages that are not obvious to us."

The use of the *tachi*, especially the very long ones of the *Nabokucho* period, will be considered in another article.

Europeans in Japan - some conflicts

The Europeans lived in *Nagasaki* when they came from Macau with their annual cargo of goods (mainly silk) from China. This trade was discussed in a an earlier article (**Coutinho (2011-b)**).

According to C. R. Boxer (**Boxer (1991)** page 64):

"The privileged position attained by merchants from Macau to Nagasaki was thus described by an envious Dutch visitor in 1610: The ship coming from Macau usually has about 200 or more merchants on board who go ashore at once, each taking a house wherein to lodge with his servants and slaves. They take no heed of what they spend and nothing is too costly for them. Sometimes they disburse in the seven to eight months they spend in Nagasaki more that 200,000 or 350,000 [silver] taels, through which the populace profit greatly; and this is the reason why the local Japanese are very friendly with them."

Since there were healthy trade relations at this time there was very little reason for conflict. In the last quarter of the 16th century there are no known battles between the Europeans and the Japanese. There were "brawls" among small groups of people or conflicts between individuals but these were carried out on a small scale.

Boxer (**Boxer (1968)** page 33) reports:

"In either case he [Fernaõ de Souza] met with a sticky end, for he together with fourteen other Portuguese were killed in a brawl with Japanese at Hirado in 1561. That season there were no less than five Portuguese ships in Japan; one of which, commanded by a certain Afonso Vaz, went to Satsuma, where he was also killed in the port of Akune by some samurai,--accidently according to Shimadzu, the local Daimyo. These are the first recorded clashes between Japanese and Europeans, apropos of which the stern old Calvinist Jan Huighen van Linschoten has no hesitation in laying the blame in the Catholic *Portugales*, 'I thinke it happened by their filthie pride and presumptuousness, for in all places they will be Lordess and masters, to the contempt and embasing of the inhabitants, which in all places will not be endured, namely in Iapon, being a stubborn and obstinate people.' ..."

This first brawl had consequences, as described by Boxer on page 36 of the same book (Boxer (1968)):

"Don Joao Pereira came to Japan In 1565, his carrack being accompanied by a small galleonwhich had a large number of Chinese merchants on board. These ships anchored in the bay of Fukuda, near Nagasaki in the fief of Omura Sumitada, since the Portuguese were naturally rather shy of visiting Hirado after the murder of their fifteen countryman four years previously. Matsuura was exceedingly annoyed at being deprived of his potential pickings, and when pressure on the local Jesuit missionaries failed to produce any results, he sent a force of eighty craft between great and small, manned by several hundred chosen samurai to surprise and seize the Portuguese ships as they lay at anchor. Surprise them the Japanese flotilla certainly did, although Pereira had been warned of what was toward messages from the Padres at Hirado, which with true Iberian indifference he had ignored. Despite the fact that they were thus surprised at anchor early morning, and with many crews on shore (the flagship had only eighty Europeans aboard) the Portuguese gave a good account of themselves. At one stage, the Japanese succeeded in boarding the carrack from the stern, breaking into the great cabin and carrying-off Don Joao writing-desk. But these boards were repelled, and the cross fire from the cannon of the two ships wrought such havoc in the closely-packed frail *fune*, that the attackers eventually retired discomfited after losing over seventy killed and two hundred wounded. Many of the later wounded subsequently died, and the Jesuits wrote jubilant from Hirado that this hard-fought victory had greatly increased Portuguese prestige, 'for the Japanese had hitherto only known us as merchants and rated us accordingly no better than the Chinese'. Such was the result of the first recorded naval action between Europeans and Japanese."

These two conflicts, involving quite a number of people tell very little about how the Japanese dealt with the European swords and vice-versa. As will be argued in detail in the last section of this article, it is very difficult to conclude anything about the quality of swords even when they are not so different as a late *Koto* sword was from a sword-rapier. One can only imagine the Japanese warrior trying to escape from repeated thrusting and the European having a hard time avoiding the slashing back when both are armed with inappropriate swords for this task. Consideration of swordsman using *katana* against other weapons will later be considered to help understanding the difficulty of encounters between warriors armed with different weapons.

