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Author	金子, 國吉(Kaneko, Kunikichi)
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An Observation of the Trend of Skills in *Kendō* Through the Japanese Literature of War

By *Kunikichi Kaneko**

Prefatory Note

This brief paper deals with the relationship between the sword fights described in two of Japan's representative war tales or *The Tale of Heike* (*Heikemonogatari*) and the *Taiheiki* and skills in *Kendō*, as depicted in the tales, for the purpose of observing such skills as they were. *The Tale of Heike* (*Heikemonogatari*) is an epic completed in the first half of the 13th century which deals with the rise and fall of the Heike family. It was recited to the accompaniment of the *Biwa* lute. The *Taiheiki* is a historic record probably completed in the mid-14th century, and deals with the civil war between the Northern and Southern Dynasties between 1333 and 1390.

1. Skills in *Kendō* in the Last Stage of the Ancient Period (794 to 1192) or the End of the Heian Era)—an Episode of Fighting Over a Bridge in Section IV of *The Tale of Heike*

This section on fighting over a bridge tells of Minamoto-no-Yorimasa who rose in arms with Prince Takakura over his army at Uji southeast of Kyoto, but met defeat and killed himself. In the episode is described a sword fight in which was engaged Jōmyō-Meishū, a monk soldier of the Onjoji Templar in the Province of Yamato in support of the Minamoto family. He then used such skills in *Kendō* as the "spider's web" or *kumote*, the "braided cord" or *kakunawa*, the "cross" or *jūmonji*, the "water mill" or *mizuguruma*, and the "somersault" or *tombogaeri* which are terminologies in the nomenclature of *Kendō*.

It is clear throughout the tale in general that skills in martial arts, as then required, were agility, physical strength, and marksmanship, and from the context of the section, it is adequate to take the description of the sword fight in which was

* Professor of the Institute of Physical Education, Keio University.

engaged Monk Meishu as rhetorical rather than realistic. Similar terminologies of *Kendō* appear in other sections, but are not used to describe any technicality of *Kendō*. For example, such terminologies as the "spider's web" and the "cross" are used to describe scenes in which a few people are fighting against a crowd of enemies, but are not used to describe the technicalities involved in the terminologies. The same thing can be said of such terminologies as the "braided cord," the "water mill," and the "somersault," and it is clear from the context of the section that fighting scenes are described by rhetorically repeating such terminologies. Thus from the context of the section and references to such terminologies in other sections, it may be adequate to take the five skills of *Kendō*, as exemplified in Monk Meishu's fighting over a bridge, as purely rhetorical.

2. Outline of Skills in *Kendō* in the Kamakura Period (1191 to 1333)

Skills in *Kendō* prevalent in the Kamakura period are sparsely recorded in the descriptions of Tōma-Taro and Higuchi-no-Jiro in the *Azuma Kagami*, a historic record completed in the latter half of the 13th century, the Ōyano brothers and the fight of the Wada family in the *Moko Shurai Ekotoba* or a pictorial scroll on the Mongols' attempts to invade Japan, and also in the *Gukansho*, a historic account completed by Monko Jien circa 1220. Compared with skills in marksmanship, those in *Kendō* are hardly described. This may be because the joust or a combat with swords or lances between two knights on horseback was no more an effective combat means than toward the end of the ancient period, and was not regarded in general as the required martial art. It is further presumed that the combat experiences accumulated to counter enemies since the latter half of the Kamakura period gave food for thought, and the influences of the experiences on strategy, tactics, weapons, and armors were great with the emphasis gradually shifting to the development of *Kendō*, as witnessed, above all, in the increased popularity of the formation of infantry in phalanxes, of *naginata*, and of light armors.

3. Skills of *Kendō* During the Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (1333-1390)—a Case on the *Taiheiki*

The *Taiheiki*, a historic account of the civil war between the Northern and Southern Dynasties during the period, has numerous parallels with *The Tale of Heike* (*Heikemonogatari*). References to *Kendō* in the former are limited to characters in possession of extraordinary physical strength, and it is presumed that skills in this martial art during this period were different from those in later periods. Even

so, in step with the combat experiences accumulated in making armors lighter, making more use of infantry, and the advent of lances, more ingenuity was used in martial arts and skills, as can be evidenced by many examples.

Many references can be observed to the honor of those excelling in marksmanship, those unparalleled in valor, and those good at manipulating lances, but there are few references to those good at *Kendō*. This evidences that the emphasis of warfare still was on marksmanship, but there is no doubt that the combat by *Kendō* was gradually establishing itself in public recognition. References to this are made in the use of such terminologies as “cutting” or *zan*, “assault” or *geki*, “piercing” or *shi*, and “strike” or *totsu*, but there are unexpectedly few examples of using such terminologies. Some examples are “sweep-cutting by the sword gripped by one hand” or *katate uchi no haraigiri*, “cutting the body into halves” or *dōgiri*, “cutting into round slices” or *kurumagiri*, “distinction of defensive and offensive attitudes” or *rippa*, “nail cutting” or *Urigiri*, “cutting straight down after the fashion of the Sakamoto school of *Kendō*” or *Sakamoto-yo no ogamigiri*, and “cutting aslant at one shoulder after the fashion of the Sakamoto school” or *Sakamoto-yo no kesagiri*. It should be noted, however, that these terminologies, as is the case with *The Tale of Heike (Heikemonogatari)*, are evidently used as epithets rhetorically describing those in possession of extraordinary physical strength employing long swords. Such terminologies as the “*kumote*” and the “*jūmonji*” are also used rhetorically, but are not used to describe the technicalities involved in them. The rhetorical use of such terminologies tells of the ascending popularity of long swords, and may have implied something intimidating.