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Welcome to November issue of our newsletter

Welcome to the November Newsletter, or *the continuing adventures of a non-Japanese, Japanese sword specialist in Japan*. My apologies, as this month's newsletter has turned into a small book.

As we turn the corner into November, the temperature is fluctuating between amicable and somewhat chilly. Another corner that we appear to have turned at the moment is the Covid one. A sudden drop in numbers seems to confirm that the gradual increasing numbers of vaccinated is finally curbing the dreaded lurgy. Additionally, martial arts clubs and meetings are steadily reforming, and the feeling of tension of being in public spaces is gradually decreasing. At least until the next spike anyway. For now, at least, life has returned to a small semblance of normality (+ masks and sterilizers) with domestic travel and business trips picking up again. Speaking of business trips, two are the focus of this month's newsletter. I sincerely believe that after Covid has finally subsided (as it will never be gone), and that international travel resumes to a degree of normality, that there will be a huge tourism boom. I often hear that Japan is number one on many peoples bucket lists. I also don't know many people, if any, that only one visit to Japan was enough. I hope that the places described in the newsletter this month may convince you to leave the beaten track, and venture into the less touristy Japan.

Matsuba Kunimasa Sword Exhibition and Talk Show



Earlier in the year I was invited to take part in a 'talk show' as part of a cross cultural weekend of events surrounding a sword exhibition by Mukansa swordsmith Matsuba Kunimasa at the end of August, 2021. 'Talk Show' may be a bit misleading as it

was really like a panel discussion with Matsuba san, Manga writer Kamata Kimiko (KATANA), and myself. However, due to the Covid spikes that took place during the summer, the event was postponed until October.

I have known Matsuba san for many years. I first met him around 2004-5 when he was a member of the Murokumokai, a small group of swordsmiths collaborating under a group name and displaying together at various venues around the country: Matsuba Kunimasa, Mikami Sadanao, 25th Gen. Kato Kanefusa, Ogawa Kanekuni, Sugita Yoshiaki (deceased), Kubo Yoshihiro, Tsubouchi Suketada and Hayasaka Nobumasa.

For those of you that don't know, Matsuba san works in the style of Bizen Chogi. He has done an excellent job of recreating the style, and was appointed mukansa in 2014. His forge is in Hyuga City in Miyazaki prefecture. Miyazaki was a province that was mostly under imperial rule, so doesn't have a strong samurai history like neighboring Satsuma, etc. The area is steeped in origin myth tales of Japan, including a giant trident that remains stuck in the top of Mount Takachiho, said to have been left there by the deity, Ninigi, on his descent to earth. Also, there is 'Ama no Iwato', which comes from the tale of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, who when upset by her brother Susanoo, hid herself away in the cave and left Japan in total darkness.

When you land at Miyazaki airport it feels rather like Okinawa, and continues to be so if you head southwards to Aoshima. Aoshima is known for various things like its surfing community, and the strange formation of ridgelines of rocks along the coastline known as, the Devil's Washboard. Aoshima is also where I met the last of his line, 3rd Generation kitchen knife and tool maker.



I met Kamata san at Miyazaki airport and we rode the quite archaic but rather luxurious train to Hyuga City where we were met at the station by city officials and taken directly to the exhibition venue. When we arrived at the exhibition, Matsuba san was surrounded by visitors while demonstrating how to cut correctly with a Japanese sword. Even among the average Japanese people, swordsmen swinging around live blades and cutting bamboo before their eyes is an excitable event. Then, just to raise the temperature a little more, Matsuba san starts giving everyone the opportunity to cut the bamboo themselves. Being the great teacher of not only sword making, but sword usage as well, the vast majority of visitors were able to cut in one stroke. Matsuba san is also a high level dan grade in aikido, and teaches swordsmanship and aikido all around the world. He also has a much higher than average amount of international customers, and is very open to cultivating international relationships.

The first evening, Matsuba san took us to an award-winning restaurant that was famous for its chicken-nanban (a kind of flattened out fried chicken, with tartar sauce and salad.) We all passed on the possible side dish of rice, and it was a good thing that we did as the portions were quite huge. We were due to fly home not long after the event finished, so Matsuba san had asked us to come down a day earlier so that he could show us some of the sights of Miyazaki prefecture. The next day was an early start, so we finished the evening at a respectable time.

