

The Creation of The Blind Menace

Unlike Ichikawa Raizo, Daiei's other big star, Katsu Shintaro took a much longer time to establish himself. The studio originally tried hard to push Shintaro as one of its handsome leading men, in the same mold as Raizo and Hasegawa Kazuo. However, despite continued strong support from Daiei's president, Shintaro's looks did not appeal to audiences and his films were not hits, causing many theater owners to repeatedly ask the studio to stop using him.

The real turning point in his career came with *The Blind Menace*. When Shintaro first read the story, he fell in love with it and did everything he could to turn it into a film.

He completely devoted himself to the character, shaving his head and practicing the nuances of being blind. The film's staff, screenwriter Inuzuka Minoru, and director Mori Kazuo were inspired by his devotion, resulting in a cinematic masterpiece that pushed the trio to the forefront of Japanese cinema.

Katsu Shintaro finally had his breakthrough role.

Subsequently, Minoru further developed the character's traits, from a despicable Kengyo to a blind yakuza, who loves sake, women and who happens to be a skilled swordsman, ultimately creating the famed Zatoichi character. And of course, Shintaro was the only conceivable choice to play the role.

A Daiei Motion Picture Company Film

Originally founded in 1942, the Daiei Motion Picture Company flourished throughout the 50s and early 60s. Eventually, the company went bankrupt in 1971 and was bought by the Tokuma Shoten Publishing Company. In 2002, Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Company purchased Daiei and Kadokawa-Daiei Motion Picture Company was formed. After another merger in 2006, the company is now known as Kadokawa Pictures Inc.

(Shiranui Kengyo)

While it is never explained, Shiranui is probably just the family name of Suginoichi's master, and Kengyo is his rank.

"Shiranui" literally means "unknown fire" and refers to the manifestation of the spirit of the deceased in the form of a floating fireball. It is similar to "orbs" in modern-day paranormal parlance.

"Kengyo" is the title given to the highest ranked blind feudal ministers, who act as overseers to the blind of the nation.

The origin of Kengyo

When Prince Saneyasu (831 - 872), son of Emperor Minmyo, lost his sight, he became a monk and began to gather other blind people to teach them music (playing the Biwa) and poetry. After his death, two rankings of blind officials, Kengyo and Koutou, were given to those who learned from him.

The rankings were later divided into four: Kengyo, Bettou, Koutou, and Zato. There are also smaller subdivisions that extend the system to as many as 73 ranks.

These blind males then established a self-governed, mutually supportive organization called Toudou-za. During the Edo period, the Toudou-za received support from the the Shogunate government.

The blind who joined the Toudou-za were given rankings according to their accomplishments and expertise in music and massage. However, it took many years to rise to the rank of Kengyo, so the Shogunate allowed Toudou-za to sell positions (719-ryo were required to rise from the lowest rank to Kengyo). Also, to make raising the money easier, the Shogunate allowed the blind to run special money-lending businesses; they were the sub-prime lenders of their day. As shown in the film, there were many greedy money-lenders among the Kengyo and Koutou during the Edo period, and they became a huge social issue during the 18th century. For this reason, Kengyo are sometimes depicted as ugly money lender characters in samurai films.

On the other hand, the blinds' protection/support system helped improve the musical culture as well as acupuncture and massage technique during the Edo period, until the Toudou-za was abolished in 1871 during the Meiji Restoration.

Throughout history, Kengyo was a high ranking feudal position. Not only were they actually allowed to visit with the Shogun, the highest ranking Kengyo, called So-kengyo, had power and authority that rivaled Daimyos (feudal lords).

The female blind also possessed a fair amount of power as they started their own organizations called, Goze or Mousou-za.

Zato

The term "zato" has two distinct meanings. The first referred to the lowest ranking of the Toudou-za society. The second was a general term of blind people who performed massage, acupuncture, or played the Biwa.

The name "Zatoichi" simply means "Ichi the Zato". However, it is unclear if Zatoichi really was a Toudou-za Zato.

"Wasshoi. Wasshoi. Wasshoi. Wasshoi."

This group chant is primarily used when hauling a palanquin at a sacred festival. However, it is occasionally used in other mundane tasks as well. During the festival (matsuri) at the beginning of the film, the men are carrying sacred portable Shinto shrines called mikoshi.

"Say mister. Sorry to say, but you can't drink this saké."

In Japanese, "saké" refers to an alcoholic beverage brewed mainly from rice and known as nihonshu, but it can also simply mean "an alcoholic beverage." In English, we use "saké" to refer to nihonshu alone.

Saké is produced by the multiple parallel fermentation of polished rice, which removed the protein and oils from the exterior, leaving behind starch. The starch is then converted to sugar by enzyme action, and this sugar is converted to alcohol by yeast. This is similar to the brewing of beer, but the starch conversion comes from the action of a mold called koji, where in beer the enzymes come from the malt itself.

