



## Tameshi-Giri (and Suemono-Giri) as a Sub-Cultural Custom and Social Structure in Feudal Era Japan: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Transformation of Its Symbolic Meanings and Functions

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### Abstract

“Tameshi-giri” (or “suemono-giri”), in which corpses were used as mediums to test the quality of swords or the skill of swordsmen, was an unusual cultural practice of the samurai (i.e., warrior) class in feudal era Japan. Although *tameshi-giri* as a modern martial art jargon referring to “a method of training in the use of a sword by cutting conventional mediums” has already been imported to the Western world, the original socio-cultural meanings it symbolized as a sub-cultural custom and its societal functions as a social structure of pre-modern Japan are rarely discussed in the context of social science. Given this, the purpose of this paper is to offer a social-historical analysis of the old *tameshi-giri* custom as a social structure by focusing on the transformation of its manifest and latent functions. In doing so, it also aims to clarify some of the misconceptions and confusions associated with it.

**Keywords:** Tameshi-giri, Samurai, Japanese swords, Edo period criminal justice

### 1. Introduction

“Tameshi-giri” (or “suemono-giri”), in which corpses were used as mediums to be cut in order to test the effectiveness of swords or the skill of swordsmen, was not only a socially accepted but also a valued cultural practice of the most privileged warrior class called the *samurai* that had existed in pre-modern Japan until 1871, when the Meiji Imperial government officially denounced the preexisting hierarchical system of social casts (Steinmetz, 2007). Obviously, such a brutal cultural practice had already ceased to exist when the Tokugawa shogun’s ruling of Japan officially ended in 1868, and not only using swords to cut humans (dead or alive) but also even wearing of swords on person were officially banned by an order from the new government in 1876 (Amada, 2004). Interestingly, however, over one hundred years have passed since the disappearance of this unusual custom, the Japanese term “*tameshi-giri*” as a martial art jargon to refer to a type of training method in the use of sword was imported from Japan, and has been used rather widely in the Western world. (See Kremer, Racette, Schellenberg, Chaltchi & Sauvageau, 2008).

In the context of the Japanese martial arts practiced in the Western world today, the term “*tameshi-giri*” seems to be used more generally to refer to the practice of cutting conventional targets, such as ones made of bundles of water soaked rice straw, rolls of straw mats or bamboos, for the purpose of testing and developing the skill of practitioners in the use of Japanese swords (Obata, 2005). “*Suemono-giri*” is another Japanese term, which not many martial arts practitioners in the Western world are familiar with. It is a rather old-fashion Japanese term that modern martial practitioners in Japan do not use very often, unless the context specifically calls for this more narrowly defined term. Other than having a semantic emphasis on how the medium is placed as a target to be cut (i.e., the target is fixed or placed still on a mount), the term “*suemono-giri*” fundamentally means the same thing as *tameshi-giri*. In other words, *tameshi-giri* and *suemono-giri* fundamentally refer to the same social behavior.

Not surprisingly, the actual practice of *tameshi-giri* (and *suemono-giri*) as a cultural custom and its social functions to the Japanese society have very much changed over its course of history. Thus, when an average Japanese person today hears either one of the terms, he or she would imagine a samurai warrior of the past or a skilled modern swordsman (i.e., martial art practitioner) performing various cuts on stationary targets made of aforementioned conventional materials in

order to see and develop his ability to perform proper cutting techniques with his sword. Similarly, the modern martial art definition of tameshi-giri seems to have been widely shared amongst the non-Japanese who are familiar with the term.

Despite the fact that tameshi-giri is already well understood as “test cutting of a stationary target with a Japanese sword,” its social functions as a historical social structure unique to the samurai class and the transformation of its functions in the feudal era Japan have rarely been discussed in the context of social science. When the practice of tameshi-giri in feudal era Japan is discussed in a non-scientific context, it seems to often involve confusions about its microscopic immediate purposes (i.e., to test the quality of swords or to test the skill of a swordsman) as an individual level social behavior and its macro level social functions (i.e., to maintain the martial spirit of the warrior class or to punish hideous felony offenders) as a social structure. Further, it also seems to involve misconceptions about its customary procedure (i.e., who performed tameshi-giri and who were used as mediums to be cut) that perpetuate themselves with inaccurate information.

Given this, the purpose of this paper is to offer a socio-cultural analysis of this unusual custom that had been practiced amongst the samurai class in feudal era Japan. Specifically, tameshi-giri in this analysis is viewed as a sub-cultural custom unique to and characterized the most privileged ruling class of the samurai during the Edo period (1603-1868), and what socio-cultural meanings it symbolized to the samurai class will be discussed. Further, tameshi-giri as it was practiced historically is also viewed as a social structure that served important functions not only to the samurai class but also to the entire Japanese society in the institution of the criminal justice system, and how its manifest and latent functions transformed over the course history will be discussed. In so doing, this paper also aims to clarify confusions about the microscopic immediate purposes of tameshi-giri as an individual social behavior and its macroscopic social functions as an institutionalized social structure. It also aims to clarify misconceptions about its customary procedure in terms of who performed tameshi-giri and who were used as mediums to be cut.

## 2. The Semantics of Tameshi-Giri and Its Historical Connotations

### 2.1 Literal meanings of tameshi-giri and suemono-giri

The word “tameshi” in tameshi-giri means “to test,” and the suffix “-giri” means “to cut.” Thus, a composite noun “tameshi-giri” literally means “test-cutting.” “Sue-mono” in suemono-giri means “something that is affixed to or placed still on some kind of mount.” Hence, “suemono-giri” literally means “fixed or stationary target cutting.” As it is obvious from the semantics, neither the word tameshi-giri nor suemono-giri by itself indicates “what is to be cut” and “what is to be tested” through cutting. To understand the cultural meanings and connotations of tameshi-giri (and suemono-giri), whether it is viewed as a micro level individual social behavior or as a macro level cultural custom or social structure, knowing what actually the terms refer to in the Japanese language seems to be prerequisite because the language they use is a reflection of their culture.

