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THE MYTH OF THE SAMURAI

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In the popular imagination Japan and the samurai are often synonymous. The samurai were--so the stereotype goes--the finest flower of Japanese civilization, a class of professional fighting men devoted to the awesome ethical principles of their bushidō code, totally loyal to their masters, indifferent to physical discomfort, ignorant of fear, and casually accepting of death, if not positively welcoming it. Apart from their masters--so the stereotype continues--the samurai cared for nothing save their reputation; to preserve or to salvage these all stood ready to take their own lives in the most painful way--by disembowelment.

This is the image, and its imprint lies heavily on Japan--in films (where Mifune Toshiro is the archetype), on television, in the warrior epics of mediaeval Japan no less than in their degenerate successors, today's multi-volume historical novels. The footsteps of the samurai echo, too, in most Japanese museums and art galleries, through room after room of armour, grotesque in its elaborate decoration, and of swordblades, polished to a chilling radiance. In Japanese art, too, the samurai looms equally large, whether in scrolls of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the screens of the seventeenth, or the masterly prints of Kuniyoshi in the nineteenth.

In the West, too, it has become an image of peculiar power, serving to define the past, the present, and even the future of an entire people. It is virtually obligatory for every television documentary, every popular book on the Pacific War, every encomium upon the Japanese miracle or Japanese management, to dwell upon the samurai heritage--sometimes lovingly, sometimes accusingly--as the source of every real or supposed Japanese characteristic: savagery and fanaticism on the one hand, and industry and obedience to authority on the other. Bushidō, the code of the samurai, would seem to lie at the very core of the Japanese psyche, generating all manner of extra-ordinary phenomena, from war crimes to economic growth.

In modern Western terms, it is not an altogether attractive image, emphasizing as it does irrationality, violence, and the extinction of self. Devotees of the martial arts can--and obviously do--find some charm in it, but it strikes most of us, I imagine, as forbiddingly remote and alien--so alien, indeed, that people with any first-hand experience of Japan find it difficult to take seriously. The notion that the Japanese are constantly and eternally motivated by instincts, training and ethics of the kind popularly ascribed to the samurai is hilariously inaccurate at best, and at worst racist and defamatory. For one thing, there is far too much variety in Japanese life to encourage such gross stereotypes. For another, the samurai of the popular imagination is a myth. He never existed. You can see him in books (often lavishly illustrated, often written by those who should know better), you can see him in films, you can see him in prints, plays, novels and museums, but you cannot see him in history, and that is where it really matters. The samurai as he is revealed in Japanese history, was very, very different from the myth.

What was he like? Well, the short answer would be that he changed very much over time. He was, after all, in existence in Japan for the

best part of a thousand years, and it can hardly be expected that he would be able to remain aloof from developments around him. Indeed he went through a number of permutations--from unlettered bully-boy to squire to urbane guardee, or from part-time semi-professional to full-time professional, or from a servant of civil government to a participant in a military one. Such transitions make generalization difficult. So too does Japanese topography, which encouraged the most extreme local variations. It is virtually impossible to find a plausible formula to cover all samurai at any given time, let alone across a millennium of change. Nonetheless, since distilling generalizations from the past is a major part of the historian's business, we have to try. For convenience, therefore, I shall discuss the historical (as distinct from the stereotypical) samurai in two stages, comparing him in either case against the constituent elements of the samurai myth--to see whether he was a professional fighting man, to what extent he was dominated by a distinct code of ethics, how loyal he was, how indifferent to discomfort, how oblivious to fear, and how careless of death.

First, then, to deal with the bully-boy period of samurai history, which can be dated fairly roughly at one end, to around the ninth century, and fairly specifically at the other, to around 1580. It was during these eight hundred years that the samurai were at their most active--a period overshadowed by wars of one sort or another, whether struggles for central control,¹ for local control,² for religious supremacy,³ for law and order,⁴ or plain, old-fashioned local quarrels and vendettas. Throw in the defense against the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281, and you have a period in which samurai were constantly fighting, getting ready to fight, or recuperating from having fought. At the same time they were in the process of displacing what remained of Japan's civil government, and then disputing among themselves with some ferocity for the right to replace it.