I am a notorious harbinger of rain (ame-otoko), and like clockwork the next morning it was raining. With some trepidation we set out on our sightseeing regardless. However, some ten minutes outside of Hyuga city, the skies cleared and turned into an exquisite beautiful day.

The first stop was Takachiho (not to be confused with Mount Takachiho-no-mine some hours away). Takachiho is a magnificent gorge of gorgeousness. There are rowing boats for hire (as seen in Netflix: James May: Our Man in Japan) to explore the crystal-clear waters and several waterfalls. The gorge is home to several myths, and stories from history, but mostly a scenic spot of breathtaking beauty that photos do not justify.



Next, we moved on to Ama-no-Iwato. This was a really unexpected treasure. You go through Ama-no-Iwato shrine, and then down into another gorge type area. There are two or three streams that converge into one larger stream. As I crossed a small bridge across one of the side streams and started to head down the main path, I could feel a sudden surge of excitement that continued to build as we walked along the path. Then we came to a large area, and recessed back to the left was a large cave with a torii gate that was dwarfed by the size of the opening of the cave. There was a small shrine at the back of the cave, but the whole area was like a wonderland as thousands of visitors had each piled-up rocks and stones in size order to form thousands of single pile pyramids. Everyone took great care not to damage or destroy any of them. In retrospect, I had noticed a few along the banks of the stream, but it had never given me any indication of what to expect as I came around the corner into and around the main cave.

Without actually breaking into an actual party, all of the visitor's excitement was palpable, and our leaving for lunch seem all but too soon. As usual, I disappointed everyone with my palate by opting for a hotdog instead of any fish infested cuisine. Disappointed is a complete exaggeration, as my disposition in regards to seafood (and food fussiness in general) is common knowledge throughout the whole of Japan (possibly another exaggeration).

After lunch, we were taken to see some absolutely breathtaking views of some of the famous scenic spots of the mountainous Miyazaki coastline. It was really fantastic. Next, we headed back towards Hyuga City, and were treated to a visit of Matsuba sans forge. It was a quick stop, so we didn't get to see



him in action, but I managed to add my obligatory "swordsmith and myself in front of his workshop sign" photo to my collection. We went back to the exhibition venue to confirm arrangements for evening's dinner and check on the exhibition. It was a very good turnout again and many people were looking forward to the following day's talk show. There was also a small shop with various Matsuba Kunimasa goods, including his books, "Kunimasa's Sword Forge" (in Japanese) t-shirts, versatile hand towels called tenugui,



and inscribed keyrings, etc. Like many of you, I myself have a penchant for various goods associated with swords and swordsmiths, so purchased a t-shirt and hand towel (I already had the book as a gift). The evenings meal was also fabulous with traditionally barbecued meat from a restaurant with a long history in Hyuga city. We were also joined by Oita swordsmith Taira Kiyooki.

The next day, was the press interviews and talk show. Matsuba san is an excellent host and great at dealing with the public. It was a real pleasure and honor to have been able to take part and be on stage with Matsuba san and Kamata san. In one late news flash, Matsuba san announced to a round of applause that from very soon he was changing his sword smiths name from Kunimasa to Kagemasa.

Congratulations!!!! Oh, wait!! Matsuba san, I've just bought a Kunimasa t-shirt and tenugui!! Oh well, I suppose they will be become historically desirable items.



My sincere gratitude goes out to Matsuba san and the wonderful people of Hyuga city and Miyazaki prefecture. I had a wonderful experience and got to spend time with some dear friends. I am looking forward to going back in the future.

The Shin-Gobankaji Ceremonial Forging by Gassan Sadatoshi Sensei and Sadanobu

It was going to be my sixth visit to the island, but this was my first time flying all the way there. I say all the way, the flights land at Dogo, so you still have to get a fifteen-minute bus to the ferry port and either a thirty-minute hydro-foil, or a one-hour ferry to Nakanoshima (island) where the event was going to take place.

Several members of our team, plus a camera man and sound man, all assembled at Haneda airport on the morning of the 14th (Oct, 2021). We had to make a brief stop at Osaka, Itami airport to change planes, but also meet up with Gassan sensei.