In fact, definitions of tameshi-giri provided in Japanese-Japanese dictionaries present interesting historical connotations of this unusual social behavior by specifying its immediate purpose and the medium to be cut. According to *Daijirin* (Sanseido, 2003), a modern Japanese encyclopedic dictionary, the term tameshi-giri is defined as “the procedure to test the cutting ability of swords by cutting **humans** and animals.” In another well respected Japanese-Japanese dictionary (Hisamatsu & Sato, 1976), tameshi-giri is defined as “to cut **humans** or a bundle of rice straw in order to test the cutting ability of swords.” Yet another well respected Japanese-Japanese dictionary (Nishio, Iwabuchi & Mizutani, 1999), it is defined as “to cut dogs, cats or **humans** to test the cutting ability of swords.” [Note: The original Japanese definitions found in these dictionaries are translated into English by this author. There is no definition for the term suemono-giri in either dictionary.]

### 2.2 Historical connotations

While the semantics of tameshi-giri (or suemono-giri) do not indicate the immediate purpose of tameshi-giri, the three Japanese-Japanese dictionaries clearly define tameshi-giri with its intended purpose: That is, “to test the cutting ability or quality of the blades,” rather than the swordsman’s skills. Furthermore, the definitions provided by all three Japanese language dictionaries even specify one common cutting medium for traditional tameshi-giri - **humans** (though they do not specify corpse or live humans).

Of course, to cut humans, whether dead or alive, in order to test the cutting ability of swords is legally and morally condemned in modern Japanese society. It is also a common knowledge both in and outside of the Japanese martial arts community that tameshi-giri today almost exclusively means “test cutting of stationary targets made of conventional materials to assess and evaluate the skill of a swordsman” (Obata, 2005), instead of to assess and evaluate the quality of swords. Nevertheless, modern Japanese dictionaries still define tameshi-giri essentially as “the test of swords’ quality by cutting **humans**.” The most logical explanation is that tameshi-giri as it was practiced in the days of the samurai, in fact, meant “the test of swords by cutting **humans**.”

Here, we must keep in mind that historically wearing swords on person had become a cultural and legal privilege given only to the members of the ruling class since the end of so called the Warring State era and clearly by the beginning of the Edo period (Takeuchi, 2003). Therefore, this brutal behavior was considered a sub-cultural custom practiced by the members of a specific social cast to symbolize certain sub-cultural values or to serve certain social functions pertaining to them. This leads us to the next level of examination of tameshi-giri as a sub-cultural custom of the samurai class and a social structure from the socio-historical and ethnological perspectives.

### 3. Tameshi-Giri and Suemono-Giri in Historical Documents

#### 3.1 Tameshi and o-tameshi in early 1600s

Many old documents that had been written prior to the Muromachi period were lost or destroyed in fire during the long Warring State era (1493-1573). Thus, it is difficult to locate records of tameshi-giri (and suemono-giri) in historical documents written prior to the 1500s. However, historical documents written after the Battle of Sekigahara (1600) tend to be much better preserved and reprinted, which makes the analysis easier.

The records of tameshi-giri start appearing frequently in historical documents (both in the public records compiled by the national and local governments, as well as in the writings of private authors) from the mid 1600s, though the word suemono-giri does not appear as often (Ujii, 1999). In those documents written in the early through the mid 1600s, such as *Hankan vol. 1* (Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c), *Kishu-han karo Miura-ke monjo, vol. 2* (Miura, 17c), *Neiko-sai Danso*, (Neiko-sai, 1600s), and *Nitcho vol. 1* (Kokura Province, 17c), simpler words for “tameshi-giri” such as “tameshi” and “o-tameshi” (i.e., an honorific of “tameshi” when it is performed by a samurai of very high status) were used to indicate “test cutting of humans to maintain honorable martial skills and spirit of samurai warriors.” Interestingly those early documents do not specify tameshi or o-tameshi as the testing of swords’ quality, but rather they tend to emphasize the maintenance of martial skills and spirit.

For example, one such historical document, *Han Kagami, vol. 1* (Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c), which was compiled by the Department of Literature and Books of the Tokugawa Shogunate as the records of accomplishments of the ruling *daimyo* loads (i.e., rulers of provinces with the complete governing authority granted by the Shogun) of each province, documents that Hosokawa Tadaoki (1563-1645), the first Lord of Buzen Kokura province, performing his first o-tameshi on nine corpses with his own sword when he was only 15 years old. Hosokawa Tadaoki’s son, the second Lord of Kokura Province, Hosokawa Tadatoshio is also documented to have performed o-tameshi in *Nitcho* (Kokura Province, 17c), which is the official daily journal of the Kokura provincial government. *Han Kagami* also documents that two sons of Tokugawa Ieyasu, both of whom were born right after the War of Sekigahara (1600) and became the rulers of their own governing territories, performing “o-tameshi” on a commoner class servant who committed a crime and on a corpse of an executed felon in their jurisdiction in the early 1600s. In *Neiko-sai Danso*, a document written in 1600s by a private author by the penname Neiko-sai, also documents that the third Lord of Izumo Province, Horio Tadaharu (1599-1633) favored the practice of o-tameshi. Also in retrospect, *Hagakure*, which was written in 1716 by a retired samurai in Saga province Yamamoto Tsunetomo, describes how Lord Nabeshima Katsushige (1580-1657) used to practice tameshi-giri on ten humans when he was young by the order of his late father.

