San'in Quest
JAPANESE SWORDSMITHING

The Japanese sword is an object at once lethal and beautiful. In a modern age when far deadlier weapons of mass destruction are within easy reach, the sword nevertheless retains a certain sway on the popular imagination. Even today, it seems that to gaze upon an old sword is to feel the weight of its history, and behold "the spirits of past generations of owners."

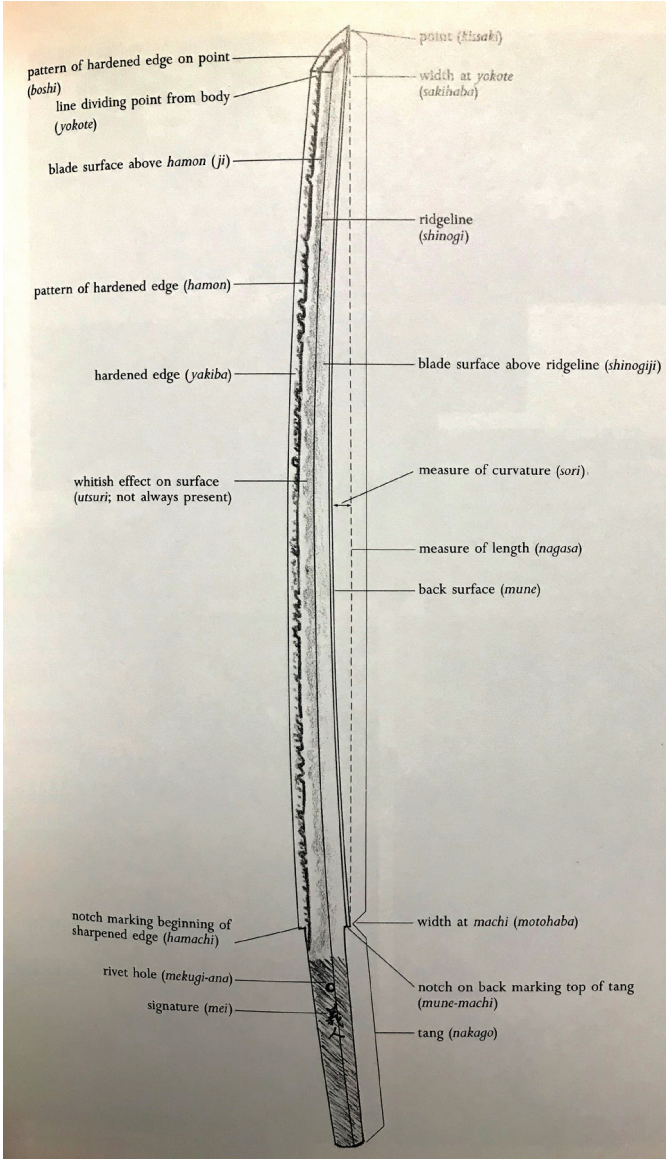
As Mohammed declared the sword to be "the key of Heaven and of Hell," so too did Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) remark that "the sword is the soul of the samurai." However, the history of the sword in Japan is long and colourful, entangled with all manner of myths and legends, and predates the emergence of the samurai class by a considerable margin. For example, the sword Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, one of the three Imperial Regalia, is believed to date back to the Divine Ages. It was discovered by the storm god Susanoo-no-Mikoto when he slew a giant eight-headed serpent – or so the legend goes.

The sword fulfilled many roles in society even as its form evolved over the centuries. It was an indispensable battle weapon, both from horseback and in close-quarter combat; an object of ritual dedication to shrines and temples; a part of ceremonial dress worn by courtiers; a symbol of authority, social status, and wealth for the samurai; an objet d'art; a precious heirloom, for those who inherit one; the means of *seppuku*, or honourable ritual suicide for the samurai. Such was the reverence in which the sword was held that sword handling etiquette today is still heavily circumscribed.

