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**Group 3: The Cultural Significance of Samurai Swords**

**Directions:** In your small group,read and annotate the following essay and then discuss the prompt below.

Source : From “Samurai Martial Culture and Their Valued Sword” Japanese Sword Society of Hawaii. 2011. URL: <http://jssh.org/samuraiculture.html>

One of the most important cultural and even spiritual aspects of the samurai was the sword. They treasured it even more than their own lives. If one were to mistakenly do the wrong thing with another’s sword or even their own, a duel would take place with no verbal challenge made. John Saris in 1605, as quoted by Draeger and Smith, reports of the Tokugawa period: “That whosoever draws a weapon in anger, although he does no harme therewith, hee is presently cut in peeces: and doing but small hurt, not only themselves are so executed, but their whole generation. (sic)” This quote means that if a samurai were to unsheathe their sword in public, another swordsman would take that as a challenge and a duel will commence.

There is a lot of etiquette of the Japanese sword. How to wear it, how to place it upon your wall for decoration, and, the one I will be exploring more here, how to use it in front of other swordsmen. A serious breath of sword etiquette was the striking of one’s scabbard, called *saya-ate*. Basically, this is the knocking of one’s scabbard against another person or some object as one moves about in the streets. Here, especially if the scabbard of one’s sword hits another’s, the one that has been hit takes it personally and feels that the other has no respect for him and his sword.

The warrior considered his sword as a physical part of his soul. Any insult done by someone to his sword, such as touching it without permission, was considered a personal insult to the owner. Any transgression whatsoever of the rules of etiquette towards the long sword will more likely be interpreted as an insult to the owner’s personal honor. Once again, if this happened, it would result in a clash with personal honor at stake.

You can tell the classical warrior took much care and pride in his sword by the way he would clean it. One of the reasons a warrior doesn’t want anyone to touch their sword is that when a person touches the naked blade with their hands, the oil on their hand or fingers will make the blade rust if not taken care of promptly. With such care, it’s expected that the warrior gave such consideration in cleaning the blade. The owner would remove all traces of oil on the blade by first wiping it with *washi*, a soft handmade fibrous paper that could not scratch the high finish of the metal. After that, he would dust the blade with *uchiko*, a fine powder that absorbed all minute traces of oil and served as the mildest of abrasives to give luster to the blade. After that, he would wipe the blade again with a washi to remove any traces of the powder left.

The classical warrior regarded their customs of etiquette of the sword as very serious, to be respected and obeyed to the letter. As noted above, if a samurai failed to comply with the set of rules placed onto the sword, they would end up in a fight that may cost them their lives. A protocol that they must learn never to breach.

With the use of the sword as the main weapon in Japan, the Japanese have developed many styles of swordsmanship in how to properly fight with them. It wasn’t until the fifteenth century, during the Sengoku era, that we have reliable evidence to prove that the *bushi* (the martial arts class) practiced swordsmanship, and that they included the body of rigorous ethics. Various terms can be used to describe these two major forms of swordsmanship, but it is convenient to categorize them as being either *kenjutsu* or iai-jutsu. However, the art of swordsmanship wasn’t only learning to kill people with the sword, but it also was a sort of spiritual training. Draeger and Warner describe it perfectly:

It is true that classical combative swordsmanship in Japan was originally taught to protect the individual warrior so that he could better defend a specific social nexus. Martial strength is obviously implied by a man armed with a sword, but the use of the sword for wanton destruction has always been genuinely discouraged.

The sword is to be used only in the spirit of *gokoku taihei*: to ‘defend the great peace.’the great peace.’

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| **Discussion:** As a group, decide the three most important ways in which a samurai treated his sword as if it were his soul:1.2.3. |

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