

The Ninja

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Oriental prototype of the cloak-and-dagger man.

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What cowboys have been to U.S. entertainment, the Ninja -- the stealers in -- are in contemporary Japan. But a Ninja is less like a cowboy than a dirty-dealing Superman. Originally a medieval cult of unconventional warrior-spies, as presented in the vogue now sweeping Japan from toddlers to grandparents they have the power to turn themselves into stones or toads, are as invisibly ubiquitous as gremlins, and can do things like jumping ten-foot walls and walking on water.

Television carries Ninja dramas from morning until night, kabuki and the serious stage put on Ninja plays, eighteen Ninja movies were made in 1963 and 1964, bookstores carry two hundred fiction and non-fiction titles on the occult art, children's comic books and the adult pulps are loaded with their adventures, toy stores sell Ninja masks and weapons, and even Kellogg's corn flakes has a Ninja mask on the box. It has got to the point that kindergarten classes have been asked to pledge they will not play Ninja, the police are plagued by moppet bands of Ninja, and hardly a castle wall in Japan has not been attacked by amateur Ninja scalers.

The legend of the stealers -- in as much a part of Japanese culture as Robin Hood and King Arthur are of the English -- has a reasonably firm if little researched basis in history, and its artifacts can be seen even today. The supernatural powers of the popular Ninja character are only an exaggeration of some remarkable accomplishments of his prototype, some of them strangely similar to things we regard as peculiarly modern. The Ninja did practice the art of invisibility -- ninjutsu -- through choice of clothes and other quite natural means. The inventions they used in their profession anticipated the skin diver's snorkel and fins, the collapsible boat, K-rations,

the four-pronged scatter spike for traffic sabotage, tactical rockets, and water skis.

Origins

The Ninja most probably began with a group of "mountain ascetics" who lived in the hills around Kyoto and Nara when those towns were the capitals of Japan and Buddhism was being established. The Ninja beliefs and practices show the influence of Buddhism (with a mixture of Shinto), of the Chinese way of hand fighting, and of the ancient writings of the Chinese Sun Tzu, with his emphasis on spies and on stratagems, deception operations.¹ By the end of the Nara period (710-784) this cult of mountaineers (Yama-bushi, those who sleep among the mountains), who were "men of lower caste representing the crude side of religion, ... exercised a great influence upon the people by appealing directly to vulgar ideas and superstitions."² Occult and dreaded, they lived and taught their blend of Buddhism (mainly of the Tendai and Shingon sects, the latter dealing in mystic hymns and secret formulas) and Shinto on such mountains as Koya and Hiei. They inducted young men into their secret orders, and they came down to the villages to get contributions in return for doing magical cures through formulas and medicines.

But their miracles were not enough to protect them in the face of government hostility to the cult, and the priests turned to guerrilla warfare, versing themselves in what was to become bujutsu, the martial art of eighteen methods -- karate, bojutsu, kenjutsu, and so on -- to protect their shrines and temples. These had been established twenty miles to the east of Nara at Iga-Ueno, then a farming village situated on a broad tableland rimmed by mountains. The area was so poor and isolated that it was not deemed worth fighting for by the warring landlords of Nara and Kyoto, and so it went by default to the mountaineer cult. Here ninjutsu became an independent art.

Before the end of the Heian period (794-1185), the first book treating ninjutsu appeared, written by the great Genji warrior Yoshitsune Minamoto (1159-1189), the "Book of Eight Styles of Kurama." Mt. Kurama, a training station of the mountain ascetics, was where Yoshitsune mastered his arts as a child. This book emphasizes the art of flying -- Yoshitsune is believed to have been a great jumper -- and the use of shock troops. It first distinguished among the three arts of strategy, bujutsu, and ninjutsu. Although ninjutsu was still embryonic, it was established as an art by Yoshitsune's "book of ninjutsu," so referred to and extant today.

The Iga area was so impoverished that families often killed their children,

particularly girls, and they could not get their whole livelihood from farming. On the other hand adults, or any who could perform adult labor, were valuable. Warfare in the plains of Iga therefore tended to be carried on by stealth rather than by bloodshed. The mountain priests would teach the head of a strong family their secret arts, and these would be passed from a father to his sons, who might also visit the wilderness temples for indoctrination. Even today, says playwright-novelist Tomoyoshi Murayama, the people of Iga are known as sly, tricky, and crafty.

Three grades of Ninja sprang up -- the jonin (leader), who was head of a strong family, the chunin (middle class), a skilled Ninja, and the genin (lowest), a day laborer in ninjutsu. As the people of Iga became known for Ninja, fighting landlords in the period of the civil wars from the middle of the fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century called upon the town for spies and warriors. There were two major families there, each having about three hundred Ninja. In addition, another settlement at Koga, some twelve miles away, had fifty-three families of roughly equal rank with a smaller number of Ninja. The heads of the Iga forces were jonin, those in Koga only chunin.

