



ABOUT THE TYPES OF JAPANESE SWORDS



NEWSLETTER

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ABOUT THE TYPES OF JAPANESE SWORDS

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This year the Brazilians that are Japanese descendents living in Brazil are commemorating the first centenary of the arrival of the first ship with 800 of them from Japan. This series of articles are dedicated to them who, although few in numbers, have give a enormous contribution to their adopted society.

One learns from the very beginning that there is a correct way to examine a sword in order to identify the maker. The order is S for the shape of the blade, P for the pattern of the steel (*hada*) that can be seen in its surface, E for edge, that is the shape of the hardened edge (*hamon*), and T for tang (*nakago*). By shape the experienced collector knows that he has to decide if the sword is wide or narrow, thick or thin, if it is strongly curved or almost straight and so on. This article begins before that. I want to ask what is the type of Japanese sword one is examining? In Japanese when one speaks of the type of the sword one speaks its *tsurikomi*, that is, *tsurikomi* means the construction structure of the blade. At this point, the reader may ask himself/herself if there is something new that he/she can learn about this. I hope to demonstrate in this article that sometimes one can get confused and I shall try to give a personal view on how to avoid confusion on this very basic topic.

The two major types offer no difficulty. They are *hira zukuri* swords and *shinogi zukuri* (also know as *hon zukuri*) swords. I hope to show that the other types are a bit more complicated to identify.

I shall begin with two difficult guys: The *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri* swords and the *u-no-kubi zukuri* swords. In order to define these two types it is better to define another common type called *shobu zukuri*. This is like a *hon zukuri* but without the *yokote*. The Figure 1a and Figure 1b bellow shows the two common types of *shobu zukuri* blades. As indicted in the figures these two types differ only by the *naginata hi* carved on one of them (the one in figure 1b). These two types are not usually distinguished in the literature. The reason I have distinguished them is that the type with *naginata hi* is very similar to a small *naginata*. The difference is that the width (*haba*) of the *naginata* increases as we move from the base towards the point whereas in the *shobu zukuri* it decreases.

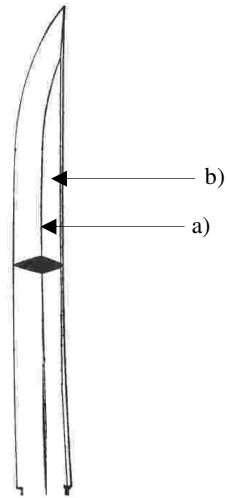


Figure 1a

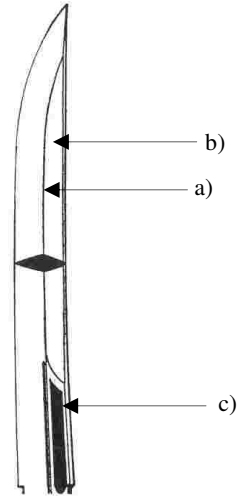


Figure 1b

Figure 1a This figure shows a *shobu zukuri* blade without grooves (*naginata hi*). Line (a) is the *shinogi*. The surface (b) is the *shinogi ji*

Figure 1b This figure shows a *shobu zukuri* with (c) grooves (*naginata hi*). Usually it looks like a *naginata* but the width (*haba*) decreases as we go from the base to the point.

REMARK 1 In some *shobu zukuri* the *shinogi* line goes up to the point.

REMARK 2 Note in figure 2a and 2b that it is easy to go from a *shobu-zukuri* type to a *shinogi zukuri* type. This is sometimes done in Japan and this procedure is called to put a *yokote*, but I think it is better to say to put a *kissaki*.

Figure 2a and Figure 2b shows the process of 'putting a *yokote*'.

