

# The culture of japanese samurai warriors research paper sample

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with Japanese samurai warriors and the cultural peculiarities of this highly decorated social and military elite. Customs, religious practices, different codes of conduct, material culture, such as clothing and weaponry, food, and drinks are among the main subjects highlighted in the paper. The project is based on the opinions and knowledge shared by prominent subject-field scientists and journalists.

Keywords: culture, Japanese, samurai, code, weapon, elite, warrior

All world societies, whether civilized or not, have always had a distinctive social group of nobility or a ruling caste in charge of administrative, cultural, economic and political affairs, with the emperors, chiefs, kings, and other rulers stemming from these privileged groups. Priests, as high priests of Amun, Celtic and Gaelic druids, hereditary aristocrats, as Roman patricians, medieval noblemen, or military elites, as knights and Roman equestrians, all used to constitute the backbone of nobility in their respective countries in their time. Whether or not they wielded the ultimate power, such groups held a great sway over political affairs and top-ranking dignitaries, so did samurai, the class of Japanese Medieval nobility.

They had so refined a military, religious, and social culture as to go on to oust a traditional Japanese nobility and establish what came to be known as Shogunate, a military dictatorial form of government to last for centuries. This caste of the privileged is comparable with the class of equestrians and medieval knighthood, titular military groups of warriors. While important elements in the European political picture, knights did not hold the ultimate power, neither did Roman equestrians. Rather than capture power, this influential royal and imperial subjects exerted their unique influence on political elites. The same was also true of the caste of druids who recognized the power of military chieftains, whose supremacy and belonging to a military class make them similar to shoguns. By contrast, samurai went further by establishing political regimes of their own, which might not have happened, but for their inimitable, multifaceted culture that had its unique characteristics, exposing and cultivating the main virtues of true warriors. Ikegami (1995) noted that, despite the correlation between the evolution of the system of samurai vassalage and its honor culture, the latter was a multidimensional phenomenon. Four aspects of samurai life are said to define the dynamic cultural creativity of this social group. The sovereign pride of a samurai dwelling, the vassalage system ideology, the collective identity of this social class, and their military culture are the defining cornerstone principles of the versatile samurai culture. The first most essential cultural characteristic is the transformation of vassalage, or the samurai's relationships between a patron and client. The appearance of such ideological dimension as the honor culture transformed this relationship. When once overlords attempted to control their vassalized samurai by

creating efficient long-term organized military forces or centralizing power structures, the honour culture would become a valuable moral source for such warriors. That the aspirations for personal glory and a postmortem fame guided samurai was the vindication of warriors' loyalty and the readiness to come at the first summons, demonstrating a humble conduct. According to Ikegami (1995), the second characteristic is the appearance of the honor culture of the samurai that corresponds to their ascension as a new social class in possession of a clear social foundation for their power in the shape of the "ie", or the household of landed military lords. The power-oriented nature of the concept of honor arises from the sovereign standing of such household as the sign of socially independent landed elites. In the course of the medieval timeframe, each of the above-mentioned samurai "ie" had a measure of political autonomy or statehood, aggressively protecting their economic interests and sovereign privileges from competitive peers whenever armed intrusion was necessary. The collectivity of such independent landed elites composed their community of honor, wherein their social reputation was subject to evaluation. The third important cultural aspect was the military dimension of warriors' life, involving the structure of warfare and troops organization. The samurai composed the class of professional soldiery, whose honor was in dependence on the application of violence. Having said that, sheer physical power was not the only source of honor for these warriors.

Seeing that both military skills and physical proficiency could be shown only through disciplined behavior, samurai's demonstrating he was under control of the situation contrary to tensions was believed the manifestation of

honorable courage. The codes of honor among these fighters witnessed to their exceptional social consciousness of discipline, military skills, and power. State formation, which was under way, was instrumental in reorganizing the army of samurai as well as producing a new set of regulators of warriors' brutality and its codes of honor. Not only that, but also changes in warfare technology and battle strategy influenced the code of honor that granted the highest honor to whoever used combat skills in the most efficient way. Though being a part of overall state transformations, these warfare-related modifications had a great effect on samurai culture. The fourth characteristic or aspect of warriors' culture is samurai's relationship with other social groups and classes (Ikegami, 1995).