Masashige Kusunoki, the warrior genius of the latter part of the 14th century, is regarded as the father of advanced ninjutsu. Like Yoshitsune Minamoto, he had learned the basics of the science from mountain ascetics as a child, but unlike him used Ninja not only for attack but also for defense and peacetime purposes. According to Iga historian Heishichiro Okuse, he had forty-eight Ninja under him who spied in Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. One of his exploits, reducing an impregnable fortress, was accomplished by locating the enemy's supply route, killing the bearers, dressing his Ninja in their armor, and sending them on, bearing bags of arms. When the gates swung open the Ninja struck and set fire to the castle. On another occasion, after vainly trying to defend his castle from attack, he was found dead in his armor by the attackers, his personal Ninja crying over the body. But while the enemy were celebrating their triumph, Kusunoki, who of course had only been feigning death, arose and crushed them.

"Two Hundred Techniques"³

The Ninja's garb was all black. He wore a black cloth wrapped in turban style about his head and covering his mouth and jaw. His cloak was full-sleeved, and the arms ended in gauntlets. Chain mesh armor was often worn beneath it. The pants were baggy, tied above the ankle. Even the socks (tabi) and sandals (zori) were black, with cotton padding on the bottom of the zori for stealthy walking. The clothes were filled with hidden pockets.

The traditional samurai sword was often shortened to leave room in the bottom of the scabbard for poisonous dust or blinding-powder which could be hurled into an enemy's face. The hilt was likely to be square across, with a long light cord attached, so that the sword could be leaned against a wall as a first step in scaling and then pulled up afterwards.

In traveling, the Ninja usually carried the following equipment: a straw hood for covering his face except for small holes to see through; a rope and hook for climbing; a stone pen for writing on walls; medical and food pills (including hydrogen pellets a half inch in diameter made of carrot extract, soda powder, wheat flour, mountain potatoes, herbs, and rice powder--two or three a day would sustain the Ninja for ten days); thirst-allaying tablets made of palm fruit, sugar, and barley; medicine to prevent frozen fingers; a lighter flint; and a black three-foot towel which could be used in climbing, to hide the face, or to carry water purifiers or poison absorbed from secret mixtures into which its ends had been dipped.

One type of weapon was shuriken, missiles which he could hurl with pinpoint accuracy for thirty feet. Usually he had nine of these, either metal knives six or so inches long or disks in the shape of stars, comets, swastikas, or crosses. Another was the bamboo pole fitted with a hook for climbing or with a balled chain for attack. More subtle were hollowed eggs containing dried jellyfish, toads' eggs, powdered snake grass, and powdered leaves from a "sneeze tree"; these were thrown to blind or unnerve his opponent. Water guns, to be shot from up wind only, were loaded with a deadly three-second poison.

There were poison rings utilizing the all-powerful tiger's nail, and leather gloves (shuko) were tipped with iron cat's claws for climbing, raking a face, or fending off a sword.

The Ninja had the secret of gunpowder before it was generally known in Japan. They developed wooden cannons, designed grenades and time bombs, mounted incendiaries on arrows, and tipped arrows with leaf-like ends to scatter the fire. As anti-personnel weapons against their soft-shod enemies they scattered sharp-pointed nuts, iron tripods with needle points, and solid pyramids of metal which would fall upright.

There were two types of water shoes. One was a wooden circle three feet in diameter with a center of solid board, the other simply two buckets, with a wooden fan on a bamboo pole used as a paddle. For invisible swimming the Ninja used bamboo tubes as snorkels, wooden fins for speed and silence. The snorkel sometimes had one enlarged end and could double as a horn or a blowgun. Their collapsible boat folded on its hinges to the size of a filing drawer. In use it would be caulked with sap. They also used rabbit skin to make floats of the Mae West type.

The Ninja are credited with developing a secret walk which would take them

along at twelve miles an hour with less effort than ordinary mortals make for four; but this secret, if they had it, has been lost. They did use a crab-like walk, crossing one foot over the other and moving sideways, for walls and narrow passages.

They were well versed in nature lore. To get his direction in the dark a Ninja would pull up a radish; the side with more root fibers points south. To find the depth of water in a moat he would pull a reed toward him (they can't be pulled up by the roots) and calculate by a sort of empirical Pythagorean geometry from the submerged increment per displacement from the vertical. From a cat's eyes he could read time with the help of a song into which the formula was woven. He watched the tides, currents, constellations, the moon and sun, the winds, and the colors of the sky to forecast the weather and the best moment to strike (there was another song on the dates of currents). A thin sheet of iron heated and then cooled at rest could be floated in water to form a crude compass.

A study of snores observed with a bamboo listening pipe told the Ninja the sleep status of their victims. They learned to boil rice without a pot (wrapping it in a wet straw sack, burying it in the ground, and building a fire on top) and freshen salt water (by packing red earth on the bottom of the boat to absorb the salt). A wooden fan was used as a protractor to measure angles and thereby determine distances. They had their own secret ideographs and coded call signs. They were adept at "Gojo no Ri," the ability to read their opponent's mind and mood from facial indications, voice, gesture, etc.