#### 3.2 Tameshi and o-tameshi in the mid 1600s to early 1700s

In slightly later historical documents written in the mid 1600s through the early 1700s, the popularity of tameshi-giri among relatively high ranking, thus financially better off samurai is well documented. For instance, *Hennen tairyaku* (Owari Province, 17c), the official record of the Owari provincial government, documents that in 1667 corpses of executed Christians were awarded to samurai officers in the province for use for tameshi-giri. (This document implies that during that time tameshi-giri was a very common practice among the samurai class and that formally receiving corpses of executed felons for that purpose was an honorable experience.) Similar instances that took place in the mid 1660s are also recorded in *Histoire de la religion chretienne au Japon* authored by a Frenchman Leon Pages, who translated many historical documents of Japan that are related to Christians in Japan and published the book in Paris in 1869-1870. In Nara province, the official record of criminal courts (Nara Magistrate’s Office, 17c-19c) also shows records of using corpses of executed felons for tameshi-giri in the mid 1600s.

To reflect how tameshi-giri as a sub-cultural custom of the samurai class was popular in Japan during the 1600s, *Zoku Henro-ki* (Yamazaki, late 1600s, reprinted in 1956), which is a private journal kept by an Echizen province samurai official during the late 1600s, describes how servants of a samurai who devoted himself to tameshi-giri always searched rivers to find corpses of drowned people for their master. To correspond with what was described in this old journal, in 1661 the Kaga provincial government officially issued an order to prohibit anyone from collecting corpses of drowned and starved or injured to death on the street for the purpose of tameshi-giri, unless they were authorized by the magistrate’s office. Similarly, in *Aizu-han Kasei jikki* (Aizu Province, 17c-19c), the official record of the Aizu provincial government, there is a record of a new formal procedure officially enacted in 1660 regarding the using the public facilities specifically dedicated for tameshi-giri by the samurai class. According to this official record, the newly

enacted procedure was to be followed by all members of the samurai class in the province, from the lowest ranking *ashigaru* to the highest ranking officers. This clearly suggests that tameshi-giri in Aizu province, which was very famous for its strong militant and warrior spirits (Hoshi, 2004), was extremely common and popular among the samurai across all ranks and statuses. The popularity of tameshi-giri as a part of public execution of serious felons was also well documented in a private journal *Ohmu churo-ki* kept by a relatively high ranking samurai official of Owari province (Asahi, 1691-1718).

### 3.3 Tameshi and o-tameshi in the mid 1700s to 1800s

During the 1700s, however, as the social order and peaceful atmosphere of the society were restored, the Tokugawa Shogunate emphasized education and moralistic behaviors of the samurai as the ruling class to be respect by the commoner class (Kanno, 2004). Accordingly, the popularity of tameshi-giri among samurai throughout the country started declining clearly. For instance, later volumes of *Han Kagami* (Tokugawa Shogunate, 18c-19c), whose older volumes had proudly documented the highest ranking *daimyo* lords born before or right after the Battle of Sekigahara (1600) practicing o-tameshi by themselves, started recording stories of merciful *daimyo* lords quitting o-tameshi after being preached by a monk or pardoning felons who were about be executed as live medium to be cut in tameshi-giri.

To reflect the nationwide decline in tameshi-giri practice in the 1700s, the author of *Hagakure* (Yamamoto, 1713), a famous book on Bushido (i.e., the way of samurai), complains about the younger generation of the warrior class giving excuses and not performing tameshi-giri as older generation used to do. A very similar complaint by “an old timer” samurai in Shonai Province of the early 1700s can be found in *Shijintsu* (Kodera, 1724), where the author states that despite the whining from (then) recent samurai that tameshi-giri is brutal and crude, there is no other way to maintain the martial spirit and be always prepared for deployment than by actually using swords (on convicted felons and corpses), especially when the society is peaceful. Similarly, the overall decline of tameshi-giri by newer generations of samurai was reported in *Hachiju ou mukashi-banashi* (Shinmi, 1732), an essay written by a retired *hatamoto* officer of the Shogun’s military who was eighty some years old when it was written. In retrospect, the author Shinmi states that during the 1660s-1670s the commoner class servants who were caught committing a crime in the master’s mansion were executed on the property and then used as mediums for tameshi-giri, but in (then) recent years (i.e., 1720s-1730s) such things are very rare occurrence.

In historical documents that were written in the 1700s and still exist today (e.g., Kodera, 1724; Shinmi, 1732), records of tameshi-giri still appear, but mostly in the context of court records mentioning that corpses of executed felons were used for tameshi or o-tameshi. Further, during the 1700s most of those aforementioned official journals and records of provincial governments that were kept till the end of the Edo period started only briefly mentioning tameshi along with the records of executions of criminals who committed serious felony offenses (Fujita, 1870s). This tendency of official government records only to mention tameshi or o-tameshi briefly in the context of execution records continues in the 1800s. (See Yamazaki, 1957).

The words “suemono-giri” and “suemono” appear much less frequently than does “tameshi” or “o-tameshi” in the history of Japan. However, they start appearing more frequently in the mid 1700s to especially 1800s. What is notable is that when “suemono” appears in historical documents, it mostly refers to a specific form of “tameshi” in which a decapitated corpse of convicted felon was securely placed on an elevated soft soil to be used as a stationary target to test the quality of the sword being used (Fujita, 1870s; Hachiya, 1814). Additionally, the word “suemono” was also used to form compound nouns such as “suemono-shi” which means an expert/professional in “stationary target test cutting” or “suemono no waza” which means “techniques of stationary target test cutting.” In fact, suemono-shi or professional tameshi-giri performers start appearing in historical documents increasing more often in the 1700s (e.g., *Aizu-han Kasei jikki*, 18c), when the cultural practice of tameshi and o-tameshi started clearly declining.

