

The Katana through the ages

In this first part the Katana will be studied not as a simple piece of metal but as a real symbol. The Katanas and their owners, the Samurai, have a preponderant place in Japanese history. Everywhere in the country and at any time from the 10th century to World War II Japanese history has been linked with that of the Samurai. These Warriors brought lots of modifications to the form of the katana. That is why each period of Japanese history can be matched with a particular type of katana.

Until 10th century : Early Japan

Although katanas did not yet exist this period is significant. As in the rest of the world, the prehistoric inhabitants of the Japanese islands were gatherers, fishers and hunters. Japan started to unify thanks to the introduction of the cultivation of rice (300BC to 300AD) which created a social hierarchy. We increasingly find the biggest land owners at the top of the social hierarchy. The country evolved under Chinese influence which decreased only during the 8th century. Times of trouble appeared. Each land owner tended to extend his influence and the dominant clan changed frequently. The troubles persisted until the era of the Fujiwara clan which reformed the country : a new government headed by an emperor and an administrative system were established. Heian (Kyoto) was chosen as the capital. All lands were redistributed among the farmers in order to introduce a tax system.

10th – 12th century : Heian period

The emperor's power declined, unlike that of the land owners. In fact the taxes were so high that smaller owners were forced to become tenants of larger ones. Public order was no longer maintained and a military class emerged : the samurai. These warriors were in charge of the protection of property. They usually fought on horses and the contexts were simple duels, where they used long, heavy swords (80 cm.). The main characteristic of their swords was their curve. Earlier swords were straight. Only the Samurai owned a curved sword and he was respected as representing his master's power. Only at the end of this period did the Japanese give interest to finely tamped (**trempe**)

katanas which were the most beautiful. The best smiths hence became more and more renowned.

13th century : Beginning of Kamakura period

As the emperor had lost power a coalition led by the Minamoto family took control over Japan after defeating the emperor's army. The war lasted from 1180 to 1185 and opposed Samurai in duels which would be seen as Homeric by a spectator today. The armour and the katanas became heavier and more sophisticated : The development of the two necessarily went together. The finely tapered katana was replaced by a larger, thicker and heavier one. Its use demanded a lot of strength and two-handing fighting techniques began. After the war a feudal government headed by Minamoto Yoritomo was established in Kamakura. The Minamoto family had a real military culture and when Yoritomo became the leader of Japan he was appointed Shogun (highest military officer.) The place of the Samurai changed : they acceded to the noble class. During the half century which followed, "noble" even became a synonym of "Samurai". Moreover the Shogun had little power over the Samurai-lords who were now feared and respected for themselves. They became demanding about their katana and the forging had to make lots of progress, both technical and artistic. This period was the golden age of the Japanese sword. Nowadays artists, even with their high techniques, cannot reproduce the quality of these blades.

13th – early 14th century : End of Kamakura period

In 1274, a few years after having conquered China, the Mongols tried to do the same with Japan. After only a few hours of fighting, however, the large naval invasion fleet was forced to pull back because of bad weather conditions. The Mongol force was modern and the Samurai should have had no chance against it. Having a good preparation the Japanese maintained a good defence for several weeks during a second invasion. Yet the Mongols would not have been defeated once more without the kamikaze (divine winds) which again drove back the invaders. The Japanese fought in duels after each opponent had been presented, which was considered a mark of honour. Unlike the Mongols, who fought in a group, the Japanese had little chance of victory. These events brought changes. The armour became less heavy. The katana became easier to handle both on horseback and on foot : the sword became more tapered, the tip became longer

and more pointed. After the war the shogun forgot to reward the Samurai who consequently refused his authority.

14th century : Nambokucho period

Helped by the Samurai, emperor Go-Daigo restored imperial power in Kyoto in the year 1333. But he failed to satisfy those who helped him. Ashikaja Takauji and an imperial lord banished Go-Daigo. Two imperial courts appeared, the southern one headed by Go-Daigo and the northern one headed by Takauji, who appointed himself shogun. Each Samurai wanted to show his bravery and chose a side to fight with. During little more than 50 years lots of wars — the Nambokucho wars — opposed both clans. They fought in groups and for the first time a war in Japan concerned all the Japanese people. The Samurai's attitude changed : they forgot their strong ideas about honour and fought treacherously. Moreover they wanted to differentiate themselves from ordinary soldiers. The armour's ornaments became impressive and the katana became gigantic in order to intimidate. The blade became longer — more than 90 cm —, finer and more curved. Handiness was not the main characteristic of this sword and the Samurai had to carry it on his back. The use of a second sword became usual. This shorter katana, which warriors used with only one hand, was called "Uchigatana" and "Tachi" was the name given to the other bigger one. Thanks to the works of the artist Masamune, smiths became able to mix metals of different densities. We will examine this technical aspect further.