This relationship is presumed to have influenced the culture of honor, with warriors considering it the source of their inimitable collective identity. Their culture of honor represented the so-called "status honor," a term coined by Max Weber. Such status was assigned to the samurai collectively, being nothing short of a form of collective honor tied to any trait shared by a plurality. Warriors were distinguishable from social classes and groups other than samurai in that they were a class of men willing to perish for honor. The culture of honor was what brought their military prestige to new heights and enabled the class of landed warriors to gain the position of ideological and political dominance by denying the privilege of membership to all who bore no relation to the community of honor. Interestingly, in the course of the entire history of this military, social class, samurai could not relinquish the culture of honor, without undermining the legitimacy of their cultural dominance over other classes (Ikegami, 1995).

Clothing is an important testimony of trends in the culture of Japanese privileged warriors. Nolan (2013) stated that photographs from the 19th century gave a clear picture of clothing worn by samurai. A number of warriors were shown wearing plated armour known as tosei-gusoku while other photographs depict them as dressed in kimono-style robes worn on casual occasions. According to Samurai culture (n. d.), kimonos, consisting of inner and outer layers, were the articles of clothing worn on a daily basis, with heavier ones put on in winter and lighter, silk ones in summer. During the 1st week of May, there occurred a ceremony of exchanging winter kimonos for their summer analogue. Samurai wore fundoshi, a loincloth, beneath their kimonos. One of loincloth types was a wrap that was similar to a diaper. The other type was a long piece of cloth worn under armor down the front of the body. It was up to samurai whether to wear white tabi, or socks. Warriors could also choose between such kinds of footwear as sandals called waraji and wooden clogs called geta. Kappa, or raincoats made of straw, were indispensable in rainy weather, as were decorated folding umbrellas that resembled the parasols of Victorian era (Samurai culture, n. d.).

There are also other manifestations of material culture, which is a physical evidence of people's intellectual achievements. Analyzing photographs of samurai from the 19th century, Nolan (2013) suggested that warriors' wielding swords, spears, bows, arrows, and guns was indicative of the culture of warfare and weaponry used in combats that remained static for centuries. Some fighters can be seen holding the deadliest of Samurai weapons known as katana, a long, razor-sharp, single-edged sword, which

was a principal element of their warfare culture. That almost every warrior was caught clutching the sword by the lens of a camera speaks volumes for the role katana played in the life of the samurai as a nearly sacred attribute of their culture and the code of honor.

As inhumane as it may sound, some photos show a group of samurai who is about to perform a ceremonial suicide, or hara-kiri, by which a warrior raises his sword high only to pierce himself through as a result. The honor code of Bushido dictated the necessity of this act of disembowelment as the replacement of disgrace, which was a distinct possibility in the event of capture by enemies. One of photographs shows warriors during the Boshin War, the 1868 civil conflict, with a number of samurai being on the point of thrusting their stomach with a short-blade sword called tanto. Samurai became Shizoku after them merging with another social group during Meiji reforms, restoring imperial rule in a move that banned wearing a katana along with the right to execute anyone who would disrespect a samurai right on the spot. Hence, such privilege used to be in practice before the merge (Nolan, 2013).

Apart from the culture of clothing, weaponry, and the act of ceremonial suicide, samurai had a well-developed code of ethics that crowned their cultural supremacy over non-samurai social groups. While looking at a photograph, one can see a pair of noble fighters bowing to each other, with their legs tucked under, during a samurai ceremony. One of these warriors' duty was following a set of rules influenced by the teaching of Confucianism. A set of rules was known as bushido rendered as "the way of the warrior." The code of conduct is, by far, one of the most important manifestations of

samurai culture, its ideas and social behavior patterns. The unspoken and unwritten code of conduct placed a particular emphasis on loyalty, thrift, honor to death, and martial arts mastery.

Later on, code preachers proceeded to add ferocious family pride, heroic courage, selflessness, and senseless devotion of master and man (Nolan, 2013). According to Matrasko (2004), the doctrine of bushido composed of eight principles was comparable with the code of European chivalry.

Principles called Jin, Gi, Chu, Ko, Rei, Chi, Shin, and Tei demanded that samurai develop a sympathetic understanding of all people, retain the correct ethics, demonstrate loyalty to masters, care for parents and hold them as well as other people in ultimate respect. Growing in wisdom by widening the scope of knowledge, being truthful, and caring for aged and humble individuals were also among the basic principles (Matrasko, 2004). Speaking of religion, another important cultural category, Stuart (n. d.) stated that monks exported the teachings of Zen Buddhism to Japan in the 12th century. One of the earliest groups of adopters of this rapidly spreading religious and philosophical current were Japanese samurai. Warriors used the principles of enlightenment and inner peace discovery during both battles and routine life. The belief was that battlefield strategies and plans brought warriors' death closer and that Zen helped its religious followers disperse such thoughts, overcome distraction and fear, and clear all thoughts.