In the 1800s tameshi-giri was still performed, but only in the context of penal procedure after executions. At this point, tameshi and o-tameshi in the jurisdiction of the capital city Edo were entirely commissioned by the Yamada Asaemon family, who were professional sword testers specialized in test cutting of corpses and even live felons on behalf of the Tokugawa Shogun and other very high ranking samurai lords (Fukunaga, 1970; Ujiie, 2002). Because tameshi-giri in the 1800s was performed by professional suemono-shi commissioned by the national and local governments or private samurai of very high ranking, there would be no more record of o-tameshi being performed by high ranking samurai by themselves.

### 3.4 The end of tameshi-giri in history

The end of the long history of tameshi-giri and o-tameshi on corpses and live felons came about as the Meiji Imperial government, which took over the Tokugawa Shogunate’s ruling of Japan in 1868, first abolished the preexisting four social casts (i.e., the samurai class, the farmer class, the craftsmen class, and the merchant class) in 1871 and declared that all four categories of people to be equal (Steinmetz, 2007). Then they officially ended when the Meiji Imperial government issued a ban on wearing swords by those who were not active duty military or police officers in 1876

(Amada, 2004). Those orders from the new imperial government completely abolished the samurai, the warrior class that had ruled Japan for almost 700 years. They also abolished the privilege of the samurai to wear their symbolic weapon that they even regarded as their souls (Amada, 2004; Nitobe, 1905). It is much later in history when the term tameshi-giri starts reappearing as a martial art jargon to refer to a method of training in the use of Japanese sword by cutting conventional targets.

#### 4. Tameshi-Giri (and Suemono-Giri) From the Socio-Cultural Perspective

In examining the records of tameshi-giri and o-tameshi in historical documents, four historical phases of transition of tameshi-giri can be observed. Specifically, they are 1) the pre-Sekigahara era (before 1600), in which tameshi-giri was assumed to have been practiced on a regular basis amongst the samurai class of the Warring State era, 2) the prevalent era (from the early 1600s to early 1700s), in which tameshi-giri and o-tameshi were very popular amongst relatively high ranking samurai, 3) the declining era (from the mid 1700's to 1876), in which tameshi-giri was viewed as cruel and inhumane and high ranking samurai were no longer performing o-tameshi by themselves, and 4) the modern era, in which tameshi-giri is revived as a type of martial art training. At each phase, the immediate purposes of this unusual social behavior vary. Also the symbolic meanings and social functions of this sub-cultural practice and social structure seem different as the role of the samurai class and the functions of their symbolic weapons, swords, changed over time.

In this section, tameshi-giri is conceptualized as an individual level social behavior, a sub-cultural custom of the samurai class, and a social structure of the Edo period Japan. Therefore, its immediate purposes, symbolic meaning (i.e., non-material social fact), and social functions are analyzed at each of the four historical phases.

##### 4.1 Transformation of its immediate purposes as a social behavior

The fact that those early Edo period *daimyo* lords, who were born right before and after the War of Sekigahara (1600), were well documented to have been performing o-tameshi by themselves strongly suggest that for the samurai who had lived before the Edo period, particularly during the Warring State era, tameshi-giri on live humans and corpses were very common practice of their sub-culture as the battle fields had provided them with the mediums and opportunities continuously. Because the samurai class was constantly engaging in battles, it is not difficult to imagine that tameshi-giri as a social behavior served the purposes of both testing the quality of the swords they were using and testing the mental and physical skills in the use of swords.

From a tactical point of view, in the actual battle fields the samurai wore armor and used swords only as side weapons. Obviously the enemy soldiers against whom they wanted to prevail were also moving rather than just being statically posing (Tanaka, 2002). To understand that the immediate purpose of tameshi-giri on stationary corpses was only to test the quality of the blades and the physical skills in using the blades seems too simplistic because cutting unarmored corpses that are not moving may not be as good of a test of the blades nor the physical skills as cutting armored targets that are actually moving. In this sense, it seems more reasonable to assume that tameshi-giri during the pre-Sekigahara era was mostly performed as a psychological training to overcome the fear of fighting and cutting live humans with swords in the battle fields.

As it was well described in the previous section, during the prevalent era (from the early 1600s to early 1700s), in which tameshi-giri and o-tameshi were very popular amongst relatively high ranking samurai including the highest ranking *daimyo* lords, the immediate purpose of such a behavior seemed to be the testing of the mental and physical skills in the use of swords. (See Koderu, 1724; Kokura Province, 17c; Neiko-sai, 1600s). Probably popular tameshi-giri practice amongst relatively well off samurai was something similar to sport hunting. Even though those who enjoy sport hunting no longer need to hunt for food for survival, they still enjoy the activity as a mental and physical exercise.

The immediate purpose of tameshi-giri would transform from testing of the mental or physical skills of the swordsmen to be testing of the quality of swords during the declining era (from the mid 1700's to 1876), in which tameshi-giri was viewed as cruel and inhumane, and high ranking samurai were no longer performing o-tameshi by themselves (Ujiie, 1999; also see the historical documents cited in the previous section). This was the time when the Tokugawa government emphasized the stability of the society and encouraged samurai to be loyal to their lords and serve their administrative duties, as opposed to be brave and effective warriors (Naramonto, 2002; Kanno, 2004). Especially when the professional suemono-shi, who were specialized to perform o-tameshi on behalf of high ranking samurai to test their personally owned swords, started appearing in history (Ujiie, 1999), those high ranking samurai who commissioned the professional tameshi-giri experts to test their swords had their swords' tangs proudly inscribed with the records of tameshi, indicating how many corpses the blades successfully cut and how well they cut (Fukunaga, 1970).