Conflicts between Europeans and Japanese are described in documents that are now in the *Torre do Tombo* in Portugal. The following is a link to a discussion of the matter by a Portuguese gentleman named Pedro Morais:

<http://www.thearma.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=7864&sid=519538d001a30b1a3ebe9aa656458b95>

"In fact there are some records in our national historic archive of more than a dozen encounters of Portuguese soldiers and samurais. These encounters are very well described and detailed.

All ended with the same result except one.

The samurai was killed in some or wounded (but killing themselves afterwards in shame) the only register of a killed Portuguese soldier was because he had such an amount of sake in his blood that he couldn't stand straight. The Samurai that killed him was killed in the next day in a sword duel with a Portuguese sailor in top condition. “

These descriptions are available in "Torre do Tombo", the national archive institution and are available to anyone.

These documents are available in microfilm in the archive to preserve the actual documents. Copies of the microfilms may then be scanned and transferred to the computer. A good scanner is a wonderful asset for this job. The task of translating the page from the Portuguese used in the 16th century to modern language usage may be hampered by the elaborate calligraphy; this makes deciphering and interpreting a slow process.

Repeated attempts to contact Mr. Pedro Morais were unsuccessful. In any case, fights in which the Portuguese were defeated would not appear in Portuguese records. The cases related show that the results of such combats were dependent on the combatants with varied results. The European sailors were combatants and in general very tough. The picture in **Figure 2** below shows the sailors climbing the ropes of a ship which requires very good fitness. The small arrows show their positions. On long voyages from Portugal scurvy was rampant; the sailors were weakened and perhaps in some cases at a disadvantage in combat.