After fermentation, the produce is heavily clouded with grain solids and is generally filtered. The product is not generally aged because customers tend to prefer the flavor of the fresh product, which degrades quickly in light, air, and heat.

Slight variations in the brewing process can lead to many different types of saké being created. There are two basic types of saké: sanzoshu ("normal saké") and tokutei meishoshu ("special designation saké"). Tokutei meishoshu is distinguished by the degree to which the rice is polished and the added percentage, or absence, of jozo alcohol.

"I just went to pray to Hachiman then stumbled upon the parade, and couldn't get away."

Hachiman is a major indigenous deity of Japan and known as the divine protector of the Japanese people. Today, there are over 25,000 Shinto shrines dedicated to Hachiman.

"I know it's a pipe dream, but if only we had 1000-ryo, Shichinosuké could become an outstanding kengyo."

A ryo was the gold piece in pre-Meiji Japan, worth about 60 momme of silver or 4 kan of copper (depending on the exchange rate fluctuation).

It was eventually replaced with a system based on the yen. 1-ryo can be considered roughly equivalent to ¥350,000. Today, ¥350,000 is equal to around \$3900.

1-ryo bought roughly 1 koku (about 180 liters or 5 bushels) of rice, which is about a year's supply of rice. That

said, 1-ryo was a lot of money for the average villager/townsperson and 1000-ryo was equivalent to almost 4 million dollars, certainly a dream for Shichinosuke's mom, who lived day-to-day.

“Shiodomé Bridge will be good. Let's go there next.”

The town of Shiodomé (lit. “keeping out the tide”) is located inside present-day Minato-ku, Tokyo. During the Edo period, it was home to many Daimyo (and therefore a wealthy town), which explains why Shichinosuké is eager to ply his trade there.

“You. Won't you go to Kawasaki on an assignment for me?”

“Yes. By “Kawasaki,” are you referring to the Kawasaki that is by Suzugamori?”

Kawasaki is located 21.3 km (13.2 miles) south of downtown Tokyo. During the Edo period, it was a major stop along the Tokaido Road and would have taken at least 4-5 hours for someone to walk this distance.

Suginoichi's hesitation to travel through Suzugamori might be due to the fact that it was often used for executions during the Edo period. From 1651-1871, between 10,000 and 20,000 people were executed by the Tokugawa Shogunate in an area that measured 75x16 m (246 x 52 feet).

Today, an iron post that was once used for execution by burning still stands on the site.

“Where are you headed?”

“To Kakegawa. I run a curiosity exhibit at Ryogoku.”

Ryogoku is a neighborhood inside present-day Sumida-ku, Tokyo. It is best-known for its sumo stadium, Kokugikan.

Kakegawa was a major stop along the Tokaido Road and is located roughly 214 km (133 miles) southwest of Tokyo.

“Oh yes, I use the Sugiyama Method.”

Sugiyama Waichi (1614-1694), who lost his vision at a young age, was an innovator of Japanese massage and acupuncture techniques. He developed the needle insertion tube method of acupuncture (the Sugiyama Method) and used his expertise to cure Lord Tsunayoshi of a painful stomach illness. With the help of the Shogun, Sugiyama established medical schools for the blind, therefore helping blind therapists become common-place in Japanese culture.

“Yeah. So I gave her back her hairpin.”

The word used here “kanzashi,” is an ornamental hairpin worn in traditional women's outfits.

“But I'll give you 1-bu, just for that. 1-bu.”

Suginoichi's stinginess is on display here as 1-bu is equal to one-fourth of 1-ryo.

“What a nice smell. It's the smell of aloeswood.”

Aloeswood (also known as agarwood) is a dark resin found in Aquilaria trees. The pleasing fragrance is actually the result of a chemical reaction; when the trees are infected with parasitic molds, they produce the dark aromatic resin as a defense mechanism.

“Here. The borrower is a vassal worth 800-koku a year.”

A koku is a unit of volume in Japan, commonly used in the Edo period as a measurement of wealth. A koku of rice weighs about 150 kg (330 lbs.) and describes the amount of rice needed to feed one person for one year. Each fiefdom had an assessment of wealth, the smallest being 10,000 koku, and the largest (besides the Shogun) deemed “a million-koku domain.” During the Meiji period, Japanese units such as the koku were abolished in place of the metric system, though the koku unit is still commonly used in the Japanese lumber

industry.

“Tomorrow, on behalf of the master his disciple Yanoichi and two other masseurs will go on a pilgrimage to the Enoshima Benten temple.”

Enoshima is an island located 50 km (31 miles) southwest of Tokyo. A shrine dedicated to Benzaiten (Benten) is located on the island.

“Then I’ll be able to visit the mansions of all the daimyo and hatamoto.”