The immediate purpose of tameshi-giri makes the last transition in the modern era when it is revived as a type of training method in Japanese martial art. Today, the immediate purpose of tameshi-giri as a martial art training method is primarily to test the skill of the swordsman in the effective use of sword by actually cutting conventional targets with it (Obata, 2005).

#### 4.2 Transformation of its symbolic meanings as a sub-cultural custom

Tameshi-giri is not merely an individual level social behavior, but it is also a sub-cultural custom held amongst the members a particular social casts, the samurai. Since it was a behavioral manifestation of an important aspect of the samurai sub-culture of pre-modern Japan, it also represented important symbolic meanings (or non-material social fact) to the samurai class.

As it was clearly mentioned in the famous book of *Hagakure* (Yamamoto, 1716), the martial spirit of the warrior as a collective sentiment was extremely important for the members of this social cast. The samurai were the professional warriors as well as the ruling class of the country (Kanno, 2004). Their swords as a symbolic representation of their martial spirit, duty, responsibility and obligation as the rulers were sometimes regarded as important as their own souls (Amada, 2004; Naramonto, 2002). During the time when members of the samurai class were actually engaging in tameshi-giri by themselves, the sub-cultural custom clearly symbolized their effort to maintain the honorable martial spirit and mentality. Additionally, their actually performing tameshi-giri on corpses of executed felons also symbolized their being the ruling class of the country with the military and criminal justice authority. Tameshi-giri as an additional punishment to death penalty (Ishii, 1997) continued to exist in the context of official penal procedure of Japan till the abolishment of the samurai class itself. As it will be discussed later, this also substantiates the argument that tameshi-giri was in fact a symbolic representation of the samurai class's collective sentiment and shared martial spirit that lived and died with the warriors of the past.

#### 4.3 Transformation of its functions as a social structure

Tameshi-giri was clearly a sub-cultural custom of the warrior and ruling class of pre-modern Japan. However, it was also a social structure that served some important functions not only for the samurai class but also for the entire Japanese society. Obviously, tameshi-giri as an institutionalized social structure of criminal justice also served functions to stabilize and maintain some order to the Japanese society.

It is not difficult to imagine that the samurai's constantly performing tameshi-giri, especially on live and executed felons had some deterrent effects on criminals and potential criminals as one of its latent functions during the disordered Warring State era. Once the long lasting wars ended in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the new Shogunate tried to restore order and stability of the society by emphasizing loyalty, duties and responsibilities of the samurai class. At this time, the Shogunate emphasized education over martial arts; administrative service over winning the battle; and morality as the ruling class over braveness as the warrior class (Kanno, 2004). During this time, the popularity of wide-spread tameshi-giri must also have served a latent function as a safety valve through which the new generation of samurai, who did not have the opportunities to win the battles and be promoted to much higher ranks or awarded larger territories, could vent their political frustrations with the new government by maintaining their collective social identity as the warrior. Also, during the prevailing era of tameshi-giri from the early 1600s to early 1700s, commonly seen tameshi-giri must have also served a social function to show to the commoners that the samurai, who were no longer fighting the war, were still the ruling class of the country that is given the cultural and legal authority to serve justice through o-tameshi. It is also clear from historical documents written by private author (e.g., Asahi, 1691-1718) that tameshi-giri as a part of public executions served a latent function as a rather distasteful entertainment.

During the declining era of tameshi-giri, the samurai class was no longer the warrior class actually fighting the wars for the country, but was a privileged class of government officials by ascription (Yamamoto, 2000; 2008). Of course, as it is described in the next section, strictly controlled and ritualized tameshi-giri and o-tameshi performed by suemono-shi as a part of the formal penal procedure during the 1800s (Fujita, 1870s; Ishii, 1997) served an important manifest function in the criminal justice system as an additional punishment to the death penalty to deter commissions of serious felony. By having the professional suemono-shi to test the quality of swords that they proudly owned, high ranking samurai, who were no longer the warriors but had become an advantaged class of government bureaucrats in the mid to late Edo period (Naramoto, 2002; Kanno, 2004), were still able to maintain the warrior spirit and identity symbolically and able to show the society that they are still the ruling class of the country with the legislative and law enforcement authority.

### 5. Clarifying the Confusions and Misconceptions

#### 5.1 Criminal justice procedure versus martial arts practice

As the historical documents referenced earlier clearly indicate, the term tameshi-giri was rather closely linked to the criminal justice practice throughout the Edo period, which was from the early 1600s till 1868. In that sense, tameshi-giri, which was originally a sub-cultural custom of the samurai class being performed as a martial practice before and the beginning of the Edo period, evolved and lasted also as a legitimate penal procedure in the criminal justice system of pre-modern Japan. That is why the term "suemono-giri" or "suemono-shi" in historical documents was also used in conjunction with the professional tameshi-giri performers to test cutting abilities of swords using decapitated corpses in the context of court records on executions.

The notion of *tameshi-giri* performed as a part of legitimate criminal justice practice is very well substantiated as a number of historical documents written between the mid 1600s to early 1800s (e.g., Aizu Province, 17c-19c; Fujita, 1870s; Hachiya, 1814; Koderu, 1724; Nara Magistrate's Office, 17c-19c) describe the procedure and specific details of *tameshi-giri* as part of the formal public execution ritual. Also, those historical documents and public records written in the Edo period indicate that *tameshi* using the corpses of executed felon as a form of extra punishment (because even felons wanted their bodies to be handed to their families for proper burial) seems to have been the norm in the Edo period criminal justice system rather than an exception at least till the late 1700s to early 1800s (Ishii, 1997). That is, unless they were exempt by the laws of the jurisdiction, corpses of executed felons had always been used as medium for test cutting as a part of the capital punishment.