Traditional swordsmithing demanded much of the swordmaker. They would purify themselves in mind and body, abstaining from meat and sexual relations, and frequently praying to both Shinto and Buddhist deities. One of the *kami* most commonly invoked was the Shinto deity O-Inari, god of rice and of metalworkers. Stories abound regarding divine interventions during the crafting process; visions of Kannon, it seems, were common. Buddhist ideas hold the sword to be a weapon against demons and evil influences, and so the sword-wielding Heavenly Kings stand guard at the gates of Buddhist temples. A legend tells of the smith who forged Minamoto Yoshitsune's sword, invoking the name of Amida Buddha with each stroke of the hammer.

Swordsmithing in the modern age has changed little in this sense. Many smiths still work in spaces whose perimeters are delineated by sacred *shimenawa* and *gohei*, evoking the ritually pure spaces of a Shinto shrine. So deeply hallowed and single-minded are the efforts poured into making a sword that the blade itself is believed to be a physical manifestation of a *kami*. Little wonder, then, that the sword and the circumstances of its making are yet capable of thrilling the beholder.

Crafting a sword



Parts of a sword

"The fact is that the Japanese sword can exist only within a very narrow range of physical conditions. It must be sharp, easy to hold and to wield, properly curved, forged of good-quality steel, and hardened at its edge but ductile along the body. Any innovations in the physical construction of the Japanese sword were all achieved long long ago." (Leon and Hiroko Kapp, *The Craft of the Japanese Sword)*

Though the smith forges the blade, the full making of a sword involves a team of specialists, and is overseen by the smiths themselves. A full exploration of this process alone would merit an entire book, but I have simplified certain details for the sake of readability and clarity.

Steel is a combination of iron and carbon. A form of raw steel known as *tamahagane* smelted in a

traditional large-scale furnace or *tatara* is used to forge Japanese swords. Historically, parts of what are today Hiroshima, Okayama, and Shimane prefectures were the predominant suppliers of the form of iron ore called *satetsu* ('iron sand') as well as charcoal. Both are used to make tamahagane. Not only does the Shimane region today still supply most of the raw materials for smelting tamahagane, it is also home to the nation's only tatara licensed to make this particular steel for swordmaking – the Nittoho tatara in Oku-Izumo. Tatara will be discussed later in this essay.

Innovations during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) – also referred to as the golden age of swords – led to the forging technique that still forms the basis of all swordsmithing today. A sword is forged from two blocks of steel. An outer jacket of higher-carbon steel (the *hadagane*) is wrapped around a comparatively softer, inner core of lower-carbon steel (the *shingane*). Much like the way a building is made earthquake-proof, a single blade marries all the conflicting yet desirable properties of the two steels – hardness and ductility – resulting in a sharp, deadly blade with a resilient core, one able to absorb shock in battle and therefore less likely to break.

The first stage involves forging these two blocks of steel. Unlike factory-smelted steel, which is brighter, with a more even chemical composition, blocks of tamahagane that first arrive at the smithy are darker in appearance, with an uneven distribution of carbon content. This steel is speckled with metallic red, blue, purple, and gold patches, hence its moniker 'jewel steel.' Using tamahagane provides far more textural and visual interest in the grain of the final blade. Practically speaking, steel that is less homogenous also results in a blade better able to withstand damage.

The smith treats tamahagane in his forge by welding pieces of them together. Similar to making croissant dough, the process of hammering, splitting, and folding steel back on itself results in a laminate containing thousands of layers. It allows any remaining slag – impurities – to melt away, and also creates the characteristic grain pattern in the steel known as *jihada*, highly prized by connoisseurs. Variations in how the steel is folded and hammered determine the exact visuals of this pattern.

All the while, the smith adjusts the carbon composition of the steel to his requirements. Too much carbon, and the steel will be brittle; too little, and it will be ineffective as a blade. Both high-carbon and low-carbon steel blocks undergo the same forging process, though the latter is welded with fewer folds than the former.

The outer block of steel is shaped into a long 'U'. The inner block is inserted snugly into this channel. Next, the smith reheats and forges this composite slab into a single piece of steel, further hammering it out into an approximation of the finished blade.

As if by magic, the length of this steel billet stretches out under the smith's hammer until it is transformed into a rectangular blank. The smith cuts a triangular section off the top, which then becomes the *kissaki* or curved blade tip. This blank is referred to as a *sunobe*.

