



Historical Anecdotes

Human Tameshigiri: Testing Katana on Condemned Criminals

During the Edo period, some katanas were tested directly on the bodies of death-row inmates. This practice was called *tameshigiri* and served to assess the quality of the blade. Sometimes, the executioner would cut through multiple bodies in a single strike! Blades that passed this test were engraved with phrases such as "**go-nin giri**" (五人切り), meaning "cut five men."

The "Cursed" Katanas of Muramasa

The swordsmith **Muramasa** was famous for forging legendary blades, but they were said to be cursed: bloodthirsty, they compelled their owners to kill—even friends or family. It was commonly believed that owning a Muramasa meant being doomed to tragedy. Even **Tokugawa Iyasu**, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, banned their use.

The Katana Saved from Nuclear Fire

After the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, a katana was found among the ruins—almost completely intact. It had belonged to a samurai and was preserved as a symbol of survival. Today, it is kept in a museum as a testimony to Japanese cultural resilience.

The Duel Between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojirō

Musashi, the most famous Japanese swordsman, faced his rival **Kojirō** not with a katana... but with a carved wooden boat oar! Kojirō used a very long katana called *Monohoshizao* ("The Drying Pole"), but Musashi killed him with a precise blow to the head, proving that strategy is more important than the weapon.

The Legend of the Leaf in the River

A Zen anecdote tells of two katanas: one forged by **Muramasa** and the other by **Masamune** (another legendary swordsmith). Both were dipped into a stream to test their quality. Muramasa's blade cut every leaf that floated by. Masamune's blade repelled the leaves without cutting them. The judge declared Masamune the winner: his blade cut only when necessary—a symbol of the balance between power and wisdom.

The Katana of General Nogi Maresuke

During the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), General **Nogi Maresuke** carried a ceremonial katana. After the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912, Nogi, devoted to *bushidō*, committed *seppuku* with that very same katana, along with his wife, as an act of absolute loyalty to the Emperor. His katana is now a historical relic preserved in a shrine in Tokyo.

Katanas During World War II

Many Japanese officers carried katanas during WWII. But beware—not all were authentic *nihontō* (traditional swords). Many were "**Shin Guntō**", mass-produced for the army using industrial methods. However, some officers carried ancestral swords—ancient katanas passed down for generations—and brought them to the front as spiritual protectors.

The Kamikaze Who Gave His Katana to an Enemy

In 1945, a kamikaze pilot was shot down and survived on the island of Okinawa, where he was captured by American soldiers. Before being taken away, he asked that his katana be returned to his family. An American officer kept the sword but, years later in 1970, he honored the promise and returned it to the pilot's family—a story of respect between enemies.

Masamune's Katana in the Imperial Collection

Japan possesses a treasure trove of “national treasure swords” known as **Kokuhō**. One of the most important is the **Honjo Masamune**, considered one of the finest blades ever forged. Once owned by various Tokugawa shoguns, it was handed over to the Americans after the war under General MacArthur's orders. Today, it has mysteriously disappeared—no one knows where it went.

The Soldier Who Walked Back to Japan with His Katana

A Japanese soldier who survived in the Philippine jungle after the war, **Hiroo Onoda**, remained hidden for 29 years, believing the war had not ended. When he was finally persuaded to return to Japan in 1974, he was still carrying his katana. He was welcomed as a hero, and his sword was preserved as a symbol of unwavering dedication.