### 5.2 Who were used as *suemono* (i.e., stationary target for *tameshi-giri*)?

As described in section 2 above, along with the decline of the practice of *tameshi* as a martial practice amongst the samurai class since the mid 1700s, the shogunate and provincial governments started amending their penal laws to include exemptions for *tameshi-giri* based on the social casts and gender of the felons, in addition to the severity of the crimes they had committed. Most official records of provincial governments and the Shogunate cited in the earlier section also reveal exactly who were used as the medium for *tameshi-giri* and who were not. (Also see Ujiie, 1999; 2002.) By the late 1700s to early 1800s, the Tokugawa Shogunate and several provincial governments had issued prohibitions against the use of executed felons in the following categories:

- 1). Samurai or clergy, in the jurisdictions of the Shogunate (Yamazaki, 1957);
- 2). Female felons, in the jurisdictions of the Shogunate, Owari and Takasaki Provinces (Gunma Prefecture, 1978; Owari Province, 19c; Ujiie, 2002; Yamazaki, 1957);
- 3). Felons convicted of manslaughter instead of premeditated murder, in the jurisdiction of Hiroshima Province (Yamazaki, 1957);
- 4). Felons who have visible skin diseases, in the jurisdictions of the Shogunate and many provinces (Yamazaki, 1957).

### 5.3 Who actually performed *tameshi-giri* on felons after they were executed?

This is one of the areas in which misconceptions are still perpetuated amongst many, particularly those outside of Japan. To understand this issue more accurately, it is necessary to see the notion of *tameshi-giri* (and the use of corpses) from a socio-cultural perspective and examine it in the context of old criminal justice system in pre-modern Japan.

Up until 1868, when the last Tokugawa Shogun officially returned his commissioned authority to govern Japan to the Emperor, the samurai class had ruled Japan for about 675 years (Steinmetz, 2007). During the 1600s, the samurai class had still maintained a strong warrior class mentality, and thus had also tried to maintain the weaponry and martial skills necessary for their primary role as the warrior class (Kanno, 2004). While there are few existing historical reference sources on *tameshi-giri* prior to the Edo period (1603-1867), it is clear that by the early 1600s the practice of *tameshi-giri* on corpses had already been established as a legitimate means to test the quality of swords amongst the samurai class, as well as a legitimate form of penal procedure in the criminal justice system of old Japan.

During the early stage of the Edo period, many high ranking samurai, including *daimyo* lords actually engaged in the practice of *o-tameshi* on corpses by themselves as it was considered a very legitimate and necessary practice embedded in their warrior class sub-culture. As listed and cited in the earlier section, those *daimyo* lords who were well documented in historical records to have performed *o-tameshi* on live felons or corpses by themselves include:

1. Tokugawa Yorinobu, a son of Tokugawa Ieyasu and the 1st Lord of Kii province (Miura, 17c; Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c)
2. Tokugawa Yorifusa, another son of Tokugawa Ieyasu and the 1st Lord of Mito province (Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c)
3. Tokugawa Mitsukuni, a son of Tokugawa Yorifusa and the 2nd Lord of Mito province (Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c)
4. Nabeshima Naoshige and Katsushige, the Lords of Saga province, father and son (Yamamoto, 1716)
5. Honta Masakatsu, the Lord of Kohriyama province (Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c)
6. Hosokawa Tadatoki and Tadoshi, the Lords of Kokura province, father and son (Kokura Province, 17c-19c; Tokugawa Shogunate, 17c-18c)
7. Horie Tadaharu, the Lord of Matsue province (Neiko-sai, 1600s).

(Also see **3. Tameshi-Giri And Suemono-Giri in Historical Documents**)

As it is obvious from existing historical records, at least until the mid 1700s, to test their martial spirit and the cutting ability of their symbolic weapons on live felons or corpses of executed felons had not been considered as overly uncivilized or inhumane acts to be deprecated.

Despite the efforts of higher ranking samurai to try to maintain their martial spirits and identity, the long peaceful social environment of the country and the wave of civilization clearly started affecting the collective mentality and daily customs of the samurai class since the 1700s. That is, the samurai were no longer the actual warrior class: Rather they had mostly become the advantaged class of government bureaucrats (Yamamoto, 2000; 2008). Because of the declined needs for maintaining the martial skills as warriors, o-tameshi performed by higher ranking samurai themselves had no longer been popular by the mid 1700s (See the later volumes of *Han Kagami* kept by the Tokugawa Shogunate in the 18c).

During this time of decline of o-tameshi practice by the nation's highest ranking samurai, professional sword testers (but not ordinary executioners) that were called "otameshi-geisha" or "suemono-shi," who were relatively lower ranking samurai with recognized skills in swordsmanship expertly performing o-tameshi on behalf of very higher ranking samurai, started appearing in history. By the mid 1700s, the Tokugawa Shogunate and its Osaka and Nara *Bugyo-sho* (i.e., the district magistrate offices), as well as Aizu, Owari, Saga, and Satsuma provincial governments, (some of whose rulers had been famous for practicing o-tameshi by themselves till the mid 1600s) all started hiring or commissioning to have the professional otameshi-geisha or suemono-shi (all of whom were the members of the samurai class) to test the swords of high ranking samurai on their behalf. (See, for example, Aizu, 17c-19c; Fukunaga, 1970; Nara Magistrate's Office, 18c; Owari Province, 17c-19c, for historical records on tameshi professionals.)