The flight was quite short to Osaka, and transfer was smooth. As we approached the gate of the connecting flight, I spotted Gassan Sadatoshi sensei dressed in his usual traditional samue attire, waiting for us to arrive to board together. We still had a bit of time, but he was quite excited to tell me that in their preparations, that purely by chance he had discovered a full length oshigata of his father's sword that was devoted to Oki Jinja in 1939 as part of the Showa Gobankaji. Wow! The gods were looking out for us! I had seen the small oshigata in the Takashimaya 1941 book, and I had seen the actual blade every time that I had been to Oki Island, but I had never known that a full length oshigata in Sadaichi (Sadamitsu)'s own hand existed. Gassan sensei pulled it out there and then, and showed us all in the airport. It was a very special moment.

The weather was very clear and warm, hot in fact. It was like summer had returned. However, we had been informed a couple of days before that the weather forecast for the day of the event was rain. Seemed quite unbelievable at that point in time, as there wasn't a cloud in the sky. We boarded a rather small plane for the second leg of our journey to Dogo, the largest of the four islands that make up the Okinoshima. On arriving at Oki airport, being a larger group with checked in luggage, we were slow to get out of the airport to find that all the taxi's had been taken. Flights and Ferries are not so often at these outer limits, so they don't wait for stragglers. Luckily, the bus was still there, and Gassan sensei graciously said he wanted to ride the bus with us.



When we arrived at the ferry port, it turned out that we had a two-hour wait until the hydro-foil ferry arrived to take us to our destination of Hishiura Port on Nakanoshima. While we waited, I got to sit and talk to Gassan sensei about the previous occasion 46 years ago. To my surprise, my idea of replicating the event were closer than I ever imagined. Gassan sensei told me that at that time, his father had flown from Osaka, while he and the other apprentices had to load a truck and travel by ferry. This time, Sadatoshi sensei had flown, while Sadanobu san and the other apprentices had rented a truck, and brought all the equipment by ferry.

When we arrived at Hishiura Port, it was fabulous. To disembark from a ferry to a place that I hadn't been able to visit for over a year and a half due to the Covid situation, and be greeted not by only old friends, but Gassan sensei's son, Sadanobu, and his other apprentices was spectacular. It was real! My vision that had appeared in my head four years prior were finally becoming a reality before my very eyes. It was so exciting.



That evening, we were all staying in the same traditional Ryokan inn. We were taken to the Ryokan to check in, then whisked straight off to Oki Shrine make introductions and see more old friends. We viewed the stone monuments dedicated to Sadaichi sensei on his sword forging demonstration and then Gassan sensei, his apprentices and the shrine priests decided on a location to build the temporary forge. While we were there, the sun was beginning to set and dip behind the large conifers that surround Oki Shrine creating a dusk lit courtyard that added to the nostalgia of the moment like memories of summers gone by. It was idyllic.

We headed back to the Ryokan where after a brief respite, we all met for a celebratory evening meal. I had to give an impromptu introductory speech, in which I gave a quick recap of the past four years, and then expressed my gratitude to everyone for making it actually happen. Next, Gassan sensei officially opened the meal with his very thoughtful and gracious words, congratulating the island for their 800-year anniversary of their relationship with Emperor Gotoba, and some thoughts on the importance of traditions. After a very delicious meal of many courses (I am famous here too for fish my disposition) we all headed for bed. The next two days were about to become very busy.





The next day was another gorgeous day, not a cloud as far as you could see. Surely... surely, the weather forecast was wrong. It was just too beautiful weather for a sudden change. I checked my smart phone weather app. Yes, it predicted rain for the next day. However, I took this as a pinch of salt as my weather app was often wrong. First, we all had to head for the town hall for greetings with the Mayor, Ooe Kazuhiko, and Deputy Mayor, Yoshimoto Misao. I have met them both several times before, and even sang Beatles songs together.

We introduced Gassan sensei and Sadanobu san, and sat down for coffee. Gassan sensei pulled out his father's

oshigata for them, instantly making everyone in the room realize the depth of the connection between his father's participation in the Showa-Gobankaji, their joint return in 1975, and the event with his own son about to take place the following day. The excitement was building.

