

Japanese Sword Etiquette

by Jeffrey Pawlowski

Role-Playing in an historical Japanese setting requires some level of understanding of the culture. It allows the player to operate the character in a way that delves deeper into the setting and game that makes the experience enjoyable for all parties involved. This is the point of most role-playing games to experience something wonderful, fanciful, or exotic within the safety of your own imagination.

Operating in Medieval Japan requires an understanding of the importance of loyalty, honor, war, and the warriors. The Japanese reverence for the sword developed over an entire millennia. We are going to attempt to explain some of the very pragmatic reasonings for the Japanese etiquette revolving around the sword and include some insight into its development in Japanese culture.

Before we can get started, there are a few key terms necessary to understand to get the fullest conveyance of this information.

Saya (say-a) - Scabbard

Nagasa (na-ga-sa) - Blade

Tsuba (tsoo-ba) - Hilt

Tsuka (tsoo-ka) - Grip

Nakago (na-ka-go) - Inner Handle

Ha (ha) - Cutting Edge of Blade

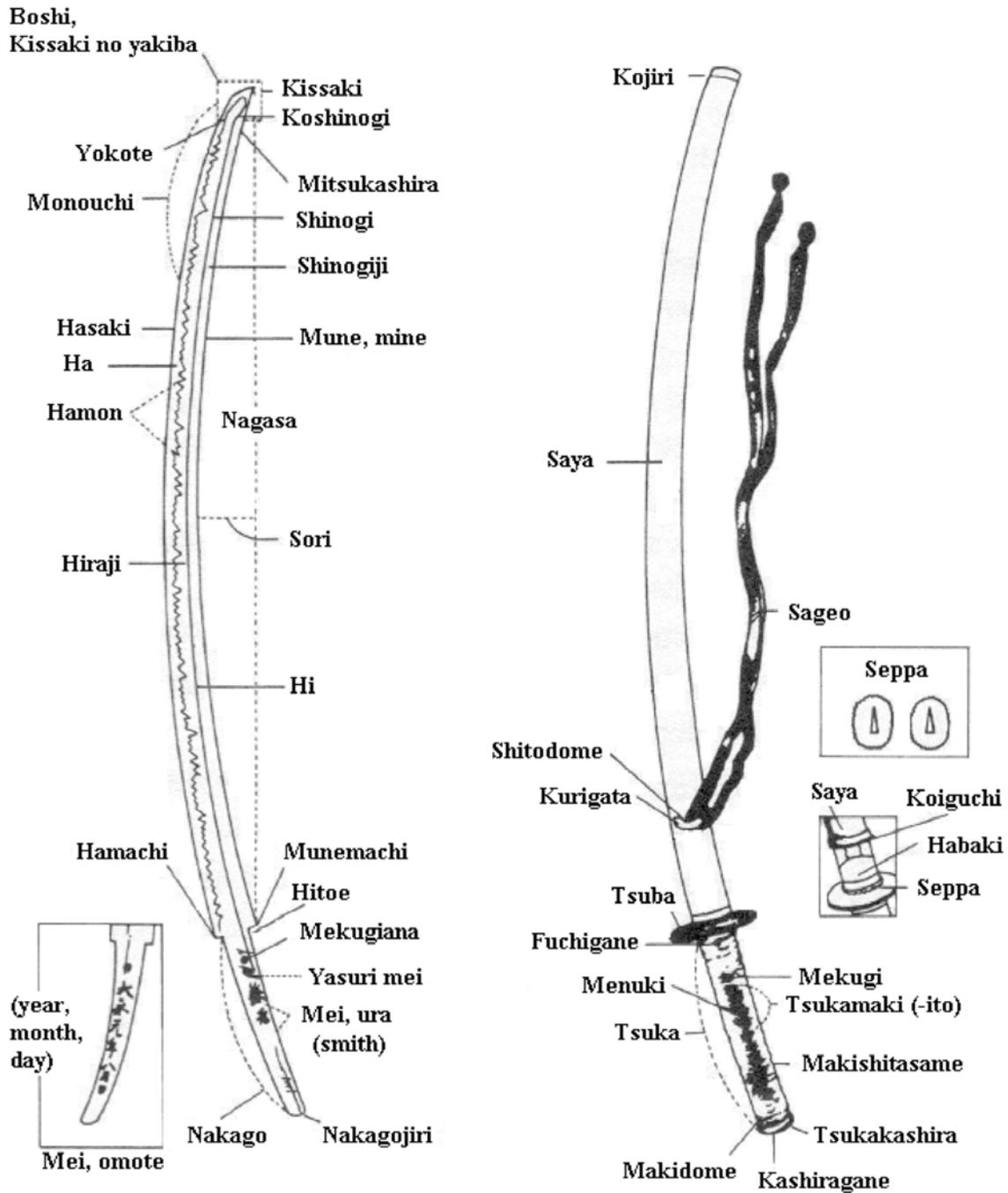
Kissaki (kis-sa-kee) - Blade Tip

Sori (sor-ee) - Back Edge of Blade

Obi (o-bee) - Sash worn around waist of kimono

The rest of the terms used to describe the remaining parts of the sword are unnecessary to this discussion, but remain on the diagram for your future reference. It should be noted that diagram below is for a **Katana**. Most of the basic terms above also apply to the **Tachi** as well, with the following exception. The **Mei Ura** (swordmaker's name engraving) is always on the "front" facing of the blade and the **Mei Omote** (date engraving) is always on the "back" facing of the blade.

The front facing of the blade is the side of the blade that faces outward when worn. Because the **Tachi** is worn edge down and the **Katana** is worn edge up, these are reversed between the **Tachi** and **Katana**. This is the tell-tale sign that an older **Tachi** has been refitted with **Katana** furnishings later in history as well, as the **Katana/Daisho** was much more fashionable in later Japanese history.



The one thing to note in this article is differences in “handling” etiquette between actual historical methods and the new “modern” etiquette involving collectors. There is a great difference between the “personal tool” a sword originally had in Japan versus the way collectors of Japanese swords regard swords today.

In the period of Japanese history that I am fond of (1400-1500s Muromachi Period), swords were only starting to become the tremendous status symbol they ultimately become later on. I regard this transformation as ongoing even until the 21st century where Japanese swords are considered art and artifact versus a common tool used by a living man.

