Wartime Naginata Education : a Survey of the Monbushō Seitei Kata

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The naginata, or Japanese glaive, is a weapon commonly associated with women in Japan since the Edo period. As a martial art, naginata has become an important field in Japan’s female education during the first half of the 20th century. In the late 1880’s, the naginata courses introduced in schools were mainly designed to provide girls with simple gymnastics thrills, but with the rise of militarism in the 1930’s, the martial character of naginata started to be emphasized. During the last three years of World War II, naginata evolved into a martial discipline, and in 1944 was made compulsory in female education throughout Japan.

In 1941 the Dai Nippon Butokukai published a set of generic kata and teaching guidelines entitled Naginata-dō Kihon Dōsa, for the purpose of promoting a unified form of naginata in schools, as it had already been the case with kendo in 1906 (Dai-Nippon Butokukai Seitei Kenjutsu Kata). However, The Naginatadō Kihon Dōsa failed to achieve its purpose, because of ryūha antagonism (mainly the Jikishinkage-ryū and the Tendō-ryū) and especially because it did not constitute a modern system where a naginata would face another naginata. Instead, it still promoted the old pattern of a naginata facing a sword, which was inconvenient as a school teaching material because the children had to become “proficient” in the use of two very different weapons in a short period of time. Naginata versus naginata methods were to be devised later on by Niino Kyūhei (Nihon Kokumin Naginata-dō Kyōhon) and subsequently by Sakakida Yaeko who created a set of 17 patterns, under the patronage of the Ministry of Education: these patterns are now referred as the Monbushō Seitei Kata.

In this presentation, we will examine two documents:

- “Naginata - Yōmoku no Seishin to ono Shidō”, an interview of Sakakida Yaeko and several Ministry of Education officials, published in the magazine Gakuto kyōiku in June 1944. The panel discuss the concepts and the technical aspects behind the creation of the Monbushō Seitei Kata.

- The official guidelines published on March 1944 by the Ministry of Education.

By studying the content of those documents and comparing it with the Shikake-Ōji and the kata that are nowadays practiced in modern naginata, we will attempt to reconstitute the Monbushō Seitei Kata. We will compare the Monbushō’s patterns with the modern naginata’s techniques as well with the kata created by the Dai Nippon Butokukai three years earlier, and explain the differences that can be found between each system. We will also demonstrate the emphasis on simple but actual techniques in the Monbushō Seitei Kata, and the focus on thrusting moves that denote a militarization of naginata education in the last period of the Pacific War.

Each pattern of the Monbushō Seitei Kata will also be supplemented by detailed pictures.