From there we broke into separate groups. Sadanobu san and the other apprentices were going back to the shrine to build the forge. Sadatoshi sensei and I were going with a camera crew to film at various spots around the island to do with Emperor Gotoba. First, we headed across the island to Saki Harbor where Emperor Gotoba was forced to land in rough weather. There is also a large flat stone just to the side of the harbor on the edge of a small coastal village. The stone is known as the Honorable Sitting Stone (Okoshi-Kake-no-Ishi) as Emperor Gotoba is said to have sat on it while waiting for his servants to find him temporary lodgings for the night. However, in fear of the military government, or just in fear at having a cloistered emperor drop in for the night, they all refused. They headed around the bay to a small shrine called Miho Jinja, and Emperor Gotoba spent his first night there.



On the way back, our car climbed the narrow mountain road giving us beautiful breathless views of the islands, coves, and coasts. The Oki Islands were designated a UNESCO Global Geopark in 2015. Trying to describe the rich landscape and beauty of the area is very difficult, as words and photos just do not do it justice. We stopped at a small layby with a clearing in the shrubs to admire the view. Later, Gassan sensei pulled me to one side and passed me his father's oshigata and said, "Do what you need to do with it!". My mouth fell open, he was entrusting

me with this precious piece of not only history, but his family's history. I thanked him, and let him know that I would take great care of it. This will certainly be a crowdfunding item in the future.



We were called back for lunch, and then after lunch we headed to the Shrine and nearby museum for more filming. I was also called upon to complete some other tasks, so I was running backwards and forwards. The forge in the shrine grounds was taking shape, and despite the decidedly hot, clear weather, the courtyard was suddenly filled with seats and rain tents. With lots to do, the day passed quickly and it was soon early evening.



Due to the large volume of visitors (press etc), myself and the camera crew had to change hotels. We were moved to the recently renovated and extended Ento hotel that sits right on/over the coast facing out to sea along the channel that the ferries from the mainland travel down to dock at Hishiura Port. The view is in a word, stunning! I also had another meeting with the president of the San'in Tourist Org (San'in: Shimane and Tottori Prefectures) of which I am an advisor. I was very grateful to

him and his staff for coming all the way to Okinoshima and supporting the event. He joked that I looked like James Bond 007 in a suit, and gave me a new 'San'in' lapel pin.

That evening, there was another celebratory barbeque meal with lots of new guests and people who were participating in various ways in the Matsuri (festival). The food and company were great (the seafood was probably great as well), and various media people arrived adding to my excitement (or relief). A quick nightcap at the local karaoke bar (in Japan there's always an after party called a Nijikai). The next day was going to be a big day. I agreed to arrive at the museum early to film with two different film crews, but had to be at the shrine at 10 am sharp for opening ceremonies.

I woke up in my coastal overlooking room and opened the heavy curtains. It was very overcast. Was it raining? I strained to see through my morning eyes. It looked pretty wet, but it was hard to discern with the sea right in front of you and the other coast pretty far away. Pressed for time, I got ready and skipped breakfast. I got outside, the rain was just spitting. I found the film crew and we headed to the museum.

I finished my morning filming duties, met more people that I hadn't seen for a long time. The harbinger of rain had struck again. The rain had gotten heavier, and ended up running (well kind of) in a suit with an umbrella in the direction of the shrine while trying not to discover any puddles. I arrived at the shrine zig-zagged my way under the rain tents and through rows of fold-up chairs. The priest waved me up to the main shrine where there was a large group of guests all dressed similarly to myself and sporting white sashes. I was directed to my seat to find my white sash folded neatly upon it. I quickly surveyed other people and soon figured out which shoulder it sat on and which way up the logo was supposed to go.



Not long after, we were asked to take our seats. From this point on was some rather long, but very poignant Shinto ceremonies mixed with traditional performances by shrine maidens, a live rendition of the Japanese National Anthem (Kimi Ga Yo) and a Shigin (Waka poems in a kind of song form) performance of Emperor Gotoba's waka that he is said to have composed on his arrival to the island 800 years ago. Three bars into Kimi Ga Yo, the heavens opened and torrents of rain streamed off of the roof of the shrine, with the odd strong gust of wind blowing the shrines pennants curtains quite dramatically. I looked around nervously to all the people outside under the rain tents. My friend leaned into me and said, "it's quite dramatic isn't it? Don't worry, it is Emperor Gotoba's tears". Nervously, I smiled at the humorous take on the situation, while at the same time wondering if the forge was filling with water, or if it was being completely washed away?