Today, collectors bow to honor the sword and swordmaker before receiving a sword to their hands. White cotton gloves are usually worn when handling any part of the sword, including the **saya**. These have practical reasoning as natural human body oils are acidic and can damage ancient lacquer finishes, pit the polish of the blade, and cause rust.

In Medieval Japan, these same swords are every day tools. While care is taken to keep these tools in good shape, daily care and polishing being required, most damage done to a sword was repairable.

Japan, being an island nation (or collection of “nations”, depending on the era), is a humid place. Lacquer is used extensively to preserve and protect items from moisture. This is especially true for both arms and armor of Japan.

The **saya** is often lacquered and protected from the elements. While this lacquer was very hardy in most cases, damage could be done to the lacquer coat if hit by another hard object. This is the foundation of the rule of peasants never touching a samurai’s **saya**. This is also why it was an extreme insult to “clack” or bump the **saya** of a samurai. Such roughness could damage the lacquer finish of the **saya**, resulting in moisture getting to the steel blade and causing rust and other corrosion.

One may determine a samurai’s importance by how their sword is carried. If it is almost straight up and down with the leg, one can note that this person is of little importance and is doing much to avoid bumping another with his **saya**. A very important samurai could wear his sword almost completely perpendicular to his body, forcing all others to avoid bumping or touching the **saya**.

Because of these rules, samurai would only walk on the left side of a road when passing one another, for fear of accidentally clacking or touching **saya**. This is still evident today as Japan (a non-British Commonwealth nation) drive their cars on the left side of the road. This is simply another example of how pragmatism adapted and was adopted as custom and influences a culture even to this day.

It should be noted (and Charles Rice does a fantastic job) that samurai were not only measured by their combat prowess, but through their demeanor. While a peasant could technically be slain by the samurai if the peasant touched the samurai's **saya** by accident, this was often not the case. If the peasant was aware of the situation, immediate apologies and request for forgiveness would be in order. It would then behoove the samurai to let the situation slide. If the peasant was unaware but the samurai is, the samurai would immediately confront the peasant. Regardless of if the peasant believed they touched the **saya** or not, they would apologize and indicate no intention of slight and request forgiveness. Again, the samurai should comply.