Disciplined samurai had no problems with embracing death, and Zen meditations use was excellent at confronting the sensations of brutal injuries sustained in battles. Bushido principle of accepting death originates in Zen philosophy that accentuates the inconstancy of all material bodies (Stuart, n.



d.).

According to Samurai culture (n. d.), though a staple meal, rice was thought a benchmark of wealth since growing rice was hard to accomplish in insular Japan that was a mountainous country. Other foodstuffs traditionally consumed included 24 types of potatoes, 9 kinds of radishes, 14 types of cucumbers, beans, persimmons, chestnuts, tofu, nuts, yams, apricots, apples, peaches, oranges, and sour plums popular with soldiers during campaigns. The range of seafood embraced abalone, 7 types of seaweed, bonito, carp, tuna, trout, jellyfish, octopus, clams, and whale. Japanese warriors also resorted to such cooking facilitators as plants, including kelp, soya, red beans, rice vinegar, and imported pepper, to name a few. They used to add a great amount of oil to the dishes by cooking. This cuisine received the name of shojin ryori and necessitated the use of sesame, soya, and camellia.

When in predicament, samurai could drop Shinto and Buddhist injunctions prohibiting the consumption of meat, which enabled hungry warriors to hunt wild geese, pheasants, deer, quail, and boar. The meal culture of Japanese samurai allowed them to go as far as to eat their horses when siege and the lack of provisions had the potential of incapacitating warriors to the point when they could no longer defend city walls. Red meat consumption had not become a part of warriors' cuisine until the above-mentioned Meiji Restoration. When it did, only upper classes of warriors could enrich their daily ration with this type of meat. Tea ceremonies were an important element of both samurai and Japanese culture as a whole. Besides the tea, the most popular drink of samurai was sake made from rice during winter

seasons. Consuming alcoholic beverages was common enough. In later periods, drinking became a part of social gatherings, especially the ones celebrating the outcomes of battles. Not getting drunk at parties could be impolite, and drunkenness was never odious (Samurai culture, n. d.).

## Conclusion

Samurai were a privileged caste of warriors in medieval Japan from the 10th until the 19th century when Meiji Restoration, giving power taken from shoguns, or military dictators, back to emperors. The sovereign pride of a samurai dwelling, the vassalage system ideology, the collective identity of this social class, and their military culture were the prominent principles of the multifaceted samurai culture. These principles helped warriors distinguish themselves from non-samurai groups, gain political autonomy, reorganize their ranks, become professional soldiery, acquire lands, and create the codes of community or collective and status honor that made it possible for them to remain a formidable force for nearly 10 centuries. A good number of photographs from the 19th century bear witness to the versatility of Japanese samurai material culture. Plated armour, kimono, loincloth, socks, sandals, clogs, raincoats, and folding umbrellas were the articles of clothing worn during battles and in everyday life.

Surviving artifacts and those shown on photographs demonstrate various weaponry used by these formidable warriors when on the battlefield.

Samurai may be seen wielding swords, spears, bows, arrows, and guns; however, nearly every picture features fighters who hold their signature sword called katana, a razor-sharp, polished sword that represents a huge

segment of not only samurai, but also Japanese culture as a whole. There is a direct relationship between samurai cold weapon and a notoriously known cultural tradition of hara-kiri, or disembowelment, by which a warrior voluntarily rips his stomach with a short-blade sword called tanto. Before the restoration of the imperial position and during Shogunate, warriors were authorized to use their katana against whoever disrespected them in public. The acceptance of death was dictated by the code of Bushido, or the “way of the warrior” largely based on the tenets of Zen Buddhism worshipped by Samurai. The code of conduct preached respect for parents and other people, loyalty to masters, sympathy, ethics, aspirations for knowledge elevation, and other essential principles.

The religion helped warriors clear thoughts and concentrate when they were mere moments away from a battle. More than that, religious meditation was instrumental in alleviating their physical pain. As far as such cultural aspect as samurai cuisine is concerned, warriors were no strangers to eating vegetable food, meat, and seafood. Samurai could bypass Buddhist and Shinto injunctions and hunt wild animals when besieged by famine. In the event of siege, they could come to eat their own horses not to perish from hunger. Apart from consuming tea during special ceremonies, samurai would usually drink sake, which was an alcoholic beverage made from rice and produced during winter seasons. Getting drunk was common while the state of drunkenness was not deprecated, much less restricted. Not coming to drunkenness could be regarded as being impolite. Overall, Japanese samurai culture is the manifestation of the highest intellectual achievements of these fearless warriors in the shape of customs, religious practices, different codes

of conduct, material culture, such as clothing and weaponry, food, and drinks.

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