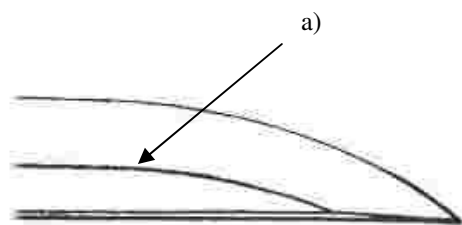


Figure 2a

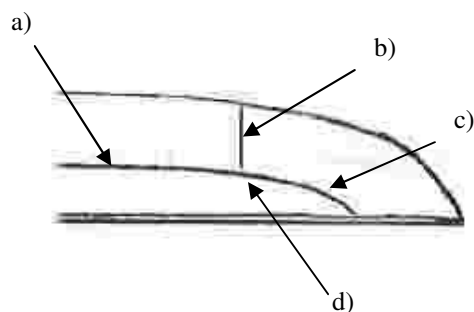


Figure 2b

Figure 2a Shows a *shobu zukuri* blade that is going to receive a *kissaki* as show in figure 2b.

Figure 2b Is the same as Figure 2a but with a *kissaki* added. The *kissaki* consists of a *yokote* (line b) a *ko-shinogi* (line c). The point where the *shinogi* (line a) the *ko-shinogi* (line b) and the *yokote* (line c) met is called *mitsukado*.

The two types--*kanmuri-otoshi zukuri* and *u-no-kubi zukuri* ---are defined from the *shobu zukuri* type on the article by Kashima Susumu [1] as follows: *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri* are "generally short blades [similar to the *shobu zukuri* type] with partly thinned down *shinogi ji*; the *shinogi* line reaches the point." On the other hand, *u-no-kubi zukuri* are "usually short blades [similar to the *shobu zukuri* type] without *yokote*, and [with the thinned down] *shinogi ji* stopping at the *mune* before reaching the point." However these definitions are not always followed. For instance Nagayama Kokan [2] defines, on page 54 of his book, that in the *kanmuri-otoshi* "the lower part of the blade is a normal *shinogi zukuri* type, but the *shinogi* is cut on a diagonal, making this type similar to those in the *shobu zukuri* style." On the other

hand the *u-no-kubi zukuri* type is defined as "similar to the *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri* except that only the middle of the *shinogi* is slanted, while the lower part and the *kissaki* is normal. This type sometimes has *yokote*." The difference in the two definitions is that Nagayama Kokan sensei definition allows for a *yokote* in the *u-no-kubi zukuri* type.

Figures 3 shows how the *u-no-kubi zukuri* looks like, and figure 4 shows the *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri*. Note that the two types can be derived from the *shobu zukuri* type by just thinning down the *shinogi ji*. (In the case of the *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri* it may be necessary first to extend the *shinogi* line to the point and then thin the *shinogi ji* down.)