Once the ceremonies were over, various performances took place. Traditional indigenous Kagura to the Oki Islands (Dozen Kagura), performances of traditional music by the local school children, other rare performances of a Noh like dance performance (Maihime), and so forth. The event went on all day and was live streamed to the world. [See link here](#). All credit goes to the people of Oki who stayed through the duration of the event despite the torrential rain.

Once again, I was sprinting back and forth between duties at the shrine/event, and press interviews at the nice and dry museum. I was met by a museum staff who I also hadn't seen in a long while, they congratulated me on the launch of the Shin-Gobankaji Project. I replied, "Thank you, but it's a shame about the rain." They paused for a second and slightly tilted their head, "but it is Emperor Gotoba's tears!". Surprised, I informed them that they were the second person to say that to me, to which they responded, "Because everybody knows that whenever we have an event dedicated to Emperor Gotoba, more often than not, it rains." Suddenly, the rain stopped being troublesome to me. I had been worried that the rain would be bothersome for all the visitors, but conversely, they saw it as a blessing from Emperor Gotoba himself. The rain now had a new meaning, and lifted my dampened spirits (pun intended).



Finally, as dusk began to set in, the sword forging demonstration was preceded by further Shinto ceremonies where all of the ten VIPs who were going to take turns at hammering the blessed tamahagane, and Gassan sensei were also blessed and made offerings to Emperor Gotoba who is the residing deity at the shrine. Then just as miraculously as the rain had started, it lifted. Allowing everyone who had been confined to the rain tents to come and surround the forge, and the various press cameramen were also now free to move around to film the main event. It was around

this time I was introduced to the Governor of Shimane prefecture by the president of the San'in Tourist org. He introduced me, and then told the Governor that I was Daniel Craig, 007. The Governor laughed, but then I quipped, "Yes. I am 00 San'in". The Governor laughed even more (another Dad joke in the bank).

A sacred flame was brought down from the back of the shrine along with the blessed tamahagane, and taken out to Gassan sensei who had taken his position at the forge. A ceremonial passing of the sacred flame and tamahagane took place between Gassan sensei, the head priest, Murao Shu, and his shrine maiden grand-daughter.



Gassan sensei placed the sacred flame into the hearth, and Sadanobu expertly worked the bellows.

The sacred flames soon grew into a bright blaze illuminating the dark courtyard and the faces of the many visitors who had all assembled and braved the rain all day to watch this momentous occasion. The look of excitement and joy on their faces was fantastic. In many cases, three generations of family watched together. Some of the grandparents had witnessed the prior event 46 years ago, and I knew that their grandchildren would remember this night for the rest of their lives.



Two of the people watching and taking part in the ceremonial hammering were my very good friends, the 48th generation Murakami Sukekuro, and Tamura Fukutaro. Murakami Sukekuro's family had been friends with Emperor Gotoba and still retained items from him that were displayed nearby at their former residence/museum. They were also in charge of the maintenance of his grave via the Imperial Household. Sukekuro remembered vividly the previous time when Sadaichi sensei had forged at the shrine. I was so happy that this time he was actually taking part.

Tamura san is the supervisor of the swords at the museum. I mentioned him in the previous newsletter. His father had also been an Oki Island/Emperor Gotoba historian. Tamura san had shown me many wonderful things over the island. I was immensely happy that he too was among my nominated hammer men. First up for hammering was the head priest, Murao Shu. Then we were all called in turn, ending with the Governor of Shimane prefecture, Maruyama Tatsuya. Once the ceremonial hammering



was finished, Gassan sensei passed the reigns to his successor and future 6th Generation head of the Osaka Gassan line, Sadanobu. Sadanobu, expertly worked the bellows, and coordinated the hammering of the other two apprentices. It was poetry in motion. The sound and smell of the fire, the blazing flames in the dark autumn

night, with the rhythmic ringing of hammers on the anvil, it was truly a sight to be seen.

Following the demonstration was the official press conference. We were surrounded by news and local newspapers, etc. Here, I have to say, that Gassan Sadatoshi sensei is one of the kindest, gentlest gentlemen I have ever met. I was deeply moved by his kindness, sharing of my vision and support for the project. We were asked many questions, and answered many of them straightforwardly, but when I was asked to comment on my feelings on the event, and I tried to explain that Gassan sensei and his son had been there for me, I suddenly became overwhelmed with emotion and struggled to get out the words when trying to tell them what that meant to me.

