

Biography of a famous sword: Yoshimoto Samonji

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Swords have played a central part in Japanese history since the very beginning. Myths tell of Susano'o defeating the dragon with a sword which then became one of the three regalia of the imperial family. That sword, however, was a straight one (*tachi*). Starting with the tenth century, swords started to change towards the familiar shape we know today, with a deep curvature towards the end of the sword (*saki-zori*). After the establishment of the military government (*bakufu*) based in Kamakura in the twelfth century, swords started to be produced in large numbers. However, it is important to remember that the primary weapons of combat were bow and arrow, and later the spear (*yari*). Swords were a secondary alternative for close combat when all else failed, and their importance increased during the infantry-based battles of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, the sword has always been closely associated with the warriors' identity, and as we will see, it acquired many layers of meaning.

Probably the most famous swordsmith in history was Masamune (1264-1363). One of his celebrated disciples was Chikuzen Samonji (1277-1356), who made this sword. Samonji established his forge in Ikihama in the Chikuzen province, and is also simply called 'Sa' or 'O-sa', from the first character of his name which he inscribed on the blades. The first documented owner of this sword is the warlord Miyoshi Masanaga (1508-1549), who presented it to Takeda Nobutora (1491-1574), lord of Kai province, as a sign of their alliance. Nobutora then included it in the dowry for his daughter Jokei'in on the occasion of her marriage to Imagawa Yoshimoto, lord of Suruga province on the occasion of his marriage to Nobutora's oldest daughter, Jokei'in (1519-1550). Yoshimoto was an old ally of Nobutora. While Nobutora was visiting his daughter, the wife of Imagawa Yoshimoto, in 1541, Nobutora's son Shingen took over leadership of Kai province and expelled his own father. Nobutora found refuge in Yoshimoto's castle.

Meanwhile, Yoshimoto made this dowry sword his favourite because of his deep love for his wife. Besides an effective fighting tool, it now also became a symbol of love. It was by Yoshimoto's side up to his final moments in the battle of Okehazama of 1560. Yoshimoto was on the retreat, but Nobunaga's men caught up with him. Yoshimoto used the sword to cut the knees

of Hattori Kazutada, but was then beheaded by Mori Yoshikatsu. The sword was taken to Nobunaga, who shortened the blade from 78.8 to 65.1 cm, effectively turning it from a *katana* to a *wakizashi* with a curvature (*sori*) of 1.8 cm. He inscribed it in gold: 'on the nineteenth day of the fifth month of Eiroku three [1560] through the killing of Yoshimoto this sword came in the possession of Oda Nobunaga, the lord of Owari.' Nobunaga probably shortened the sword at the advice of Hon'ami Koji (1524-1603), one of the top sword expert of the time, whose son Ko'etsu would become a celebrated artist. This was standard practice of the time – the length of swords decreased in the sixteenth century to match new one-hand sword combat styles. Longer swords were frequently paired with shorter swords, forming a set called *daisho*. Nobunaga probably shortened the sword to match it with a longer sword already in his possession. From a symbol of love, the Samonji thereon became a symbol of military victory.

Nobunaga formed a nucleus for what would later become an unified country, but his luck ran out in 1582, when his retainer Akechi Mitsuhide launched a surprise night attack on him at Kyoto's Honno-ji Temple, forcing Nobunaga to commit suicide. Nobunaga's mistress fled from the scene with the sword and entrusted it with her father, the chief priest of Matsuo Shrine. Hideyoshi was informed about the whereabouts of the sword and forced the priest to hand over the sword so Hideyoshi can avenge the death of his master, Nobunaga. After Hideyoshi's death, the sword remained with the Toyotomi until it was given to Tokugawa Ieyasu to ensure his benevolence. This illustrious pedigree gave rise to the legend that whoever came into possession of this sword would become the ruler of Japan, and was thus carefully preserved in the Tokugawa family for centuries until the end of Tokugawa rule.

Besides political authority, swords like this also had cultural authority. Yoshimoto Samonji shared owners with a few other objects associated with the tea ceremony. For example, the famous tea caddy named Nitta once belonged to Miyoshi Masanaga, one of the first warlords to join tea gatherings. It was then owned by many warlords including Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, until it was recovered from the ruins of the siege of Osaka castle in 1615 and was included in Ieyasu's collection.

Therefore, like many other famous objects, Yoshimoto Samonji passed through the hands of famous warlords, and throughout its history it was transformed from a fighting tool to a symbol of political alliance, love and authority.

Chronology

1520s Belongs to Miyoshi Masanaga.

1527 Presented to Takeda Nobutora.

1537 Presented to Imagawa Yoshimoto.

1560 Nobunaga receives the sword after Yoshimoto's death in the battle of Okehazama.

1582 After Nobunaga's death the sword is hidden at Kyoto's Matsuo Shrine.

1582 Confiscated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

1598 Toyotomi Hideyori inherits the sword after Hideyoshi's death.

1600 Presented by the Toyotomi family to Tokugawa Ieyasu.

1657 The sword is damaged in the Meireki fire which wipes out a large part of Edo including Edo castle. It is repaired, but according to experts the quality does not match the original.

1868 The Meiji Emperor erects the Takeisao Shrine in Kyoto for the deified Oda Nobunaga. The Tokugawa family offers the sword to the shrine, where it is still kept today.

1923 Declared Important Cultural Property.

Contemporary reception

The sword is personified in the 2015 online game Touken Ranbu as a pink-haired youth in monk's garb. The game imagines the thoughts and feelings of the sword as it is transformed from a fighting sword to a heirloom in the possession of the successive rulers of Japan.

You will find images of the Touken Ranbu character at the bottom of this page:

http://touken-ranbu.wikia.com/wiki/Souza_Samonji

Images of the sword are here:

http://www.shinken-ex.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/IMG_0003_20110903120904.jpg

http://www.shinken-ex.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/e0040579_4124762.jpg