

KOTETSU

by *Yoshi*

...with a little help
from his friends

One of the most well known names from the SHINTO period was KOTETSU. It is said that, at the time, his name was as famous as that of HORIKAWA KUNIHIRO of OSAKA. While KUNIHIRO was an established master of the time with well known roots, KOTETSU appeared suddenly, his new and racing fame eclipsing all others. But the history left to us, tells little else.

NAGASONE KOTETSU

NAGASONE is his last name, but as with many names of the feudal era, NAGASONE was taken from the town of his origin and is the same as speaking, "KOTETSU from NAGASONE."

It is easy to see the inference of trademark when he signs "at OMI under SAWAYAMA-JO" when we know that SAWAYAMA Castle (JO) is the historically famous place for the munitions industry being the origin of KUNITOMO--HINAWA rifles, to note.

His personal name was SAN-no-JO.

His artisan or smith name was OKISATO 貞里 or 興里. After

NYUDO "became priest" we find KOTETSU 古鉄虎徹 虎徹 KOTETSU is recorded as dying in EN-PO 6, 1673 at approximately 73 years of age. This would place his birth in KEICHO 5 to perhaps 10, the very end of the SENGOKU-JIDAI. JIDAI is a term describing an age or era. The SENGOKU was the "age of wars" and his earliest youth was steeped and saturated with this SENGOKU energy and the confluence of its MOMOYAMA arts and values, and the unsettled tribulations presented by a fledgling TOKUGAWA government and its as yet unresolved stand with the House of TOYOTOMI.

KOTETSU's father carried on smithing for the demands of these

times and his family was the family of a smith.

To this "100 Year Wars" OMI, it is said that KOTETSU was born. I think the key to solve the questions of KOTETSU is in this place.

OMI, long a strategic point in military affairs, holds Lake Biwa as if cupped in a palm. The cup of this hand, however, takes or defends the KINAI; it's a bridge or a barrier to KYOTO and became the trial and test for the lives and schemes of the three last landlords, the ROKKAKU, ASAI and ASAKURA. All fell to NOBUNAGA who found his own fate after building on BIWA's long shore. KOTETSU was a small child when the hotly pursued family of ISHIDA MITSUNARI, the castle master and vanquished leader for the TOYOTOMI at SEKIGAHARA, put their wives and children to death at SAWAYAMA.

Throughout history, SAWAYAMA was a place that improved and developed armaments and weapons. It was not a place that slept.



The long battles of the SENGOKU provided SAWAYAMA the unique opportunity for testing, altering and researching new techniques for weapon manufacturing. The NAGASONE family was engaged in the production of armor and the tools of war. Production of defensive tools require a studied familiarity of the offensive weapon - the Japanese sword.



his well

KOTETSU

The SENGOKU was a time of constant technical challenge for KOTETSU's father and grandfather, and we can see that KOTETSU was raised and trained to be a smith under these circumstances.

At the end of the SENGOKU, armor was called TOSEI GUSOKU and was at a top level of technical development and also fine art. SEKIGAHARA had not ended fighting and the demand for armor was much.

Slowly, with the advent of peace, the work in SAWAYAMA began to change. The NAGASONE family was not a prestigious armor maker like those of MYOCHIN, MUROYA or AKAO, and depending on demand, they might produce a variety of metalwork. Farm tools, metal fittings, keys, sickles, TSUBA, all highly professional ironwork.

The NAGASONE, like other families of artisans, had been filtering to EDO to serve the capitol of the TOKUGAWA. With ambition to become a famous smith, KOTETSU moved as well.

But the times were too late. The mood of those days was shaped by the feelings of tranquillity and social satisfaction created under the TOKUGAWA. Most of the DAIMYO withheld orders of expensive armor.

For the sake of his living, KOTETSU was forced to give up armor and change his career, - to that of sword maker.

There are different stories about the teacher of KOTETSU. SUISH-INSHI MASAHIDE wrote about KOTETSU in his book, "SHINTO MONDO," saying he knew of a story that KOTETSU became a student of ISE DAIJO TSUNAHIRO, who he said was known as a good smith in the EDO area. MASAHIDE's input has



been accepted until recently.

Current study brings new opinion.

Comparison of KOTETSU with TSUNAHIRO finds a vague similarity of KOTETSU's rippling NOTARE to that of the late SOSHU.

The most powerful theory at the present time states the master of KOTETSU was IZUMI-no-KAMI KANESHIGE 和泉守兼重.

Not only similarity of swords but also their home country, age and way of finishing of their respective NAKAGO.