The next day, I had to be up early again as Gassan sensei was taking an early ferry to the next island, and we had to go and see him off safely. However, I awoke in my, somewhat of a greenhouse, hotel room to a howling wind whipping along the windows and the sound of large waves crashing on the shore. I cautiously peeped out of my curtains with a rather melodramatic fear of my hotel room falling into the ocean. The sky was various shades of dark grey, and it was suddenly cold, very cold.

The next big shock, even though I should have been used to it by now, was that the hydro-foil ferry was cancelled. Gassan sensei and the Governor of Shimane had to be quickly transported around to the other side of the island, and boarded a rather small boat that would take them to Dogo. In a climatic film car chase type situation, we all took cars and raced down the small country lanes to get to a small harbor to see them off. The rain had mostly lifted, but the wind, waves and the cold were quite powerful.

As the boat pulled away, we waved them off in a happy fashion, but as the boat pulled out of the harbor we saw the size of the huge waves. The boat would disappear from view between them, then crash through the next wave with a large white splash. My thoughts were with Gassan sensei at this time, and prayed for a short safe trip.

Next, I had to do some further closing shots with a film crew, and then we all converged at the ferry port for the main large ferry to take us to Dogo in the early afternoon. To my surprise and relief, Gassan sensei was at Dogo airport waiting for us alive and well, and in good spirits. We all boarded the plane together, and then went our separate ways at Osaka airport. That evening, after an exhausting few days, tiredness took over and it was time to sleep in the hope of at least one day off before beginning the actual hard challenge of crowd funding to raise the money to complete the entire Shin-Gobankaji project.

You can see the entire festival here.

<https://youtu.be/9WbLIN1jaI4>



While you are here...

we need your help. This is one of the most audacious projects in recent sword making history. The craft has gone through ebbs and flows in its long history, and currently we are in rather fragile downtrend. Japanese sword making is not only made up of swordsmiths. It is a team of different crafts that depend on one and other. If one of the crafts disappears, or a set of skills, the whole chain becomes perilous. This is not a void that can be filled by amateur craftsmen from abroad or domestically. There are traditions and canon to be followed and passed down from teacher to student. Reverse engineering and rebooting crafts from books are not going to fix the situation unless you have a solid background already in those traditional crafts.

The loss of any of these skills is also going to affect the stability of old swords too. For example, there is currently quite a severe lack of habaki and scabbard makers. These items are also very important for the preservation of swords of antiquity. The problem simply does not lay in changing the law to allow sword makers to produce more swords. The situation is much more complex than that. Even if it was changed, making three or four swords per month while maintaining the artistic integrity and quality control of blades would be quite challenging for most smiths. In my opinion the biggest problem is that nobody seems to be aware of the plight of the craft. I am sure that no one would want to see it in trouble, and by raising awareness the situation may begin to take steps to resolve the current problems.

We need your help. We will soon be opening English language pages to allow crowd funding for the Shin-Gobankaji Project internationally. Funds raised will establish the important data of representative works from each successive imperial era onwards, that will possibly become the standard for appraisal of works from the Showa period onwards in the future. As well as, information boards on important sword related sites (starting with Emperor Gotoba) in English for visitors to Japan.

As many of you are aware, we are merely the custodians of swords for our generation, and pass them onto the next generation in the best condition possible to try and successfully preserve them as far into the future as possible.

The same applies to the support of the traditional crafts. As individuals, we may not be able to afford to purchase a single sword by a Japanese swordsmith, but we can come together as a collective to make a difference. As the current generation, we naturally bear the responsibility to try to support these crafts so that they can be passed successfully on to future generations. If any of the sword making crafts was to disappear under our watch, it would be a great shame. Your donation counts and will make a difference. If you cannot afford to make a donation, then please help by spreading awareness by sharing the flyers, posts, and this newsletter to interested parties.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Final comments

I am deeply honored at being a part of the two events that I have written about above. Two weekends in a row with working with different mukansa swordsmiths. It is achieving the dream. It is also commonly commented that, "You are a lucky man!", because of the glamorous perception of being a foreigner deep in the world of Japanese swords. I have to admit that I am somewhat conflicted by comments such as that one. Yes, I do feel very fortunate in some ways that my life has turned out way beyond whatever I had envisioned. I never ever dreamed it would come as far as this when I was a security guard wishing to be a sword specialist in the Japanese department at the British museum. Even then, I wanted to become knowledgeable about swords like my mentor, Victor Harris. Then I wanted to live in Japan for a while and study like Japanese scholars had, and so on and so forth.

