

Sanurai



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The samurai were the feudal warriors of ancient Japan. For thousands of years they have upheld the code of bushido, the way of the warrior. Samurai have been around for thousands of years, but when did they disappear? Does the code of bushido still exist to this day? Exploring the history of the samurai will give an explanation to what has happened to these formidable warriors.

The samurai, or bushi (warrior), are well-trained cavalymen that serve a particular lord. The first recorded history of the samurai was about the 9th century A. D. At that time the capitol of Japan was Kamakura, a military installation. Japan was ruled by an emperor who controlled his empire through the use of shoguns. Shoguns were generals that ruled over provinces and enforced the emperor's laws. The shoguns used soldiers that swore undying loyalty to them as means for an army. The elite soldiers are called samurai.

A samurai practices budo (the Way of combat), ken-jutsu (the warrior art of the sword), and kendo (the Way of the sword). A samurai could only come from a wealthy family. The amount to raise the child and give him proper training and equipment was quite expensive. After the bushi had reached a certain age, he was released from training and sent to a lord or shogun. Samurai are intensely loyal and would sacrifice their life for the lord. If their lord died they would commit seppuku (hara-kiri is the vulgar term in the West). Seppuku is the ritual act of suicide performed by cutting the abdomen. Another samurai stands next to the one committing seppuku with his sword drawn. This is in case the man committing suicide makes any

sound. If the man cries out the other lopes off his head in order to preserve the deceased's honor. Above all, the Japanese warriors valued honor.

Loyalties to the lord were the most important aspects of honor. The young warriors were taught to sacrifice everything for the emperor or lord. In Japan, the emperor represented the laws and the state and was considered divine. Loyalty was an ethical demand stemming from this political theory. A samurai was obligated to appeal to the wisdom of his lord by committing seppuku.

The entire Japanese culture is based on honor. Honor extends to the nation, the family, and the individual. The samurai are no exception to a code of honor. The samurai follow the code of bushido. Bushido is closer to the western term of chivalry. Bushido places emphasis on courage, benevolence, justice, politeness, truthfulness, honor, loyalty, and most importantly is self-control. The samurai's primary religion is Zen. The samurai adapted Zen easily due to the philosophy that fits closely to Buddhism. Samurai may act in the extreme when it comes to honor. They will kill anyone who may dishonor them or their lord. Nothing is worse to a samurai than to have corrupt dealings. Some of the warriors believed,

“ Honor is the power of deciding upon certain course of conduct in accordance with reason, without wavering ... to die when it is right to die, to strike when to strike is right.” Other warriors believed that “ Honor is the bone that gives firmness and stature. As without bones the head cannot rest on top of the spine, nor hands move, nor feet stand, so without honor neither talent nor learning can make of a human frame a “ Samurai”. With it the lack of accomplishments is as nothing.” The samurai placed honor above all else.

A samurai went through years of extensive training both in body and in mind. The young warriors were continuously drilled and indoctrinated in courage. When the warriors are young they are led to horrible places such as execution grounds, graveyards, and haunted houses. This system of training is what gives samurai their courage. The young bushi were trained extensively in the mind as well. The bushi are taught that benevolence is a feminine trait. Benevolence included the traits love, affection for others, sympathy and nobility of feelings. The instructors emphasized counterbalancing rectitude and stern justice. It was taught that politeness is a poor virtue if a person does it for fear of offending someone's good taste. Simple acts such as walking, bowing, standing, table manners, and serving tea were developed into ceremonies.

A bushi never told a lie. A lie was seen as cowardly and thus, it was dishonorable. Honesty was very important to a samurai. It was an extension of the samurai's courage and strength. Any smear of the Samurai's honor was seen as a ren-shi-shin (a sense of shame). According to an old samurai legend " Dishonor is like a scar on a tree, which with time, instead of effacing, only enlarges." To avoid over-reacting to small insults, the bushi chided each other for being too short-tempered. Patience and forgiveness formed an essential part of the meaning of honor.

Samurai were paid in koku, which is the measure of rice needed to feed a man for a year. Samurai were judged on the wealth of their fief. Samurai that had an income of 10, 000 or more koku were considered as Daimyo (lord). Those that earned incomes between 100 and 9, 500 koku were considered to be a Hatamoto (leader). Those that earned less than 100 koku are classed as

Go-kenin (followers). Daimyos were the leaders that led the Go-kenin into battles and made sure that the samurai had the proper equipment.