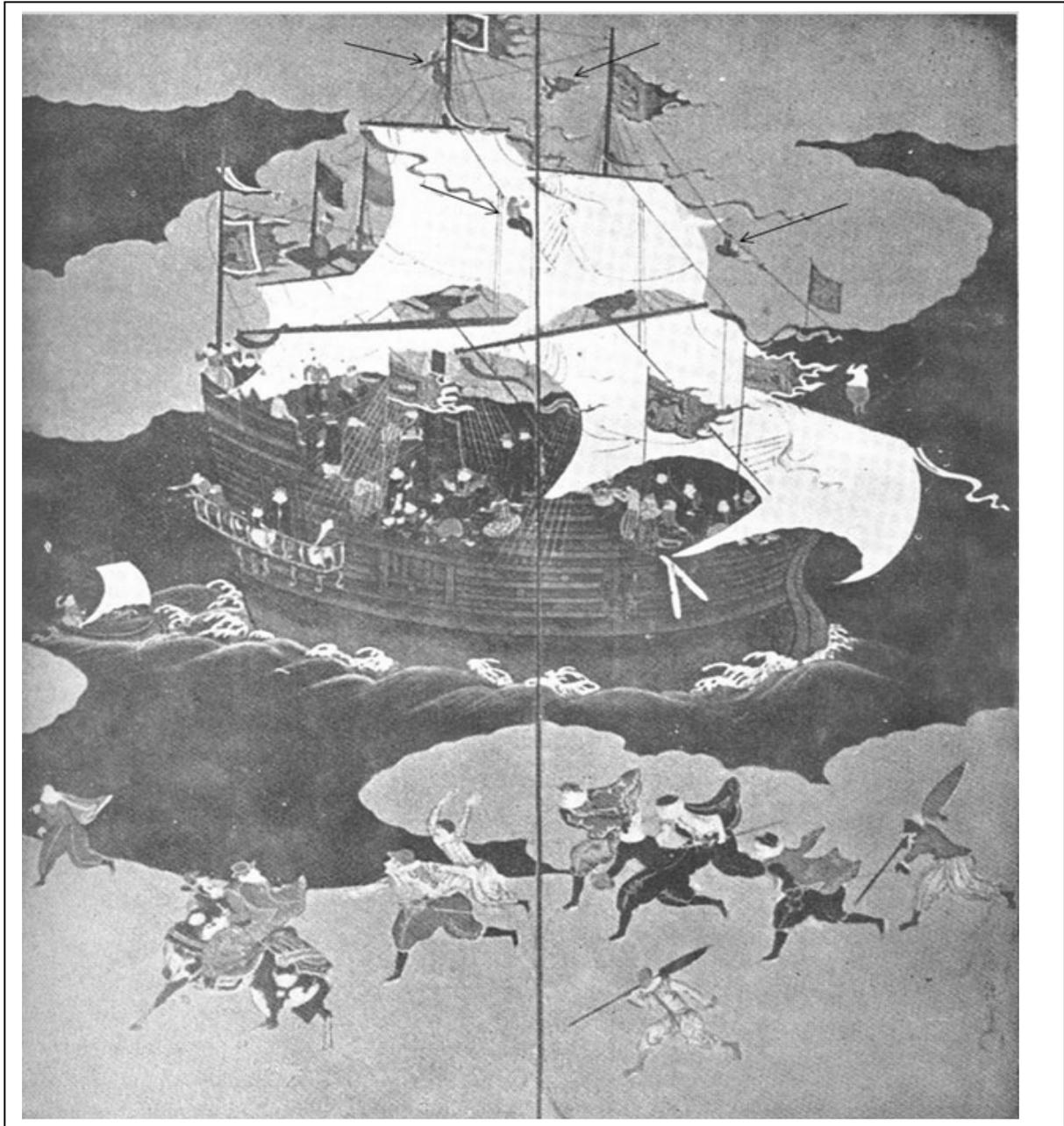


Figure 2

Figure 2 is part of a much larger picture entitled “The departure of the southern barbarians,” which was painted by Kano Naizen in the early 17th century. It belongs to the Kyushu National Museum.

Another interesting incident is described online at:

<http://www.e-budo.com/forum/showthread.php?p=57119> ; a small part is reproduced below:

"Maybe no recorded personal duel per se but the story about the Portuguese being banned from bringing swords (rapiers) ashore during the extensive trading exchanges in Kyushu is documented. The reason for the ban was linked to the fact that the Portuguese originally cut down so many samurai. The local samurai responded by having new swords made which were much lighter than the battle blades they normally carried. Later, another encounter occurred and a virtual small scale war ensued with many Portuguese dying in the skirmish. I know about this because a distant relative of my teacher actually took part in this bit of historical trivia. My teacher (Takamura Yukiyoshi) still owned his relatives sword which was made specifically in response to the Portuguese sword tactics the samurai encountered in Kyushu. Like the famous *Kogarasu Maru*, this sword was double edged from about 5 inches to the *kissaki* but much lighter and faster. This design was adopted to allow a swift back-cut like the ones the Portuguese employed so effectively against the samurai with rapiers. Once armed with swords of this style, the samurai turned the tables even on the Portuguese in the second encounter. This is when the ban was finally instituted. The whole trading relationship was threatened. The Japanese needed the guns from the Portuguese and the Portuguese needed the gold from the Japanese. Duels were doing neither side any good at this point so the Portuguese were banned from bringing weapons ashore. Really the only possible options as the Portuguese were on Japanese territory."

"...From what little I understand, the original confrontation resulted due to a serious breach of protocol by a Portuguese officer towards a Japanese official. He was summarily cut down by group of samurai. A party of sailors experienced at swordplay hearing of the incident went ashore armed with rapiers intent on a confrontation. Another incident of this type occurred (or was instigated) but the Portuguese were prepared and avenged their shipmate by quickly cutting down several samurai. Evidently several other similar incidents occurred in a short period of time which shook the proud samurai. Things calmed as the Portuguese were temporarily confined to their ship. Never to forget such a breach of honor the samurai set about a crafting a suitable response. Sometime later small contingents of Portuguese were allowed ashore and always came armed. The samurai insulted by the previous incident and angered by the defiance of the armed Portuguese instigated another incident. During this confrontation many of the Portuguese died or were seriously wounded."

"Both Japanese and Portuguese officials clamped down to prevent any further

misadventures so the Portuguese were banned from coming ashore armed in any way. The local samurai were likewise ordered under penalty of death not to draw upon an unarmed Portuguese sailor.”

"I think I've got this story right. It was related to me by *Takamura Yukiyoishi Sensei* several years ago in relation to a double-edged sword I previously mentioned. How much of this story is fact or conjecture I cannot be sure of, but the premise does seem plausible given other accounts of this or similar incidents."

This is an interesting tale which raises several points for discussion. First, it is doubtful that the duels related were between trained Japanese warriors and Portuguese sailors-soldiers. (The term Samurai was avoided here because, as explained above, they did not exist in this period.) Instead it is probable that these encounters were between Portuguese sailor-soldiers and Japanese merchants who were allowed at that time to go about armed with swords. This may explain why the encounters were favorable to the Portuguese. The solution found by the Japanese, in the episode described above, that is, to modify their swords, would not be accepted by Japanese warriors who would use their swords on other occasions. This is not to say the swordsman did not have to adapt his techniques when encountering a different weapon.