If actual damage is done to the **saya**, then the situation would escalate, but often not by death of a peasant. Such a situation would be rare since all lower-class are aware of any upper-class person arriving on the scene and act accordingly.

If the slight is intentional, then honor would demand reparation and a duel could ensue.

Wearing a weapon such as a sword, within a home or other private setting is not appropriate. This is partially pragmatic as well, since having any meter lengthed object strapped to your waist in confined quarters is uncomely. The **wakasashi** is always worn, but the **katana** would be pulled from the **obi** with the right hand on the **saya** and carried in the right hand. This implies a "peaceful" stance. The right hand is not in a position to draw the **katana** from the **saya** by the **tsuka**. If one were to carry the sword in his left hand, it would imply distrust of the host and/or indicate the uneasiness of the samurai in the setting. With the **saya** being grasped with the left hand, it offers easy grasp of the **tsuka** with the right hand.

This same idea works when sitting. Sitting on wooden floors or tatami mats could not be accomplished if wearing a sword in the **obi**. It would be carried (as above) and placed beside you when sitting. Again, placing the **katana** on the right side of the body and **ha** facing toward you indicates a "peaceful" stance. Some occasions would require you to place the sword in front of you. Again, placing the **tsuka** away from the right hand and **ha** facing you indicates a "peaceful" stance. Placing the sword on the left side or in front of you with the **tsuka** facing your right hand (and even having the **ha** facing away from you) would indicate that you require your sword at the ready, and is insulting to the host.

Handing a sword to another works on the same principles, but also incurs another level of complexity depending on the two people involved. Passing a sword between two equals that are comrades, the situation is allowed to be very informal. Care and respect is always taken, however, since the sword is an object that the owner holds to a very high value. A friendship can end and a rivalry begun if carelessness damaged the sword.

Presenting your sword to a servant or subordinate would require you to pull the **katana** from the **obi** by the **saya** with your right hand. It would be presented **tsuka** to the left, grasped with one hand, palm down, and arm outstretched with straight elbow. The subordinate would lower his head in a bow, bringing two hands up, thumbs out and palms up, to hold the **saya** on either side of the superior's hand and receive the sword without grasping with his fingers. The superior would then "let go" and retract his arm, allowing the subordinate to have the sword.

Presenting your sword to a superior is almost the exact reverse. Pulling the **katana** from the **obi** and pointing the **tsuka** to the left and **ha** toward yourself, you would grasp the **saya** with your left hand palm up, and then move your right hand further down the **saya** and grasping palm up. You would then lower your head in a bow, unclasp your fingers, and present the sword with bent elbows. It is very important to allow enough distance between your two hands to allow the superior to grasp the **saya**. Depending on the level of respect your superior has for you, he may grasp the **saya** with his left hand and the **tsuka** with his right hand, draw your sword and behead you, or he may grasp the **saya** with his right hand, palm up, elbow straight, and lift the sword from your hands, immediately turning the **tsuka** to the left.

Presentation of the sword to another as the superior or the subordinate is always tricky. If both parties silently and mutually agree who is the superior and subordinate, all is well. It is when you imply superiority over another that does not see themselves as the subordinate, that causes issues. When in doubt, always present and act as the subordinate. Humbleness is honorable.

At no time is a sword drawn unless permission is asked. Even a superior (again, if he has any respect for the subordinate) will ask permission, even if the subordinate is in no position to deny that permission. A subordinate would draw the sword (as below) and present the sword unsheathed to the superior. This would be done **kissaki** pointed straight up, **ha** pointing toward you, with your right hand grasping the **tsuka** on the lower half away from the **tsuba**. This would allow the superior to grasp the **tsuka** with his right hand near the **tsuba**. If you are visualizing this properly, you can easily see this situation being quite unfavorable to the presenter of the sword. If a subordinate or equal asks to view the sword, you would not draw the sword, but simply pass the sword to the other, as indicated above.