#### 5.4 Did hinin actually perform tameshi-giri on corpses?

This is another area in which misconception is commonly perpetuated for two reasons. One is that by the late 1700s many higher ranking samurai had stopped actually performing o-tameshi by themselves (Ujiie, 1999). The other reason is that at least during the Edo period, executions of convicted felons from the commoner class, unless they were sentenced to death by decapitation, were mostly carried out by the hands of executioners from the lowest social cast called *hinin* (which literally means "non-human" in Japanese) who were also used as janitors of correctional facilities and execution grounds (Ishii, 1997).

As far as the historical records indicate, however, even after the practice of tameshi-giri had been considered uncivilized and inhumane, decapitation and cutting corpses to test the quality of swords was still conducted and actually performed by the hands of none other than the samurai class professionals or executioners, but never by the hands of then the lowest social cast *hinin*. Contrary to the widely spread misconception, *hinin* were only employed as actual executioners to carry out death penalty of non-samurai class felons and executions other than decapitation (Ishii, 1997). Additionally, those in the lowest cast were merely used as assistants to carry, move and set up the corpses on the stand for the samurai class professional sword testers, as well as janitors to clean up the execution grounds afterwards (Fujita, 1870s; Hachiya, 1814).

Aside from the existing historical documents, there were at least two obvious reasons that high ranking samurai (who wanted their symbolic weapons to be tested) would never have allowed the lowest cast of *hinin* to actually test or even handle their precious blades. One is the existence of rather strict and detailed legal requirements imposed by the Shogunate and local governments for the proper procedure of tameshi-giri rituals (Aizu Province, 17c-19c; Nara Magistrate's Office, 18c). Because tameshi-giri was also performed as an integral part of legitimate criminal justice procedure (i.e., harsher punishment in addition to mere execution), these laws clearly designated the actual performer of test cutting only to qualified samurai along with specific procedures of the ritual (Hachiya, 1814; Ujiie, 1999). Once again, those who actually performed decapitation of felons and tameshi-giri on corpses were either a) the *doshin* class samurai (i.e., the lowest ranking criminal justice officers) who were skilled in swordsmanship or b) professional "suemono-shi" (who were freelance sword testers but members of the samurai class) commissioned by the appropriate magistrate office or by the owners of the swords being tested (Nara Magistrate's Office, 18c).

The other reason that members of the *hinin* class could not have been allowed to handle swords after executions of felons was the symbolic meaning of swords to the samurai class in pre-modern Japan. Those swords being tested were private property of high ranking samurai who requested their swords to be tested through the local magistrate's office. In many cases, the swords to be tested were their family heirlooms or newly presented awards by higher ranking lords on special occasions. As many students of Japanese history already know, the samurai of the past believed and actually treated their swords as the symbolic representation of their social status and identity, and as though they were their own souls (Amada, 2004; Nitobe, 1905). As a matter of fact, those swords to be tested were first handed to the *bugyo* (i.e., the chief magistrate officer), then to the *yoriki* (i.e., deputy chief), and finally to either *doshin* performing executions or professional suemono-shi (Fujita, 1870s; Nara Magistrate's Office, 17c-19c); but never to be in the hands of assistants from the lowest social cast who were literally regarded by the samurai "not even humans."

Another relatively widespread misconception is that many of those who actually performed tameshi-giri did not possess good sword skills. Existing historical records also tend to refute such a notion. Despite the fact that most of those sword testers were relatively low in the bureaucratic hierarchy within the stratification system, they often operated their own schools of suemono-giri (i.e., specialized techniques of cutting stationary targets for the purpose of tameshi) and had

students entirely dedicated to perfect the skills of *suemono-giri* (Fukunaga, 1970; Ujiie, 1999). Since the swords being tested were properties of higher ranking samurai, the owners of precious swords would not have trusted their family heirlooms and valuable awards in the hands of unskilled testers.

### 5.5 To what extent professional *tameshi-geisha* and *suemono-shi* were deprecated in Japan?

Once again, to fully understand this issue, it is necessary to view the practice of *tameshi* from a socio-cultural perspective, and analyze how the cultural practice of *tameshi* had changed its meanings over the course of Japanese history. During those 260 years of the Edo period, *tameshi* practice had always been a privilege of the samurai class. Especially in the early Edo period some of the nation's highest ranking *daimyo* were actually performing o-*tameshi* by themselves. Later, some of high ranking samurai lords had even become students of well recognized early *suemono-shi* in their own ruling provinces. For example, one of the earliest documented *tameshi* professionals in the early Edo period, Nakagawa Saheita Shigeyoshi, was a high ranking *hatamoto* class samurai (i.e., a commissioned officer of the Shogun's military force) with the 1200 *koku* (i.e., rice barrels per year) size of his manor (Ujiie, 2002). Also as in the case of Aizu province, up until the early 1700s many of those *tameshi* professionals were well respected by the ruling lords of their provinces.

Those honorable days for professional *otameshi-geisha* and *suemono-shi* did not last too long, especially since the mid to late 1700s when many high ranking samurai started viewing the practice of o-*tameshi* by themselves unnecessary or uncivilized. Nonetheless, the practice of *tameshi* as a part of legitimate criminal justice procedure and penal ritual still survived till the end of the Edo period. Many historical documents compiled in the mid to late Edo period indicate that the ritualistic practice of *tameshi* on corpses was carried out with dignity before the presence of very high ranking officials (Ujiie, 1999).

From the economic point of view, however, the annual salaries of those *tameshi-geisha* in the Edo period were not great. Except for a very few like Nakagawa Saheita (who was a commissioned *hatamoto* officer of the Shogun's military with his own governing territory), his student Yamano Kanjuro/Kaemon (i.e., the teacher of the 1st generation Yamada Asauemon), and the famous 1st generation Yamada the "*Kubikiri*" Asauemon (but not later generations Yamada Asauemon), all seemed to have received relatively modest salaries and not so prestigious official ranks, even though they were still well respected in their professions. Combined with the general decline of the demand for commissioned test cuttings and the emerging cultural norms to view *tameshi* on corpses as an uncivilized act, most professional sword testers other than the famous Yamada Asauemon lineage had eventually disappeared from the front stage of history (Fukunaga, 1970).