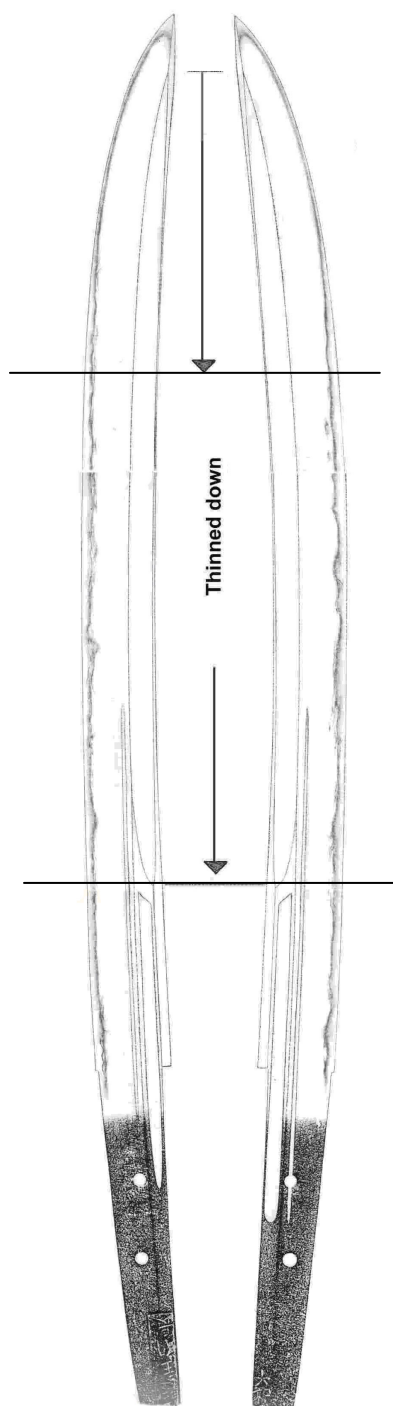


Figure 3

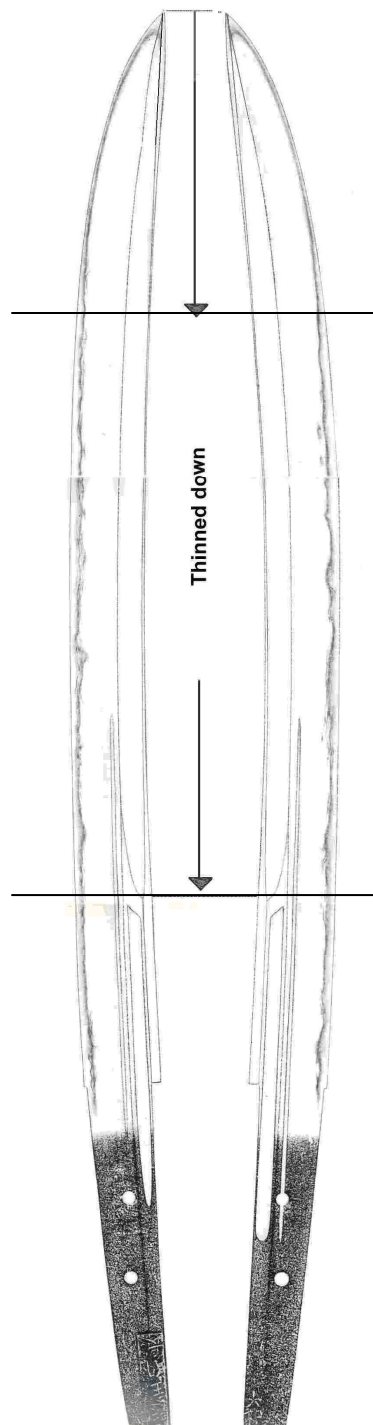


Figure 4

Figure 3 This figure shows a unokubi zukuri blade. Note that the thinned down shinogi stops before the point. This is an actual blade.

Figure 4 This figure shows a Kanmuri otoshi blade. Note that the thinned down shinogi goes up to the point. This is a theoretical situation where the blade in figure 3 would be thinned down by polishing it.

Like everything related to the Japanese sword the above distinctions are sometimes overlooked. Let me give you a few examples. Tanobe Michihiro sensei [3] describes a blade by Norinaga as *kanmuri-otoshi* although the thinned down *shinogi* stops before the tip of the blade. This blade should therefore be classified as *u-no-kubi zukuri*. Another blade, this time by Teruhiro, is again classified by sensei Homma Junji [4] as *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri* and in this case from the *oshigata* is difficult to tell if the thinned down *shinogi* reaches or not the tip of the blade. However in another occasion Sensei Homma Junji [5] classifies a blade by Masatsugu as *kanmuri-otoshi* although it has *yokote* and the *shinnogi* line finishes before the end of the very tip of the blade. This blade, according to the present article, should definitely be classified as *unokubi zukuri*. Finally Homma Junji [7] classifies as *shobu zukuri* a blade by Iga no Kami Kinmichi . In fact the blade is a *u-no-kubi-zukuri* blade. As the reader can see from the above examples the definition is not always followed.

Unfortunately we are not yet quite finished. There are *hira zukuri* blades that have the back thinned down. The figures below show two examples. The first is signed Junmyo and dates from the late Edo period (about the first half of the nineteen century). The second is signed Kiku ichi mon ji and is probably a gimei, made during or just before the second world war. This type of signature can be found in the book by Hawley (4) and in the book by Shimizu Osamu [5].

Swords of this type according to the present article should be classified as *u-no-kubi-zukuri style* because although they have no *shinogi* that can be thinned down, their backs were thinned down and this thinning down stops before the point. Unfortunately they are called either *u-no-kubi zukuri style* or *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri type*, regardless whether the thinned down back stops before or at the point depending on the author. Also, sometimes the word **style** or **type** is not mentioned. I leave to the reader to decide by himself/herself how they want to call them. The book by Suzuki [8] has seven examples of *tanto* classified as *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri*; however only one (a *tanto* by Nobuhide) can be classified this way. The others are *kanmuri-otoshi zukuri style* blades.