The Ninja used many disguises, but it is said there were seven basic covers--the priest, perhaps offering prayers for the enemy dead while making a head count of the quick and a general survey of their battlefields, the mountain ascetic who could spy from above and signal by conch shell from mountain top to mountain top, the itinerant merchant who could be admitted to castles, the wandering bard and the entertainer with their songs and tricks, and the commoner.

The mystical elements of ninjutsu, largely from the Shingon sect, took the form of secret hand signs and murmured formulas. The art of invisibility and transformation is also put in mystical terms. Shugendo, the mountain ascetic creed, says, "Conceive that you are a stone." If you believe you are a stone, then you are. It is much like becoming one with Buddha. When the Ninja is surrounded by enemies and has no place to escape, he shortens his breath, shrinks himself as small as a stone and conceives he is a stone. The enemy cannot find him.

This particular camouflage is called Doton no jutsu, invisibility by means of the earth. But four other elements can be used. In Katon no jutsu a man is turned into smoke (helped by liberal use of gunpowder in the Ninja practice of blowing one's face off to preserve secrecy when cornered). But this probably

refers primarily to the use of smoke screens, setting fire to infiltrated castles, etc. Suiton no jutsu is making use of water to disappear, likely with a snorkel. Mokuton no jutsu is to hide in trees. And Kinton no jutsu is the use of metal; Ninja would crawl into rice boilers, hanging bells, and temple statuary to spy. A combination of metal and water was to steal a large temple bell and jump into deep water with it, making use both of its weight and of its trapped air supply.

Mass Action and Decline

The last burst of Ninja activity came under Ieyasu Tokugawa (1541-1616), who was to become the first shogun of a unified Japan. On February 6th, 1562, the general wrote a letter of gratitude to a Koga Ninja, Yoshichiro Ban, for services rendered two years before Ieyasu had had to attack an impregnable castle (we gather all castles were impregnable until the Ninja were called in) and had asked Ban to lead 280 Ninja in an infiltration movement. This band slipped in at night and fired the castle towers. The defenders thought their own men had betrayed them and fell into confusion. The Ninja totally disrupted them without use of staff or sword except to behead the enemy leader.

Two other generals, however, who helped in the unification of the country, Nobunaga Oda (1534-1582) and Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1536-1598), were trying to stamp out Buddhism and therefore not only rebuffed but held and tortured any Ninja who fell into their hands. In 1581, 9000 of Oda's men attacked a force of 4000 men from Iga, including many Ninja, laid waste the town, and slaughtered its warriors. Ninja leader Hanzo Hattori, lamenting the death of his townsmen, asked Ieyasu to employ the survivors, and the great general did. Then in the battle of Sekigahara (1600), 100 Ninja of the 200 in the Ieyasu forces were killed.

In the first years of the 17th century, when Ieyasu as shogun moved the political capital of the country to Edo (Tokyo), he took 200 Ninja with him. He made Hanzo and his successors the equivalent of U.S. Secret Service chiefs. The Ninja had complete and unquestioned access to the shogun to protect and inform him. (The main west entrance to the Imperial Palace, then the shogun's residence, is still called Hanzo's gate, and parts of Tokyo where the Ninja lived are now named Koga-cho, Iga-cho, and Kogai-cho.) Their cover was gardener employment, and they lived it. But they were always ready to be stopped among the poppies with the order, "Go to Kyoto," and they would drop their spades and set out at once at Ninja speed.

In 1638, when farmers and Christians in Shimabara, Kyushu, rebelled against the shogunate, Ninja were called in again, this time strictly to gather information. The fight had lasted ten months, and 40,000 rebels were holding

the Shimabara castle (impregnable) against 130,000 of Ieyasu's troops. Finally the commanding general, Nobutsuna Matsudaira, ordered ten Ninja to reconnoiter the castle. "We have no idea of the layout inside the enemy camp," he said. "Determine the depth and width of the moat, the height of the wall and fence, and the distance from our camp to theirs; and draw a map."

Five Ninja fired guns as a diversion. After the consequent enemy stir had subsided, at midnight, the Ninja moved in from the opposite side, scaling the castle wall with rope ladders. Two of them fell into traps in the floor, and this aroused the guards. Nevertheless the Ninja, with their black garb and ability to work in the dark, accomplished their mission, and they carried off the enemy's cross-bearing flag as well.

With the coming of peace, however, the Ninjas, like old generals, now faded into the administrative spy and other dull professions. The era of the true Ninja was over.

1 For example: "In the whole army none should be more favorably regarded than the spies; none should be more liberally rewarded than the spies ..." And elsewhere, "A stratagem is a military trick. You should win the enemy to your side ... throw him into confusion ... break his unity by provocation ... make him overconfident and relax his guard ..."

2 Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*.

3 Most of the information in this section is taken from the 22-volume *Bansen Shukai* (Thousands of Rivers Gather in the Sea), written in 1674 by Natsutake Fujibayashi. Extant in seven manuscript copies, it is now being edited for publication. Notable among the score or more of other 17th- and 18th-century accounts of ninjutsu is the volume *Shonin-ki* (The True Ninjutsu).

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