The blade is still far from complete. To begin giving the blade its recognisable curved shape, the blank is heated and hammered again, section by section. Japanese swords exhibit a distinctive curvature, and the smith must be able to control the exact degree of this curvature during the hammering process – a skill that takes years of training. During this time, they add other characteristics such as a ridge line along the blade and notches on its edge.

Now that the body is complete but in a relatively rough state, it is time for the most dramatic part of the smithing process – *yaki-ire*. The sunobe is painted with a thick goulash of clay and charcoal powder. Not all of the blade is covered in this mixture, so as to expose certain parts of the blade to more heat than others.

The smith returns the clay-coated blade to the fire. Once it is heated to the appropriate temperature, he pulls the blade out and plunges it into a trough of water to 'quench' it. The sudden drop in temperature rapidly cools the blade. The insulating clay layers cause different sections of the blade to contract at varying speeds, increasing its curvature even further.

Yaki-ire can only be performed at in pure darkness – typically at night – because the smith judges the temperature of the blade by its colour only. It is a fraught, delicate process, where as many as one in three swords are lost. The smith must then rework or discard any failures.

How the clay is applied at this stage also governs the appearance of crystalline structures of steel particles, which appear as a patterned edge on the blade. This edge is called the *hamon*, and indicates the zone on the blade where hard steel intermixes with softer steel.

Hamon are purely decorative. Nevertheless, they are highly prized by connoisseurs. The presence of beautiful hamon is also testament to the smith's ability, for it signifies that a blade has been properly heat-treated.

Infinite variations of hamon exist. They can resemble lightning, clouds, waves, arcs, zigzags, and even clove flowers. True to the Japanese penchant for order and poeticism, thousands of hamon patterns have been meticulously catalogued and given appropriately poetic names. They can act as a signature for particular swordmakers, or indicate the school that forged the blade.

Now that the blade is fully forged, the swordsmith may give the blade an initial, rough polish before sending it to a professional polisher. At this stage, they may also add a decorative carving to the blade. Traditionally, these would be motifs such as dragons, flowers, or Buddhist deities. Modern swordsmiths occasionally dispense with tradition from time to time – much to the displeasure of more conservative factions in the swordmaking world!

San'in Quest
IZUMO SHRINE

Located in western Shimane Prefecture, Izumo Shrine is believed to be the oldest shrine in Japan. Though the precise date of its original construction remains unknown, it dates back to before the eighth century. It is consecrated to Ōkuninushi, the *kami* credited with creating the land. Known colloquially as Izumo Taisha, it is considered one of the nation's most important Shinto institutions and is a highly popular site of pilgrimage for Japanese people. However, this renown was hard-won, its fortunes having waxed and waned throughout its long history.

Izumo Shrine was not always known as such. For most of its existence, it operated as Kitsuki Taisha or The Great Kitsuki Shrine. It was only in 1871 that the shrine assumed the title of Izumo Ōyashiro or Izumo Grand Shrine, in recognition of its designation as a top-ranking shrine under the Meiji government's new nationalised shrine system.

Today, Japanese people flock to Izumo Shrine from all over the country to pray for good fortune in matters of *enmusubi*. Literally translating as "knot-tying," *enmusubi* expresses the notion establishing good relationships in all areas of one's life, and is particularly associated with love, romance, and marriage. It is said that this is why visitors should clap four times instead of the customary two times when praying at the shrine: twice for themselves, and twice for their existing or hoped-for partners. Unsurprisingly, Izumo Shrine is also a popular wedding venue.

Historical overview

Located just inland from the coast of the Sea of Japan, Izumo Shrine occupies a level site of approximately 80,000 square metres. As in Ise Shrine, to which it is often compared, the expansive shrine grounds are divided into the inner and outer precincts. Demarcated by a two-storey gatehouse and a simple fence of pointed stakes, the inner precinct houses the Main Hall where Ōkuninushi is enshrined.