My visions, or dreams have evolved as I move along and hit certain milestones, and realize new dreams or that the boundaries that I had imagined do not actually exist. However, at the same time, an incredible amount of work, sacrifice, failures, building relationships, gaining and maintaining trust, and ultimately some successes have something to do with my 'luck'.

Having said that, I could not have done any of this alone, I will be forever grateful to the people who welcomed me unconditionally into the Japanese sword and sword/samurai related tourism worlds, the sages that have lit my way at different stages in my journey when I needed guidance or reassurance, and the many people who follow my journey from the other side of the media looking glass who continue to spur me on and give meaning to my efforts of sharing all of the magnificence I am privileged to witness and be a part of.

Thank you for wanting to be a part of my journey and subscribing to my newsletter. Hopefully, together we can make a difference help this art and craft that we all love, by taking the joint responsibility as the current generation of sword enthusiasts and supporting the traditional craftsmen in Japan, and their intangible skills and safely pass them onto future generations intact.



月山貞利・貞伸隠岐神社御神前打記念 令和3年10月16日



Until next month...

Paul Martin



EMPEROR GOTOKU SHIN-GOBANKAJI

An Elite Group of Modern Master Swordsmiths

This year is the 800th anniversary of Emperor Gotoku's arrival on the Oki islands. A sword enthusiast, he invited the best swordsmiths in the land to the imperial palace in monthly rotation, and even took part in making and quenching them himself. These smiths became known collectively as the

Gobankaji. The Shin-Gobankaji project aims to recreate a modern Gobankaji with an elite group of swordsmiths who represent the pinnacle of the craft in Japan today. They will create modern masterpieces that will be dedicated to the spirit of Emperor Gotoku in Oki Shrine, Oki Island, Shimane Prefecture, while preserving and passing on these ancient traditions into the future.

Crowd funding

16th Oct - 12th Jan

The project will launch on October 16, 2021 (JST) with a ceremonial sword forging demonstration in front of Oki Shrine by master swordsmith, Sadatoshi Gassan, to be streamed live around the world.

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A new generation of Gobankaji smiths arise in the sacred lands of Emperor Gotoba and swords...

Emperor Gotoba

Known for his brilliance in all things, the cloistered Emperor Gotoba was especially known for his love of waka poetry and swords. It is thought that his participation in sword making had such an effect on sword making that it is the reason that Japanese swords are so well-known throughout the world today. After the Jokyu Rebellion of 1221 he was exiled to the Oki Islands, Shimane prefecture, where he spent the remainder of his life.



The Shin-Gobankaji Project

This year is the 800th anniversary of Emperor Gotoba's arrival on the Oki islands. In commemoration of this historical event, we are holding several events in the hope to propel Emperor Gotoba's legacy another 800 years into the future. For that reason, we have created the Shin (new) Gobankaji project to celebrate Emperor Gotoba and his love of Japanese swords. The project hopes to revive the Gobankaji in the form of masterpiece swords made by modern master swordsmiths for dedication to Emperor Gotoba.

SADATOSHI GASSAN Creation of the First Shin-Gobankaji Sword

Sadatoshi Gassan has won many special awards at national competitions (Prince Takamatsu Award, Agency for Cultural Affairs Chairman's Award, Kanzan Sato Award and more). Designated a master smith at the age of 36, he is the fifth-generation head of the Osaka Gassan school famous for its Ayasugi, or Gassan-hada pattern in the surface steel of the blades. He has made swords for shrines and temples, Yokozuna Sumo wrestlers, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the New York Metropolitan Museum.

Paul Martin Japanese Sword Curator

Paul Martin, the founder of the Emperor Gotoba Shin-Gobankaji Project, is a former curator of Japanese arms and armor at the British Museum. He is also a recognized specialist by the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLT) and a trustee of the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture (NBSK).



Further Information

For more information on the Shin-Gobankaji Project and Crowdfunding site and media pages, please follow our official Instagram, Twitter and Facebook pages where we will give daily updates on the status of the project.



Web site



National Line



October 16, 2021 (JST)
Streamed live