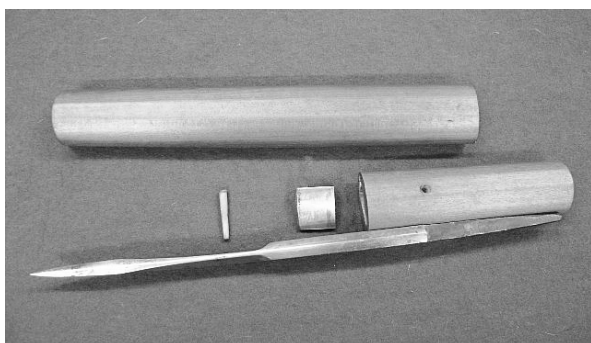


Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5 and **Figure 6** Photos showing a *hira zukuri tanto* with its back thinned down. It should be called *u-no-kubi zukuri style* blade.



Figure 7

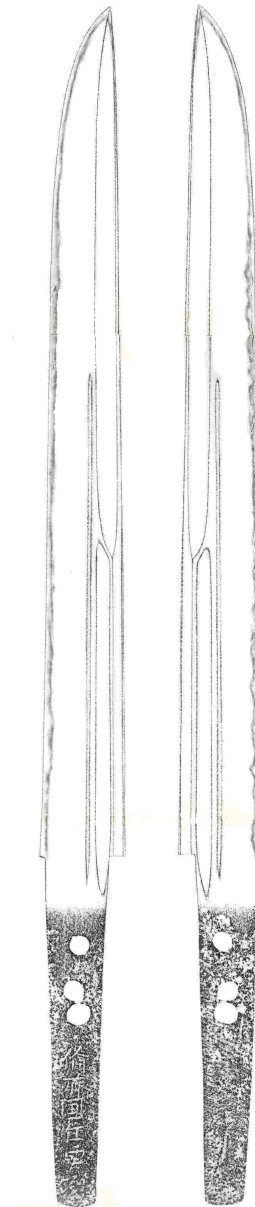


Figure 8

Figure 7 A *hira zukuri tanto* that has its back thinned down. It should be called *u-no-kubi zukuri style* blade.

Figure 8 A *hira zukuri tanto* that has its back thinned down. It should be called *kanmuri-otoshi style* blade.



Figure 9

Thinned areas in
one side have
been highlighted

shinogi line



Figure 10

Figure 9 A photograph of a *u-no-kubi zukuri* sword. Note: the shinogi line. If the thinned areas were filled rather than thinned this would be a shobu zukuri blade.

Figure 10 A photograph of a *u-no-kubi zukuri* style sword. Note that there is no *shinogi* line here. If the thinned areas were filled rather than thinned this would be a hira zukuri blade.

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- [3] Tanobe Michihiro "Apreciation of Master Pieces" *Token Bijutsu* 49 (first piece) (1992)
- [4] Homma Junji "*Kanto Hibi-Sho* " *Token Bijutsu* 50 1 (1992)
- [5] Homma Junji "*Kanto-Hibi-Sho*". *Token Bijutsu* (English edition) 20 (1984) 1-10 . See page 1 for the *oshigata* and page 7 for the description.
- [5] W. Hawley ' Japanese Swordssmiths Revised ' Hawley publications 1985. See page 259
- [6] Shimizu Osamu "*Tosho Zenshu Bijutsu*" Club Tokyo (2003). See page 614
- [7] Homma Junji "*Kanto Hibi-Sho*"*Token Bijutsu* 38 4 (1988)
- [8] Yoshisada Suzuki "*Tanto*" *Kogoei Shupan* Tokyo (1983). The following *tanto* are *kanmuri otoshi zukuri* **style**: Rai Kunimitsu, page 38; Ryokai,page 42; Bishu Yoshioka Ju Sukeyoshi, page 72; Bizen (no)kuni Ju Unji, page 82; Ryosai page 90;On the other hand the tanto by Minamoto Hideaki, page 262 has a clear *shinogi* line and so is a *kanmuri-otoshi*. (*Yoshisada* can be read *Katei* or *Kagiou*)