At the time of the early EDO, early 17th century, when a country smith such as KOTETSU came to a big city, they would usually seek out and affiliate themselves with people from the same country of origin. This was the custom of that time, as it still is today, in similar situations. Also, the way of YASURI file lines on the NAKAGO is typical of northern smiths - and the same of KANESHIGE. (Compare NAKAGO, pages 28 and 70, FUJISHIRO SHINTO-HEN) This is another point of mutual origins.

There is, however, an old HONAMI book which says KOTETSU's master was IZUMI-KANESHIGE's son, KAZUSA-no-SUKE KANESHIGE. As KAZUSA KANESHIGE was 20 years younger than KOTETSU, who was at the time, a well known and established armor maker, it is hard to find a powerful theory in support of this. The weight must fall to IZUMI KANESHIGE, the father, as teacher of KOTETSU.

So, at 50 years of age, KOTETSU, a master armor maker and last of a proud line, changed careers and became an independent sword smith.

We might consider how it is that KOTETSU received such great fame during his life and what it is about his work that is so unique and valuable. We will find that he broke established methods completely to invent his own, original way of creating swords taken from his deep family roots and long professional life of working with and knowing iron.

The condition that attends truly great genius is originality. The novel is required. It is common in the work of the three greatest masters of the Japanese sword, MASAMUNE, KOTETSU and KIYOMARO.

Against the effortless genius of sword prodigy, KIYOMARO, the

KOTETSU

wonderful works of MASAMUNE and KOTETSU were the product of long personal experience and empirical trial and experiment. It was through such experimentation that MASAMUNE suddenly created HITATSURA SOSHU DEN style that he taught himself from EZO-MOKUSA smiths for the practical element of surrounding soft steel with hard for swords that cut well but were hard to break.

It is said KOTETSU's HAMON is the brightest among all the Japanese swords. A question among smiths since his time is how KOTETSU could forge JI-GANE like that. It is still a mystery. There are famous legends that show how powerful a weapon KOTETSU produced. His blades are called by such names as KABUTO-KIRI "The Helmet Cutter" or TORO-KIRI "Stone Lantern Cutter." The swords of KOTETSU are SAIJO SAKU Greatest Made and have been placed by sword testing during the TOKUGAWA period as SAIJO OWAZAMONO or Supreme Sharpness. KOTETSU was an armor maker and fully matured master of long developed iron and steel weapon-making secrets. Secrets perfected through his rooted family tradition that stretched all the way to SENGOKU OMI.

At 50, KOTETSU was a man at the height of his power.

From his armor-making, he had the studied theory of weaponry of defence, and from this, he could produce an offensive weapon that would defeat it.

We can see in his early work as a sword smith, the undertaking of many trials. From this period many pieces have HORIMONO and are known, collectively, as ECHIZEN-BORI. This term speaks of early work and implies that, although works of great art, they were applied to cover learning errors.



He changed the character in his signature KOTETSU 古鉄. According to a common opinion, KOTETSU

had special skills to handle old iron - 古鉄. He had a deep knowledge of iron and would use old nails, pots and kettles or scrap iron ever since his armor making days to capture a unique quality that wasn't understood by his contemporaries.

Every great master of the times, GOMON-ECHIZEN YASUTSUGU, YAMATO-no-KAMI YASUSADA and the HIZEN smiths, all used a ready made, imported iron or NAMBAN TETSU for their swords.

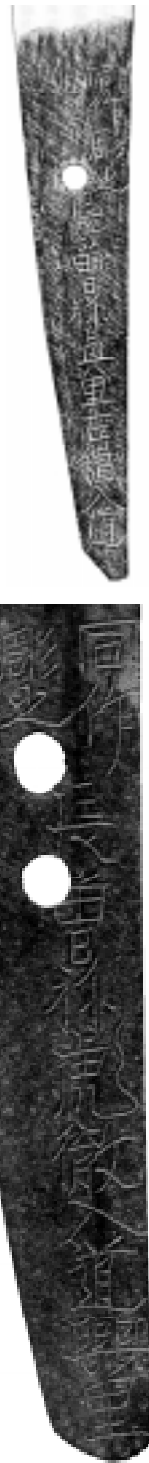
KOTETSU knew secrets about iron from his long and practical family tradition that no one else knew. His KOTO method was to use iron in same way it had been worked for centuries. He took smelted sand iron and mixed that with pieces of old iron in his billet at the forge. He, essentially, made KOTO swords in SHINTO times and called himself KOTETSU "Old Iron" because he made

swords in the old way using old iron, and this public moniker helped make him the most famous sword maker of the entire era.