Two examples are described in the literature with respect to the use of a *kusarigama* (sickle chain). A first example of the use and misuse of the weapon is the story of the great 17th century *kusarigama* teacher *Yamada Shinryukan*. *Shinryukan* was known to have killed many swordsmen with his weapon, until he was lured into a bamboo grove by *Araki Mataemon*. There, because of the terrain, he was unable to swing the chain and trap *Mataemon's* sword, and was thus killed. Another famous example of the use of a *kusarigama* against a *katana* is given by the example of *Shishido Baiken*. A swordsman of great skill. He was proficient with the *kusarigama*, but was killed by the legendary samurai *Miyamoto Musashi* when the latter used a throwing knife to cause a non-fatal injury from outside the radius of the chain, and then moved in for the killing blow with his sword. (See below for the use of *the kusarigama* with success.)

Consideration of the statements of actual combatants of last real sword fights produced no definitive conclusions, as there were disagreements as to resulting success of each combatant.

Sword fighters of British India

A book by D.A. Kinsley (**Kinsley (2009)**) contains "a collection of combat narratives and commentaries". The Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-59 was the last conflict in which there was an extensive use of the sword. These combat reports offer an insight into the opinions of people who had true experience with swords.

Why did the sword disappear from the battle field?

According to Kinsley (**Kinsley (2009)**), until the invention of the bayonet in the 17th century infantrymen in Europe carried and were trained in the use of the sword. The sword, however, was the principal weapon of cavalry men until the invention of the revolver and the repeating carbine in the 19th century. Officers, who always carried swords, then made the revolver their weapon of choice as noted by Lt. Col. C.H.Powell (1st Goorka Rifles):

"the sword is practically useless as a weapon of offence compared to the revolver", and "now it is universally recognized that an officer should rely more on his revolver than in his sword". ("The invisibility of a soldier' Blackwood' Edinburgh Magazine, 1899). "...it was the revolving pistol produced by Samuel Colt in 1836 that made the ancient art of swordsmanship obsolete (Thomas Heron McKee, the gun Book, 1918)".

The transition was not an easy one because the revolver in service tended to misfire. Most officers carried more than one pistol, whereas few carried more than one sword.

"With the introduction of metallic cartridges (ca.1860) and a subsequent improvement in the mechanism guaranteed the elimination of the sword as a weapon rather than merely a ceremonial accoutrement."

"the Sepoy Mutiny War was the last conflict in which there was not only an extensive use of the sword, but extensive hand to hand combat..."

Identifying the best sword

The subject is very controversial. Kinsley (**Kinsley (2009) page 6**) noted:

"The best steel blades were made in India, because no finer steel was ever produced than the Indian sword blades.....No wonder that the British officers often discarded their regulation blades for *tulwars* [a typical Indian curved blade, see **Figure 3**]"

Later in the same book (page 84), the author states:

"Another authority, among others, wrote that "it is a grave mistake to imagine that the English sword blades are of inferior quality" They were "infinitely superior to the ordinary run of native *Tulwars*." ("The Bengal Calvary " Calcutta Review, 1856) (See **Figure 3** for a *Tulwar*.)

The following quote on page 87 is surprising:

"The fact remained that in the *Sikh* war, arms, heads, hands and legs of British soldiers were lopped off by the enemy on all sides: while the English swordsmen labored often in vain to draw blood. Yet the *Siks*, as it was found, used chiefly our own cast-off dragoon blades, fitted with new handles, sharpened until they had a razor edge, and worn in wooden scabbard ("The Horse guard Rampant, "

Household Words, 1854). These were made of the best English cast steel and infinitely better than any Eastern blade "(Maj. John Jacob, Native Troops of the Indian Army 1854).

The author further continues to recognize the merits of each type of sword, without choosing which is superior in the following quote:

"as to the intrinsic qualities of European and Indian sword respectively, there are finely tempered blades and very badly tempered blades in both" (Lt. Gen. Sir Charles James Napier, Defects, Civil and Military, of the Indian Government, 1853)

No definitive conclusions were reached when considering the advantages of a thrusting sword compared to those of a slashing sword. The best argument against the thrusting sword is found in page 75, given by Maj. John Jacob, commander of the Scinde Irregular Horse:

"Experience in real fight shows that, for horse soldiers, the cut is more deadly and effective in every way than the point of the sword. The speed of the horse prevents the swordsman from drawing back his arm with sufficient rapidity after a home thrust; so that his sword, after passing through his enemy, is very liable to be knocked out of his hand, the weapon running up to the hilt and then of course violently stopping. This has happened to me...Such a tremendous twist, too, will certainly break any but first rate blade: and the blade breaks before it can be withdrawn."

