

# MASAKARI

鉞

まさかり

broadaxe

The *masakari* is mainly used to smooth down and finish timber. There are two types of *masakari*. One has a longer handle and is used mainly for lumbering work, while the other type with a shorter handle, also called the carpenters' broadax (*daiku-masakari*), is used for rough carpentry work or for making wedges from scraps of wood.

A carpenter's hewing ax.

This ax was an essential tool for rough hewing work and for smoothing logs to be used as pillars and beams.

It is still used by carpenter's who work on shrines and temples.

## *Ono* and *Masakari* as religious symbols

The animistic tradition from ancient times state that deities descend to and reside in the mountains. For lumbermen, the mountain was therefore a sacred territory which required strict ritual abstentions to be entered. The ax has been closely related with this religious revering of the mountain and its trees. For example, the first act amongst the myriad of *Shinto* rituals carried out before the lumbering for the rebuilding of the *Ise Shrine* every 20 years, is the cutting into a tree with a ritually purified ax (*imi-ono*). Moreover in the festival of the pillar (*Onbashira-matsuri*) at the *Suwa* shrine, a vermilion-lacquered ax is used to cut down a tree which is to become the sacred pillar.

In Buddhist symbolism the ax also acquires the power of cutting off evil, and there are numerous existing statues of bodhisattva holding axes. *Shugendō*, a traditional Japanese religion born out of an amalgam of different religions including *Shintoism* and *Buddhism* which has a particular connection with mountains, regards the ax as one of the symbolic objects to be carried by practitioners when going into mountains for ascetic training.

Ax is also an important (heavenly/carpentry) instrument in *Laoism*, a few excerpts from pseudo-chapter 74 of 'Dao De Jing':

Translation: *Lin Yutang*

And to take the place of the executioner  
Is like handling the hatchet for the master carpenter.  
He who handles the hatchet for the master carpenter  
Seldom escapes injury to his hands.

Translation: *Gu Zhengkun*

If one wants to kill on behalf of the executioner,  
It is like chopping wood on behalf of the master  
carpenter.

There are few who can escape cutting their own hands  
When they chop wood on behalf of the master carpenter.

Translation: *Ch'u Ta-Kao*

Only the Supreme Executioner kills.  
To kill in place of the Supreme Executioner is to hack  
instead of a greater carpenter.

Now if one hacks in place of a great carpenter one can  
scarcely avoid cutting one's own hand.

Translation: *Hua-Ching Ni*

To become the executioner of artificial righteousness is  
like the inexperienced lad who would brandish a sharp axe of  
a master carpenter.

He can seldom escape cutting himself.

Translation: *Witter Bynner*

Nature is executioner.  
When man usurps the place,  
A carpenter's apprentice takes the place of the master:  
And 'an apprentice hacking with the master's axe  
May slice his own hand.'

Translation: *Hu Xuezhi*

Therefore, there always exists the executioner in charge  
of inflicting death.

To inflict death in place of the executioner,  
Is equal to finishing an excellent woodwork in place of a  
master carpenter.

Of those who finish an excellent woodwork in place of a  
master carpenter,  
Few will not hurt their hands.

Translation: *J. J. L. Duyvendak*

There is always a Chief Executioner who kills.  
To kill in place of the Chief Executioner may be called:  
to chop in place of the Master Carpenter.

Now in chopping in place of the Master Carpenter, few  
will escape maiming their hands!

Translation: *Spurgeon Medhurst*

There is one who inflicts sentence of death.  
To usurp his functions and to kill would be to assume the  
role of the Master-Carpenter.

There are few who can act as Master-Carpenter without  
cutting their hands.

Translation: *Richard Wilhelm*

There is always a power of death that kills.  
To kill instead of leaving killing to this power of death  
is as if one wanted to use the axe oneself  
instead of leaving it to the carpenter.  
Whosoever would use the axe  
instead of leaving it to the carpenter  
shall rarely get away  
without injuring his hand.

## KINTARO - From the folklore of Japan - Legendary symbol of virtue and strength

Kintaro is a beloved legendary and symbolic figure from Japan. Like many legendary figures he appears in



both history and mythology. According to classic Japanese literature he was fathered by a great Red Dragon (the thunder god - see below ) who visited his mountain sorceress mother in a dream. She awoke amidst

powerful claps of thunder and knew at once she was with child. Kintaro means "Golden Boy" and his jealous uncle sought to kill him. His mother took him and fled into the Hakone mountains to the deepest forests of Mount *Kintoki*. Growing up deep in the forest his beautiful spirit caused him to become a special friend to all the wild animals, most especially the rabbits and the

bears. He loved to play with his animal friends about the rocks of the *Yuhi no Taki* Falls. So strong was he as a boy and so gifted at Sumo wrestling that he could throw down a bear. He was a very good boy, rosy-cheeked and chubby and always carried a hatchet, the Japanese symbol of the thunder god and is usually depicted riding his beloved bear.

This documentlet is available thanks to sources:

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*Kaze,  
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