One interesting piece of history about the famous Yamada family is that they also supported their family economy and their martial art school management by engaging in the making of medicine by extracting some bio-chemical essence from kidneys of the corpses they had used for *tameshi-giri* (Ujiie, 2002). Because of their side family business as pharmacist and the commissioned test cuttings from the Shogunate that they monopolized, the Yamada family had maintained wealth till the end of the Edo period even though they remained *ronin* (i.e., samurai who did not have a particular master lord nor possessed any permanent administrative positions in the government offices) on the official domicile record. According to Fukunaga (1970), the Yamada family continued their monopoly in commissioned sword testing for the Shogunate till the Meiji Restoration. When the new domicile registration record implemented by the Meiji Imperial government in 1873 replaced the old casts system of the Edo period based on *Shi* (samurai), *No* (farmers), *Ko* (craftsmen), and *Sho* (merchants), the 8th generation Yamada Asauemon Yoshitoyo and his younger brother Yoshifusa both became correctional officers in the capital city of Tokyo. However, they were registered as *Heimin* (commoners), not "*Shi-zoku*" (i.e., a new social category created for the old samurai class) because they had not possessed any official ranks in the old Shogunate offices.

In sum, most *tameshi* professionals did not have high ranks in the government bureaucracy, nor much wealth (except for the famous Yamada family): However, their skills in the profession had been well respected until the end of the Edo period.

## 6. Tameshi-Giri And Suemono-Giri in Japanese Martial Arts Today

### 6.1 New meanings and practice of *tameshi-giri* in sword arts today

As described earlier, the term "*tameshi-giri*" or more accurately "*tameshi*" meant to be the test of martial spirit and sword skills in the early Edo period. Later in the mid to late Edo period, it commonly referred to "the act of testing the swords on humans (mostly corpses but sometimes live felons)." Similarly, the term "*suemono-giri*" referred to "the specific act of performing *tameshi-giri* on decapitated corpses mounted as fixed/still targets.

As it was explained in an earlier section, those professional sword testers did not always have the "real" test medium (i.e., corpses) available for their daily training. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that those who were specialized in *tameshi-giri* mostly practiced their *suemono-giri* skills by cutting some other commonly available mediums such as water soaked bundles of rice straw, rolled straw mats or bamboos that approximate the weight and density of human

flesh. Indeed, such efforts of tameshi-giri professionals in their daily training were also shared by avid martial arts practitioners of the old days to form the foundation of the modern notions of tameshi-giri and suemono-giri in the Japanese sword martial arts community.

Today, those schools of Japanese sword arts that emphasize practical applications also emphasize the modern notion of tameshi-giri as the test of their swordsmanship and as the means to perfect their skills to perform the manifest function of the swords. In their regular training, they also strive to perfect their arts by cutting aforementioned conventional medium. In this sense, the meanings of tameshi-giri and suemono-giri are different from what they used to symbolically mean to the samurai class in the feudal era Japan when they were actually engaging such activities as their sub-cultural custom and a social structure.

Though each school of sword martial art may have slightly different emphasis and interpretation, tameshi-giri, in today's martial arts definition, primarily refers to "test cutting of commonly available medium (that are supposed to simulate human flesh and bones) to evaluate the skills of the swordsman and as the means to develop proper skills to cut with Japanese swords." Similarly, suemono-giri (though not as commonly used as tameshi-giri) as used in today's martial arts context mostly refers to "the practice of cutting stationary targets made of conventional mediums to test and evaluate the skills of the swordsman." The only exception to these modern notions, where the term tameshi-giri or suemono-giri still refers to the "test of the quality of the swords," is the situation in which sword smiths (or commissioned martial art practitioners) perform test cuts using newly forged Japanese swords to test the quality of their blades before they are sent to the new owners (Amada, 2004; Shibata, 1995; Tsuchiko, 1999).

## 6.2 Other related terms in modern sword arts

Despite the widespread modern usage of the term tameshi-giri in the martial arts community, the word tameshi-giri as it is defined in modern Japanese dictionaries still carries the old notions of "the test of swords" and "the use of humans as cutting medium." To avoid confusion (because of the historical change in its symbolic meanings and social functions) and to clarify the immediate microscopic purposes of "test cutting" as an individual behavior (whether to test the swordsmen's skills or the quality of the blades), a few other terms have already been introduced and being used by practitioners of Japanese sword arts today.

According to Toshishiro Obata (2005), a descendent of samurai and the head master of a Japanese martial art school based in California, tameshi-giri can be divided into two sub-categories based on its immediate purposes as a training method: "Shi-zan" means the testing of the skill of swordsman through the use of cutting mediums such as bundles of water soaked rice straw, rolled straw mats or bamboos. On the other hand, "shi-to" means the testing of the quality of sword through the use of harder cutting mediums including thicker bamboo and possibly traditionally made antique steel helmets that samurai of the old days actually wore. In this sense, testing both the quality of the sword and the skill of the swordsman by cutting a helmet that samurai of the old days actually wore is a return of the original purposes tameshi-giri as an individual level social behavior of a warrior. If cutting antique steel helmet is also to honor and maintain the shared martial spirit of the old warrior class, it can also be seen as a return of a symbolic meaning of tameshi-giri as a sub-cultural custom to maintain the samurai identity, even though the functions of tameshi-giri as a social structure were long gone.

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