In other parts of the book some real fighters defend the use of thrusting swords in very strong terms. Heavy swords against light swords are also discussed without a conclusion. Holding an actual old Indian *Tulwar* (see **Figure 3**) would undoubtedly verify that the hilt is too tight for the fist. In most books this is explained by saying that the Indians have smaller hands than Europeans; however, in this book it is pointed out that the tightness of the hilt on their fist places the edge of the blade in perfect position to deliver the most effective blow. In fact, the British swords of the period are criticized for having their hilts too loose in the hand.



Figure 3

Most readers are amazed by the above discussion about the hilt size. This is because

perhaps Japanese swords are regarded as a two-hand swords. This is not completely true. The *tachi*, for example, according to Nobuo Nakahara (**Nakahara (2010)** page 14) were made for one-handed use. Swords used on horseback are all one-hand swords because of the difficulty in controlling the horse under battle conditions. Also as discussed above, a slashing weapon may be better than a thrusting weapon. Even infantry, however, used the so called *katate-uchi* during the middle *Muromachi* period. These swords were a one-hand sword. In the battles of the *Muromachi* period there was little room for too much of the swordsmanship appropriate for the two-handed swords.

Besides all the other features discusses in attempting to determine the superiority of one weapon over another is the basic concept of “stopping power”. This refers to the ability of one sword or another to incapacitate the enemy so that he/she can no longer continue in the combat. Kinsley (Kinsley (2009)) quotes the following written by Asst. Surgeon J. J. Cole, Punjab Irregular Auxillary Force, Mooltan Field Force:

"The English dragoon sword is so blunt that the strongest men cannot drive it though the head dress of the Sikh of Afghan; nevertheless, the enemy is most often beaten from his horse and frequently killed by the violence of the shock. Not so, however, with the trenchant blade of the Sikh. This weapon, wielded by a strong arm, will cut through any head piece and bury itself perhaps in the brain; and yet you find no sign of concussion or compression. In the former example, the soldier is effectually disabled, often killed outright; In the latter, although the individual is mortally wounded, he may be able to continue the fight, and even to kill his antagonist before he falls himself dead or dying from his horse." (Military Surgery, 1852)

Conclusion:

The result of a fight between two fighters or a small group of fighters is very hard to predict. If the fighters involved are using different weapons then this becomes even more unpredictable and nothing can be said about the quality of the weapons. One of the most famous duels of the Edo era involved two very young women (*Miyagino* and *Shinobu*) whofought a duel against a swordsman (*Shiga Daihichi*). The swordsman was using a sword and the two young ladies were using a *Naginata* (*Miyagino*) and a *kusarigama* (*Shinobu*). The two ladies won the duel and the swordsman was killed. (See **Figure 4**) As mentioned in another article (**Coutinho 2011- b**) the duels in Japan did not require the use of the same weapons or that the contestants were in equal number.

When the swords are not very different, the opinion of Lt. Gen F. H. Tyrrel, Indian Army, Journal of the United States Cavalry Association, 1908 (**Kinsley 2010** page 7) is perhaps the wisest:

"But the never-ending controversy about what is the type of sword and style of

swordsmanship were the most effective was an exercise of futility, because each swordsman had his own preferences based on his own skills, and because the answer to the question of cut and thrust is more effective depends on the weapon and the hand that uses it"



Figure 4

The reason why this advice “each man with his own preferred weapon” was not followed by the British army was an economic one. Prior to 1788, the system required that each regimental colonel procure regimental swords (**Robson (1975)** and **Robson (1996)**). This allowed some freedom but was clearly not economical. Committees were formed to produce the so-called **Regulation Patterns**. The blades were, as expected, a compromise. The swords had to be mass-produced and inexpensive. According to (**Robson (1975)** and **Robson (1996)**) some dreadful swords were inflicted upon the British army. On the other hand, the expenses of maintaining each man with his own sword were intolerable for the British army.

Acknowledgments

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