The Main Hall was designated a National Treasure in 1952. It is notable for being built in the Taisha architectural style, the oldest form of shrine construction predating Buddhism's arrival in Japan. Characteristics of this style include a main hall elevated above the ground stilts, and forked chigi (finials) which project skywards from bark-thatched roofs.

One of the most noteworthy features of Izumo Shrine is the magnificent *shimenawa* (sacred rope made of braided rice straw) suspended from a sturdy cypress beam in front of the Worship Hall. It measures 13.5 metres in length and weighing nearly five tonnes, making it the largest *shinemawa* in Japan. The rope is renewed and replaced every six to eight years to ensure continued ritual purity. It is no small undertaking: this monumental effort of weaving, assembling, and installing a new rope involves a group of roughly 800 local volunteers and craftspeople each time.

Like Ise Shrine, Izumo Shrine was periodically rebuilt throughout its existence. However, it was not always reconstructed as an exact replica of its former self. The shrine underwent profound changes in its design several times over the centuries. Indeed, historical documents and archaeological evidence suggests that the Main Hall once towered above Nara's Todaiji Temple at around 48 metres, whereas the current structure stands at a modest 24 metres tall.

In the late Heian period, Izumo Shrine was rebuilt no fewer than six times between 1067 and 1115. These costly, time-consuming endeavours were a clear reflection of its status at the time. But at the same time, the Main Hall also collapsed no fewer than six times during this period. Natural disasters played no part; shrine records merely note that these had occurred "without reason." Modern historians believe that poor architectural planning, coupled with over-ambitious aspirations towards grandeur, resulted in the structural failures that led to its multiple collapses.

During the medieval period, Izumo Shrine was recognised as a prominent shrine that traced its origins to the Divine Ages. However, in practice it resembled other contemporary shrines in that it functioned as a strongly Buddhist-informed ritual institution. This was due to the longstanding primacy of Buddhism as a mode of administration and political control. Records as early as 1336 show that Susanoo[1], the local manifestation of a Buddhist deity, had eclipsed Okuninushi as the principal god enshrined here.

Kurosawa Sekisai (1612–78), a scholar from Matsue Domain, noted with dismay during his 1653 visit that the shrine complex "was filled with Buddha's images and sutras… decorated with Buddhist statues. Buddhist banners are flown in the four corners of the shrine, and it's difficult to tell the shrine from Buddhist buildings." HIs sharp criticisms reflected the decline of Buddhism, which had begun in the political turmoil of the Warring States period (c.1457–1600).

Precipitated by Kurosawa's comments, the Izumo priests set about "cleansing" the shrine of all Buddhist elements. By the late 1660s, Izumo Shrine had redefined itself as the first shrine in the land to practice the "One-and-Only Shinto," a self-proclaimed "pure" and "authentic" form of Shinto derived from the ancient chronicles. At the same time, the shrine authorities resurrected Ōkuninushi as its principal deity. Enshrining an explicitly native *kami* unaffiliated with any Buddhist divinity further bolstered the shrine's Shinto credentials. This unambiguous alignment with Ōkuninushi would prove highly useful for the shrine in the following centuries.

[1] According to Japanese mythology, Susanoo is the god of storms. Under the honji-suijaku theory whereby Buddhist deities "manifest" as local kami in order that the Japanese might be more easily "saved," he is identified with Gozu Tennō, a minor Buddhist deity.

In the second half of the 16th century, Izumo Shrine suffered another blow: it was stripped of more than half its sizable landholdings in the name of funding Toyotomi Hideyoshi's military campaign of invading the Korean Peninsula. This loss of land-based income represented a significant downturn in the shrine's economic fortunes.

In response to the substantial loss in land-based annual income, Izumo shrine officials turned to popular preaching during the late 15th century to raise funds for rebuilding, repairs, and other ritual commitments. Popular itinerant preachers "franchised" by the shrine authorities, known as *oshi*, helped bring in monetary funds. Over time, they also expanded their speaking activities to outside of Izumo province, a move encouraged by the post-Warring States years of peace, stability, and increasing commercialisation.