Daimyo

For many centuries, Japan had a form of feudal system, in which the servants, vassals and palace guards of the Daimyo (the military Lords of independent regional domains, who maintained a castle, a home base, and several strategically-located satellite fortresses) were granted a piece of land (a fief), or in most cases, a stipend that came with a specific official post. In return, the vassals were expected to dedicate their lives to the service of their masters. The relationships between masters and vassals were based on this reciprocity of services and rewards, and were emotionally very strong.

Almost 200 Daimyo-ruled domains and their associated castle-towns existed in the early Tokugawa period, whose sizes varied according to the Daimyo’s holdings and the agricultural production of the fiefs under their control. However, the number of Daimyo decreased quickly during this era, as the Tokugawa Shogunate used every trick in the book to eliminate or weaken their rivals.

Since in most cases this maneuvering was political in nature, both the Daimyo and the Shogunate employed large contingents of spies, and despite the code of Bushido (“The Way of the Warrior”), betrayal of a Lord by his supposedly loyal servants was a common event.

Hatamoto

Hatamoto (liege vassals, typically middle-ranking samurai) were below the Daimyo in the feudal hierarchy but had closer affiliation with the Shogunate, as they were under the direct command of the Shogunate and were often called to active service. Hatamoto did not have as much wealth as Daimyo, but their wealth was magnitudes apart from those lower in social status. Many troublesome members of the Hatamoto and Daimyo classes wandered about Edo, doing pretty much as they pleased,

“If an artist like Toyokuni drew her portrait, she must be extremely beautiful.”

Utagawa Tokoyuni (1769 - 1825) was one of the most famous Ukiyoe (“Picture of the Floating World”) painters. As the head of the Utagawa School of woodblock artists, he helped progress the development of painting into the nineteenth century and is best-known for his innovative prints of Kabuki theatre actors that became popular throughout the nation.

As seen in the film, prints such as the portraiture of Ohan were very popular among the common townspeople. The inexpensive prints sold in great numbers and were similar to the WWII-era pin-up girl posters in America.

“Just had a silly dream.”

The dream sequence in which Katsu plays the shamisen is noteworthy because, as noted in his Cast Bio, he could actually play the instrument properly.

In this scene he is actually playing the instrument, however, based on the movie credits, it appears that we actually hear someone else playing on the soundtrack.

“Her parents have debts, and they’re planning on selling her to a Yoshiwara house.”

The main Edo (Tokyo) red-light district was called Yoshiwara. At one time, as many as 3,000 Japanese women worked there as prostitutes.

“Shiranui-kengyo. You’re under arrest!”

The term used here, “goyo-da,” is equivalent to “you’re under arrest.” As seen in the film, it was customary for members of the law (or a posse) to repeat the phrase while apprehending a person.

Cast and Crew Bios

Mori Kazuo (Director)

Mori Kazuo is one of the most famous Japanese film directors, whose work certainly deserves more attention in the west. Born on January 15, 1911, in Matsuyama City, Ehime Prefecture, Japan, he directed over 50 feature films throughout his life, including *Shinobi no Mono 3, 6, & 7*, as well as several *Zatoichi* films, including the classic, *Zatoichi at Large*. AnimEigo’s 2010 release of *Hakuoki (Samurai Vendetta)* is regarded as one of his best.

A graduate of the Kyoto Imperial University of Arts, Kazuo began his filmmaking career as Ito Daisuke’s assistant before making his directorial debut in 1936. In 1957, Kazuo’s film, *Suzakumon*, won Best Film at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival (his only major award as a director). Throughout the 50s and 60s, he worked with some of Daiei’s biggest stars, including at least twenty films with Ichikawa Raizo and Katsu Shintaro, as well as actress Nakamura Tamao on eight features. By the mid-70s, he had moved to television, directing episodes of the *Zatoichi* series with Katsu Shintaro.

Kazuo passed away on June 29, 1989, leaving behind a legacy of great filmmaking. Although he didn’t receive the international acclaim of Kurosawa, Ozu or Mizoguchi, he will always be remembered in Japan as one of the top directors during the Golden Age of Daiei Films.

Katsu Shintaro (Suginoichi)

Shintaro (originally Okumura Toshio), was born November 29, 1931. Nicknamed Katsu-shin, he was a very prolific actor, but also a singer, producer, and director. His introduction to the entertainment world began at a young age; his father was a master of the Shamisen (three-string instrument) and Nagauta (tradition Japanese singing). He and his brother Wakayama Tomisaburo received formal training when they were young children and Shintaro began teaching the Shamisen and Nagauta to Geisha in Fuagawa, Tokyo when he was just a teenager. This upbringing lead some to the conclusion that the brothers’ superb sword fighting styles owe much to their musical background, and that they fight in a certain beautiful classic rhythm because of it.