Samurai were undeniably at their most warlike during these centuries, and therefore, I suppose, to that extent approximated quite well to the stereotype. In all other respects, however, they did not. To begin with, they were not actually a clearly-defined class. Recruitment into their ranks was open to anyone with the necessary attributes--strength, skills with weapons, and a willingness to use these to intimidate or to overpower others. Local warlords, under a variety of titles, were always ready to welcome willing bodyguards without asking too many questions about family origins or personal background, for there was a lot of work such men could do--frightening farmers into paying taxes or travellers into paying tolls, preying upon the estates of neighbouring warlords, and discouraging them from retaliating in turn. In a period in which there was little stable and effective central government, such bully-boys were obviously necessary, but they were hardly a class.

Nor were they totally professional. They were, of course, paid for what they did, whether by grants of land (in the case of those with what more responsible positions) or rations (for the spear-carriers), but most men would have been semi-professional at best. The early samurai was very much a local figure, and tied very closely to agriculture, either managing his estates or tilling the soil himself and, except from emergencies, fighting only in the off-season. Perhaps for this reason, therefore, fighting men saw no great reason to differentiate themselves from the rest of the community, so

produced no formal code of ethics to suggest that they were different from, or better than, anybody else. That came much later. Of course, fighting was not an unusual occurrence, and the literature they developed--military epics like the Hogen Monogatari, the Heiji Monogatari and the Heike Monogatari, all products of the thirteenth century--tended to be about fighting. Such works generally originated in the songs of minstrels who would take their lutes from place to place and sing of the gallantry of men rather like those who made up their audience. Written down and tidied up, such songs formed the backbone of Japanese mediaeval prose, and they have--despite their intrinsically bloody subject matter--a good deal of power, as they describe acts of great heroism, of indifference to one's own sufferings and death, and compassion for the sufferings and deaths of others.

But there was no self-conscious military code--no Bushidō--and one looks for signs of it in vain even in the fiction. In the actual historical documents of this period to 1580, indeed, a totally different picture of the samurai emerges. Typically, he appears not as a man obsessed with death and preoccupied with honour, but instead as someone very much more earth-bound.⁵ A look at the nature of the documents is enough--grants of land, complaints about grants of land, lawsuits about grants of land, and requests for more grants of land; these are accompanied by tax registers, lawsuits about taxes, complaints about taxes, and requests for shares of tax dividends. It is not really too difficult from evidence of this sort to piece together just what samurai were really interested in: land. Land meant crops, which in turn meant taxes, which meant wealth (either in cash or kind), and this in turn meant greater military security, and greater physical comfort. They were quite as materialistic about this as any squatter or cattle-baron, and when they went to war they usually did so for land. It was hunger for land, not glory, which kept mediaeval Japan in such an uproar.

For that matter loyalty does not seem to have been a major consideration either. If all samurai in the years between 800 and 1580 had remained steadfast and true to their masters there would not have been nearly so much fighting. In fact they changed sides as often as it suited them, tempering (if not overwhelming) their loyalties with a stiff measure of calculation, and making treachery just as much a feature of the period as constancy. The military epics show no shortage of traitors and deserters, which was really just as well. If every samurai had gone into battle determined to win, or to die in the attempt, many would have destroyed themselves rather quickly, since one would be entitled to assume at the very least a 50 percent casualty rate in every equal engagement. Obviously this did not happen. What did happen, as can be seen in the genealogy of any warrior family, is service to a whole succession of different masters, each one deserted in turn for someone more promising. They may not have been loyal, but they were certainly not stupid.