These preaching efforts proved successful. Izumo Shrine was able to raise funds from across the country numerous times, but also gained tremendous cultural cachet nationwide as a result. With further loosening of domestic travel restrictions, the shrine would also become a popular pitstop among Japanese pilgrims in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A major rebuilding took place once more in the 1660s, thanks to the bakufu's (military government) generous support. However, this was the last time Izumo Shrine would benefit from such state-sanctioned financial sponsorship. Along with the subsequent vicissitudes of political and societal changes, this meant that Izumo Shrine would never again be able to afford rebuilding on the grand scale or the frequency of its Heian-period undertakings. The last full rebuilding occurred in 1744, when the present Main Hall was built. Major renovations, instead of rebuildings, have taken place at Izumo Shrine ever since.

Ōkuninushi

Ōkuninushi, the "Great Lord of the Land," is the creation *kami* identified in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* as the primary god who made the land. He is associated with love, marriage, good fortune, agricultural harvests, and nation-building. Like a few other Shinto *kami*, he has many names. His numerous appellations include Ōnamuchi-no-kami, Yachihoko-no-kami, and most notably, Daikoku-sama, as he is often conflated with this member of the Seven Lucky Gods.

Interpretations of the specific details of narratives surrounding Ōkuninushi vary. Overall, it is agreed that his early years were filled with many extreme ordeals before he rose to prominence as the creation *kami*. His numerous feats include curing the white hare of Inaba; nurturing human life with his spear; pacifying and solidifying the floating land.

One version of the land-making episode occurs thusly. After Ōkuninushi rendered the land fertile and habitable, the sun goddess Amaterasu instigated several battles with him, demanding that he yield the land to her and her descendants. Eventually capitulating, Ōkuninushi surrendered the earthly realm he created, on the condition that Amaterasu would build him a shrine as grand as the palaces in heaven. She acquiesced. He then retreated to the invisible realm, taking up residence in Izumo Shrine, and today is said to preside over the *kami* of this unseen world.

Kannazuki: The Month without the Gods

Izumo province is known as the meeting place of the gods. It is said that every autumn, eight million *kami* from across Japan congregate here to determine the fortunes of humankind for the coming year. This divine gathering is held during the tenth month of the lunar calendar. Throughout Japan, this time of year is referred to as *kannazuki*, or the "Month without the Gods." Conversely, Izumo locals call it *kamiarizuki* - the "Month with the Gods."

The festival held at this time spans seven days. It begins with the Kamimukae-sai or "Welcoming of the Gods" at Inasa-no-Hama Beach, located one kilometre west of Izumo Taisha. As the name suggests, a ceremony is held to welcome the gods to the temporal plane. Bonfires are burned before shrine priests escort the gods to Izumo Shrine. The seven days afterwards are the Kamiari-sai, i.e. the grand divine assembly. Numerous rituals are conducted during this period, and the local residents take special care with loud noises to avoid disturbing the meetings. The final day sees the Karasade-sai or "Departure of the Gods," where everyone can send the gods off on their return journeys.

The origins of the concept of *kannazuki* are murky. It was not always associated with Izumo Province, but the idea seemed to have gradually taken hold of popular imagination over time, and by the 16th century it was widely agreed that the gods did indeed go to Izumo province in the tenth month. By the 1630s, Izumo Shrine was identifying itself as the primary location of this divine assembly, which only elevated its status as a prominent Shinto shrine.

Interestingly enough, Ōkuninushi was also not originally considered to have particular bearing on *enmusubi*. This was engineered by one of the *oshi*, Sasa Seishō, who composed and distributed a 32-page preaching tract in 1772. Part of this text includes a creative reading of the land-surrendering episode. It highlights Ōkuninushi's marriage to the Takami-musubi god's daughter in the story, and claims that this makes him central to promoting good marriages[2]. It was a strategic and clever move, as ensuring the succession of the household (ie) was a central concern of early modern Japanese society. Spreading this idea helped in part to cement Ōkuninushi in the popular imagination as a god who could take care of all earthly matters.

[2] In Japanese mythology, Takami-musubi is one of the first kami who came into existence when the universe was created. One version of the above episode sees Takami-musubi arranging for his daughter to marry Ōkuninushi for surrendering the land to Amaterasu.