Around MAN-JI 2, 1659, he made his change from FURUI 古 "Old" KO, to the TORA 虎 "Tiger," another way of KO.

KOTETSU had become well used to marketing his unique persona and now found a whole new and excited reception for swords created under this new "Tiger MEI."

There is, however, more to the story...

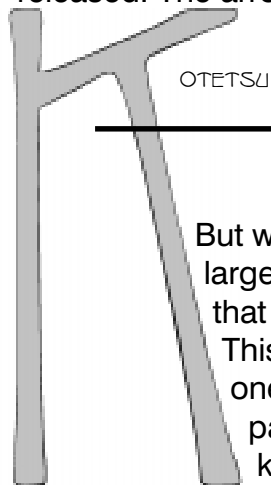


Old Japan had many common stories and legends, superstitions and mythological creatures, many of which have been passed down to today, that provided a cultural texture to everyday life. Much the same as mistletoe has a story and connotation beyond that of a plant in the West. Or for followers of Catholicism, the Saints each have cultural duties or services they perform. Things that can be done, according to belief, that translate from the spiritual into real life.

In Japan, these various stories and lore provide common cultural landmarks and venue for public wisdom and personal resolve just as New Years provides a method for making those famous yearly promises.

KOTETSU and his Tiger used just such an ancient and common historical tale to draw his personal spirit and cast his public vision by staking its lesson into his name. This old Chinese legend happened in the era of KAN 漢:

There was a young man who greatly loved and revered his parents. His name was Lee Co 李広 (RIKO). One day, when he was at work on their farm, his mother was attacked and killed by a large Tiger. The cruelty was base and undeserved, and Lee became indignant. Lee trained in archery very hard day and night, year after year. Finally, he reached "master hand" degree, and one day, he found the tiger napping under a bush. He slowly crept forward and silently notched his bow. He pulled a low, very hard shot and released. The arrow struck and Lee chased up to see.



But when he arrived, he found not the tiger, but a large rock. The arrow had gone so far into the rock that the tail of the arrow was unseen!!

This is a story that teaches when one devotes all one's energy, there can be no barriers in one's path. Accordingly, KOTETSU used this well-known story and its message in the characters of

his new name Just as he had when "old Iron" spoke the truth of his "way" with armaments and life. KO and TETSU translate literally to mean "Pierce the Tiger." This calls directly to this common tale, but it speaks to the meaning held for it by the people. He has named himself the meaning of this oracle and presents also, his work as such ~ 虎徹

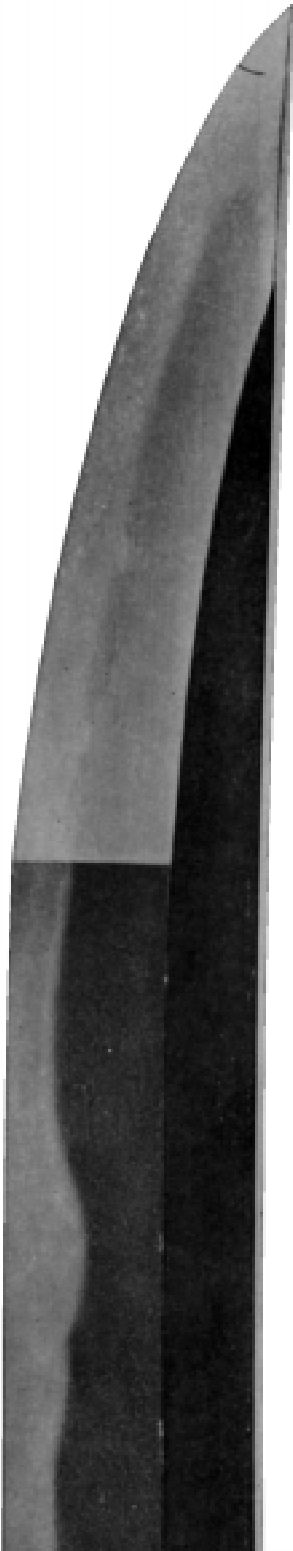
The name portrays the strength of the tiger, with this new TETSU, a character set to mean carrying through with his faith in himself and his vision and to bring real the strong, unstoppable, "Eye of the Tiger" energy that creates his best, near super human greatness. Piercing through with the spirit of the Tiger. Like the arrow that can go through rock. His swords would prove to go through a stone garden lantern!