15th – 16th century : Muromachi period

In 1392 the southern court finally wins. They captured the Muromachi district where north government buildings were located. This district in Kyoto became the political centre of the reunited land. At the Beginning the peace induced a diminution in the production of katanas. Even if some samurais had a tachi and an uchigatana, only the uchigatana was used. The interest of Ming China in the katanas established good trade relations. This event developed a new social class : the traders, who earn lots of money in trading with China but between different parts of Japan too. The families composed at once of land owners, traders and samurai became more and more powerful and surpassed provincial constables. The influence of the emperor and the shogun declined to practically nothing and new feudal lords called "Daimyo" exerted the actual control over the different parts of Japan. Each daimyo wanted to extend his domination and Japan saw

an age of civil wars which began in 1467 with the war of Onin. The renewed demand for the production of katanas increased so much that the blacksmiths gave preference to the quantity rather than beauty and quality. The uchigatana became smaller — 55 to 65 cm — and more curved. With those really small swords came "Iai's techniques" : striking the enemy immediately on drawing swords. In 1542 the first Portuguese traders and Jesuit missionaries arrived in Japan and introduced firearms and Christianity. Christianity was welcomed but the firearms induced the reinforcement of the armour. The small uchigatana was then abandoned and the two handed katanas reappeared.

1573 – 1603 : Momoyama period

The daimyo Oda Nobunaga reunified Japan by conquering the whole country. The calm which followed and the discovery of gold mines allowed the whole country to grow rich and to develop arts and culture. The big early tachis came back into fashion. The samurai appreciated early tachis which had been just cut short or ordered katanas like small tachis. Each forge developed its own style and the relationship between a powerful samurai and his smith was very close. The new shogun makes one significant reform. He confiscated all the weapons of all farmers. Every ugly sword forged during the civil wars disappeared then. Subsequently only the samurai had the right to carry a pair of swords.

17th – 18th century: Beginning of Edo period

After the death of the Shogun Hideyoshi, his earlier partner Ieyasu became the most powerful man in Japan. He killed all the successors of Hideyoshi and the emperor appointed him Shogun. His government was established in Edo (Tokyo) and the whole country was brought under tight control. He redistributed the land gained among the daimyo : more loyal vassals received more important domains. Each daimyo who moved brought with him his court and his smiths. This fact and the rising import of materials explain the huge changes in the styles of the smiths. Before this event each smith had a particular style. Earlier swords were named Ko-to and new ones Shin-to. New sophisticated fencing techniques led the smiths to forge shorter, less curved blades with a very pointed tip. Two styles emerged. In Edo, the political capital, the blades were plain while in Osaka, the trade capital, the blades had to be more showy. During this time of peace samurai were educating themselves not only in martial arts but also in literature, philosophy and the arts.

End of 18th century – 1868: End of Edo period

The traders became more and more powerful. The samurai wanted once again to become warlords. Lots of corruption infiltrated the government. Furthermore Japan had really bad contacts with its neighbour. The power of the Shogun consequently decreased. The Japanese were so afraid both of a possible civil war and of external pressures (Russian, European and American) that the trade of katanas rapidly rose again. Some smiths tried to copy earlier swords. Other attempted to create new styles. But their blades had not the qualities of the great katanas. In 1867-68 the government finally fell and the power of Emperor Meiji was restored.

1868 – Nowadays : Meiji period and present day

The first act of Meiji was to open Japan towards the western countries in order to develop trade and to profit from the western technologies. Social progress was rapid and the samurai class was rapidly abolished. In 1876 to carry a sword was forbidden and the katana industry disappeared. During World War II a great number of swords were manufactured for the army but they cannot be called katanas because of their inferior quality and the process of their creation. They were manufactured from simple **barre de metal**. After the war the government of the United States wanted to destroy all weapons in Japan but the katanas as works of art were saved. Nowadays a few smiths have the official title of alive national treasure and forge blades whose quality approached that of the earlier blades.