Beginning with his first film in 1955, *Bara Ikutabika*, Shintaro appeared in over 100 films in six decades, and along with Ichikawa Raizo was one of Daiei Studios top stars during Japan’s golden age of filmmaking (during the decade of the 1960s, Shintaro appeared in over 70 films). His most famous role is, of course, *Zatoichi the Blind Swordsman*, whom he played in 26 separate movies, beginning in 1962.

At the beginning of the 70s, Daiei Studios closed and he founded Katsu Productions, producing several great films, including the *Hanzo the Razor* trilogy (starring himself) and the *Lone Wolf & Cub* series (starring his older brother, Wakayama Tomisaburo).

He even tried his hand at directing. His first effort, a gangster film called *Kaoyaku (Boss)*, nabbed him the Best Actor Award at the Mainichi Film Concours in 1971.

Like many stars of the golden age, Shintaro briefly moved to television in the mid-70s, where he wrote, directed, and starred in a *Zatoichi* series that lasted four seasons. In the late 70s, he was cast as the star of Kurosawa Akira’s *Kagemusha* and later dismissed. Accounts differ as to the reasons. Some say it was because the star and the director had artistic differences; others state that Shintaro brought his own film crew to shoot behind-the-scenes footage. In the 80s, he acted in a handful of films, including one last *Zatoichi* film in 1989 (which he also directed).

His offscreen life was often turbulent. Besides his love of alcohol and cigarettes, his trouble with drugs culminated in 1978 when he was arrested for possession of opium. In 1990, at the airport in Honolulu, Hawaii, he was arrested for possession of marijuana and cocaine. This latter incident became notorious because, according to some tabloid reports, he put the drugs in his underwear, and then, when this was discovered, he

exclaimed “I have NO IDEA why this was in my underwear!” The line became a famous quote in Japan.

Katsu died of pharyngeal cancer on June 21, 1997 at the age of 65. During his last few years Katsu-shin spent increasing amounts of time in the hospital, only to be seen lighting up cigars at press conferences held to announce his recovery. Two days after his death, five thousand people attended his memorial service at a Tokyo Temple. The following year, the Mainichi Film Concours and the Japanese Academy posthumously bestowed him with Special Lifetime Awards.

Nakamura Tamao (Lady Iwai)

A multiple award-winning actress, Tamao was born July 12, 1939 and made her first film appearance at age 16 in Mizoguchi Kenji's *The Taira Clan*. As a Daiei regular, Tamao co-starred with Ichikawa Raizo on at least 25 films and Katsu Shintaro on 16 films. During the filming of "The Blind Menace", they began their lifetime relationship. The couple eventually married in 1962 and stayed together until Katsu's death in 1997.

At the time of this writing Tamao is still acting in Japan. In fact, she has recently found success as a comedian due to her signature slow and humorous reactions to serious situations.

In 2008, she received the prestigious Tanaka Kinuyo Award for career achievement.

Her awards:

1962 Blue Ribbon Award - Best Supporting Actress (Daibosatsu toge)
1964 Mainichi Film Concours - Best Supporting Actress (Echizen take'ningyo)
1992 Nikkan Sports Film Award - Best Supporting Actress (Hashi no nai Kawa)
2008 Mainichi Film Concours - Tanaka Kinuyo Award

Shintaro and Tamao's Relationship

The life of this showbiz couple makes today's tabloid relationships appear tame. During their 35 years together, Shintaro had endless problems with drugs, unpaid debts, and countless girlfriends; however, Tamao never left him. At one point in their relationship, Shintaro filed for divorce, but Tamao didn't take it seriously and even joked about his intentions publicly. Numerous tabloids reported that Tamao even confronted his girlfriends and mistresses to thank them (and politely bow to them) for taking such good care of her husband... certainly every man's dream wife.

At the end of his life, Shintaro famously said of her, “She can be without me, but I can never be without her.”

Inuzuka Minoru (Screenwriter)

Born on February 15, 1901, Minoru began writing and directing films during Japan's silent era. In addition to *The Blind Menace*, he is best known for writing seven *Zatoichi* films (1-3, 5, 7, 10, 24). In fact, although the character existed in book form, Minoru is credited with developing the story and the series beyond the author's original structure.

After his death on September 17, 2007, he was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Mainichi Film Concours.

Saito Ichiro (Music)

Saito Ichiro (1909-1979) was a prolific film composer. Over his 33-year career, he scored over 140 films, including *Ugetsu*, five *Sleepy Eyes of Death* films, four *Zatoichi* films, and one *Shinobi no Mono* film (#7).

Saito won the Mainichi Film Concours Best Film Score Award for *Himitsu*, *Saikaku Ichidai Onna*, *Inazuma*, and *Okaasan*, all in 1952.