During the eighth month of KAN-BUN, he changed his crouching TORA with its well-known Tiger's tail 虎尾, and having a SHICHI or seven on a table, to an older KO tiger form 虎. It is the same horoscopic sign under which the famous "Life of General Lee" within The Book of Historical Memories of China, SHIHCHI 史記 finds that Lee Co had risen to become the great General.

A common sentiment, spoken or taught in many phrases "When you see a KOTETSU, it's GIMEI" always has accompanied him. His name being famous is not recent, there were many KOTETSU GIMEI even during his late life. A student of SHOJI NAOKATSU, HOSODA NAOMITSU was a master of GIMEI swords and made a



career of them, rather than swords of his own name. It is said, he was living on KOTETSU GIMEI his whole life long. KONDO ISAMI, the famous leader of the SHINSEN-GUMI, the group that backed the SHOGUNATE throughout the struggles of the 1860s, owned a KOTETSU - a fake KOTETSU! It is said that KOTETSU's career got a boost from INABA MASAYASU's assassination of TAIRO HOTTA MASATOSHI, but no one knows if it was genuine.



KOTETSU's NAKAGO tells of his moderate and diligent characteristics. Sometimes KOTETSU cut phrases describing the difficulty of forging or the investment of his great effort in producing a particularly fine sword. For instance, carved into the very famous inscription of the sword pictured, he says,

本国越前住人至半百居住武州之江戸尽鍛冶之工精尔

"Originally I lived in ECHIZEN until at half a hundred (50), my residence is EDO in BUSHU. In this way, this worker devotes his spirit to forging"

This statement infers that he has cast his fate, at that point in his life, and gives all to his endeavors as a smith.

Blade Style of KOTETSU

1: The typical shape, known as "KAN-BUN Shape" is called, BO-ZORI. It tends to be straight with shallow SORI, a little narrow in the SAKI-HABA helps increase the perception of SORI. A shallow HIRANIKU creates a blade that is sharp. His pieces tend to be elongated or longish KISSAKI. Many early works are WAKIZASHI with SHINOGI and wide MIHABA giving the splendid appearance of the SOSHUDEN. Most of these blades have HORIMONO.

2: HAMON in early work are not too strongly tempered showing KO-NIE on TORAN or TORAN-BA mixed with GUNOME and TOGARI-BA. Middle work period finds KO-NIE giving way to ARA-NIE on wide YAKI-HABA. We see thick ASHI from the GUNOME.

Late work is splendid GUNOME-MIDARE called JUZU-BA "Priest-bead" GUNOME. Also HIRO-SUGUHA has a gentle wave and made up of deep, soft NIE in the HABUCHI. Many small ASHI are brilliant and spirited. Especially the HAMON and JI-GANE is very bright!

3: One of the most notable features of KOTETSU is his JI-GANE. A tight KO-ITAME has wet KO JI-NIE evenly covering the steel. KOTETSU's "secret HADA" is called HYOTAN "gourd" HADA. This appears about three inches above the HABAKI and has been called KOTETSU's "rough" HADA. This different steel, is black-blue O-HADA. It is thought his special device to strengthen the sword waist where the pressure of a cut delivers the greatest stress.

NOTE: SHO-SHIN MEI (genuine) must find the center line of the 角 "KO" articulated on the SHINOGI line .



4: There are beautiful and highly detailed HORIMONO in most of KOTETSU's early works. Deep and delicate, and strong. He was especially good at Dragon carvings. There are not many of the detailed HORIMONO in his late pieces. When there is HORIMONO on a blade, there must be the words, 彫物同作 or 同作彫之. If these words are absent, it must be GIMEI or ATO-BORI (carvings applied at a later time).

5: KOTETSU NAKAGO are finished with great care. YASURI in early works are SUJI-CHIGAI. The top of the NAKAGO is either KATA-KEZURI or KEN-GYO GATA. Middle work has KESHO-YASURI. Late work: shallow KATTE-SAGARI. Most NAKAGO are KURI-JIRI.

Conclusion ~

Commonly, it is very difficult and highly unusual for a man starting out in his fifties to achieve the top level of a profession especially when in the face of hard competition. His life as a sword smith was only 20 years.

Of course, the people around a successful man are almost always providing a great help, but it seems impossible for a man to make such success all by himself in so short a time.

His sentence on his NAKAGO tells us of his moderate characteristics and also shows a spirit as hard as stone.

Although he left his home in obscurity, late in life and most assuredly without any security, confused, not knowing the future, and having given up his dreams and homeland...

At last he came to be the best man of his time.

Such a strong outlook tells us the reason he has been called "The Smith from Old." ㊦

SS Thanks to J Kurrasch
for KOTETSU photos