A samurai was equipped to deal with any military situation. The samurai carried a katana (sword) and a wakazashi (ceremonial dagger). The spears were the basic shock weapons. There are two types of Japanese spears, the naginata and the yari. The naginatas consisted of a long curved blade set upon a pole. They were the typical spears of the samurai and foot soldiers. The yari is a pole of varying length that is equipped with a long triangular section. The mounted cavalry used lances, such as the te-yari (hand spear) and the mochi-yari (held spear). Dress for most armies consisted of a do (armor) which hung box-like from the shoulders. Another type of armor that grew in popularity was the tatami-do (folding armor). It consisted of card-sized or hexagonal shaped metal strips, which were attached to mail. This armor was cheap, easy to make and lightweight. Many Daimyo equipped their samurai with this armor.

Samurai helmets were made in six different shapes, each multi-plated in construction and ribbed (each plate overlapping the other). Many samurai had decorations on their helmets. The fanciest designs were worn by the Daimyo. The foot soldiers' helmet was the jingasa (war hat). It was made of metal or hardened leather and cone shaped. The samurai wore a pair of suneate (shin guards) and haidate (thigh-guards), and a kote (armored sleeves). Some samurai wore a mempo (facemask). Armor was lacquered to protect it from the elements. The colors used were black, brown, gold, and red.

As armies amassed, trying to identify allies became more and more difficult. Many samurai started to wear a sashimono (personal banner) on the back of

their armor. The sashimono varied in size and color. The symbol on the banner was usually the samurai's mon (family crest). Other forms of identification were the use of a larger flag called a nobori. The generals carried an uma-jirushi (horse insignia) to identify them in battle. Some Daimyos tried to use a standard uniform in their army by having all red or gold-lacquered armors. Some of the samurai carried flags with Japanese characters on them that when the army fell into formation would tell a poem.

In a typical battle both sides would line up a few hundred yards from one another. An arrow would be fired, the one samurai would step forward, fire an arrow and shout his name, and challenge an enemy to a duel. After the duel another set of samurai would fight until both sides were fully engaged. Many battles were fought this way until the introduction of the musket. After the introduction of the musket, formations were used in battles. The musket greatly changed the art of war in Japan. The samurai were used only in certain formations that fought against units that did not use muskets. The Japanese had over 22 formations for samurai and each one had a particular name. The Hoshi (arrowhead) was a formation that is a fierce charge. A large force of foot soldiers headed a vanguard of samurai that softened up the enemy ranks. The Ganko (birds in flight) is a flexible arrangement of troops that could be changed as the battle changed. The Saku (keyhole) was the best formation for countering the Hoshi. The Koyaku (yoke) was considered a good defense against the Kakuyoku and the Hoshi formations. The Gyorin (fish scales) formation was used when the army was outnumbered. The Engetsu (half moon) formation was to be used as a final stand. The Choda (long snake) used the front, middle, and back divisions form to contest any

enemy advance from the right or left. The Koto (tiger's head) is considered to be good defensive formation when both armies are equal. The Garyu (lying dragon) formation was used when fighting on a hill. The Taimo (big illusion) is used to access the enemy's strength on its flank. The Koran (dancing tiger) is used when the enemy is about to strike the flanks. The Kenran (dancing sword) is similar to the Koran. The Shogigashira (head of shogi piece) is useful formation for pursuing an enemy. The Matsukawa (pine trees skin) is unusual because the formation places the cavalry, missiles, and lances inside the formation. The Wachagai (interlaced circle) is used to fight a larger force in the woods. The Bette Naoshi (re-arranged) this is used when the enemy comes from behind. The Ryukei (flowing) is used when retreating. Unryo (dragon cloud) is used when the enemy has the advantage of terrain, but not in numbers. The Hicho (flying bird) is used when fighting a withdrawal. All of these formations helped Daimyos to defeat their enemies and gather more troops.

The development of samurai warfare was advanced with the introduction of the gun. Eventually Japanese warfare began to mirror that of the Europeans. The Japanese started to adopt the lifestyles of the Europeans. The Japanese adapted new technologies and new sciences. With the gun the samurai became obsolete. Peasants soon replaced the samurai in the Daimyo's armies. The samurai became a ceremonial soldier not to be used in battles. With the departure of the samurai the code of bushido soon vanished. The last true samurai died in 1845. With his death the last vestiges of ancient Japan died. The samurai only lives on through stories and legends.

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