Even drawing a sword in peace has specific rules. The **tsuka** is pointed toward the wielder, **kissaki** pointed away, **ha** pointed up. The left hand grasps the **saya** palm up and the right hand grasps the **tsuka** palm down. A slow, gradual draw is then performed, with the **sori** sliding within the **saya** and the sides not touching the inside of the **saya**.

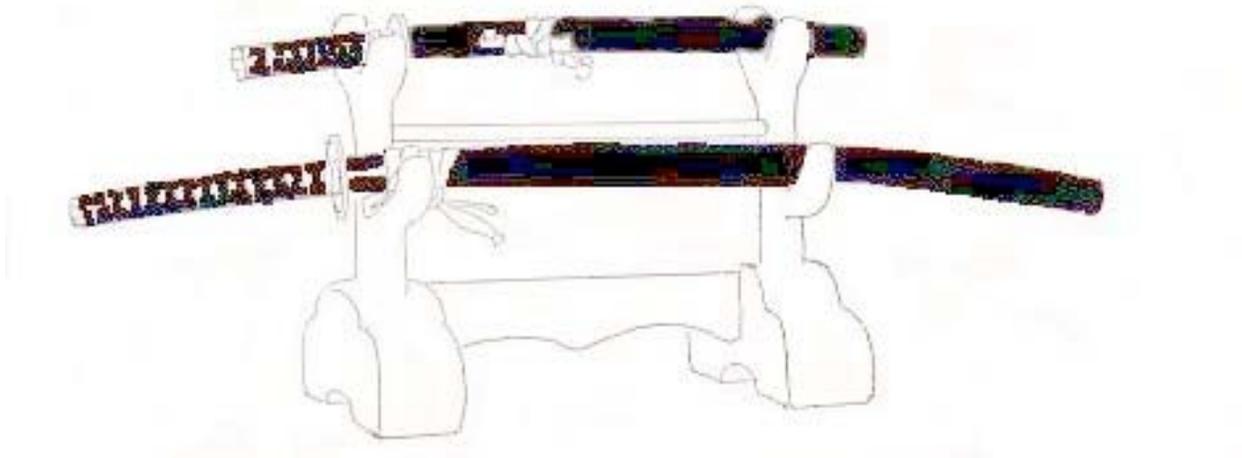


With the steel exposed to air and moisture, casual unsheathing is generally uncommon. No one is allowed to talk when viewing the **nagasa** to avoid spittle from hitting the **nagasa**. When one must support the **nagasa** to examine the details, you would use parchment to protect the **nagasa** from dirt and oil from the skin. You do not breathe on the blade keeping it away from all manner of moisture. In the Edo period, it was customary to place a piece of parchment between your lips as to keep one from talking while holding the **katana**, but also as a way to absorb the moisture from your breath.

Sheathing the sword is done in the reverse above.

When examining the sword, no flaws will be mentioned at all, out of respect for the owner, unless the owner specifically asks. Again, all talking would happen after the sword is sheathed again.

When the sword is not being worn or handled, it should be placed on the sword rack. There are two different types of racks, one for a **daisho** and one for a **tachi**. The dual, horizontal rack is what most people are familiar with and this holds the **wakasashi** and **katana**. The same rules apply for which way the **tsuka** is positioned. The front facing is always facing outward.



If displaying a **tachi**, this would mean that the **tsuka** is on the left and the **ha** is down.

A vertical stand always displays the **tsuka** down, regardless if the sword is a **tachi** or **katana**.



There are exceptions to the presentation of the sword. If traveling or expecting the need to defend yourself, the **tsuka** can be placed on the right or up positions.

Wearing a **daisho** or **tachi** with armor is worn in two distinct styles. Wearing of the **tachi** is on the outside of the armor with the entire length of the **saya** seen. The **katana** is worn through the inner **obi** and the **saya** protrudes in the front and back of the armor.

Hopefully, this source will allow you to play the role of an historical Japanese buke. Keeping in mind the “tenets” of **tsuka** and **ha** positioning and keeping in mind the superior/subordinate class system should keep you on the honorable path.