Of course, they all claimed to be incredibly brave. That much goes without saying. In this, they were perhaps no different from old soldiers anywhere. But at Kenneth Butler has suggested,⁶ it seems likely that the episodes of spectacular heroism were all too often the products of minstrelsy, not of the battlefield. After all, it is not easy to make an exciting story of a group of cautious men all too ready to change sides. There is another aspect of this, too. It is impossible, at this distance, to determine how men behaved in battle

so long ago, but the twentieth century has provided a good deal more data for an objective assessment of battlefield behaviour. This tends to suggest that, apart from the occasional case of someone actually going berserk--in the manner of Cuchulain, or the Incredible Hulk--the normal reaction to battle is not to fight unless necessary to effect an escape, or unless one is under the scrutiny of a small group of men capable of making or breaking one's reputation.⁷ Otherwise one avoids it. Brigadier S.L. Marshall, of the U.S. Army, who has made a study of battlefield behaviour, has calculated that of every three men carrying a rifle into battle, only one will every be able to nerve himself to pull the trigger.⁸

The samurai of the early period, therefore, would not seem to accord too well with the popular stereotype. Most of them were not really professionals: their code of ethics was, to say the least, elastic; they were probably as interested in survival as anybody else; and they were certainly--to judge from their obsession with land and taxes--not indifferent to this world's goods.

What then of the second period, from 1580 to the 1870s a period virtually synonymous with the rule of the Tokugawa family, from which sprang every shōgun between 1603 and 1868? In a great many ways the Tokugawa period was the high point of the samurai society, to such an extent that when we picture samurai in our mind's eye--with top-knot, two swords, and a formal kamishimo costume--it is the samurai of this period that we see. The most elaborate suits of armour, like the most imposing castles, are all the products of these centuries. The Tokugawa period, in fact, was a time of almost total samurai dominance; they dominated government, they dominated society, they dominated city life, they dominated education. They also dominated cultural life, providing most of the painters, most of the poets, most of the playwrights, and almost all the philosophers, mathematicians and botanists. In a population of some thirty million, the samurai would perhaps have numbered as many as 300,000, every one of them in service to one or another of Tokugawa Japan's 260-odd overlords, either the shōgun himself or one of the provincial barons. There was no government apart from them, no laws but what they devised, and no order save what they imposed.

How closely did these samurai, then, conform to the popular myth? They answer is: Not very well--in fact even less than their bully-boy predecessors. It is of course true that in the Tokugawa period they came far closer to being a professional military class than they ever had before. In the 1580s a number of government policies⁹ set in train a course of events which, in many parts of Japan, was to result in the end of the part-time samurai, and the appearance, in his place, of an hereditary caste of salaried city-dwellers, trained and educated to their profession as never before. The problem was that, with a largely-professional, largely-distinct class of warriors, nobody did any fighting. After the fall of Osaka castle in 1615, and the crushing of the Shimabara revolt in 1638, Japan saw no war until the 1860s--a total of more than two centuries of peace. Samurai military functions were now limited to guard duty (to keep up appearances), to some police work (in which capacity they were required to put down the occasional agrarian disturbance), and--less and less frequently, since it was expensive--to military manoeuvres of a sort, usually disguised as hunting parties. The irony of the situation is obvious: a professional samurai class all dressed up with nowhere to go. Before long there is the inevitable transition from a military class which

does not fight, to one which cannot fight. Peace, and life in the suburbs, very soon transformed them into ordinary civil servants whose top-knots and swords served much the same function as the bowler hat and the furled umbrella. Coupled with fixed or shrinking incomes, and rising commodity prices, the result was demoralization, symbolized by the pawning of weapons and armour.¹⁰

Indeed, many apparently found it difficult to survive as full-time samurai, and it was common to find men obliged to supplement their incomes in some way--borrowing money from moneylenders, or course, but also offering instruction in some academic or artistic discipline, or growing vegetables, or making handicraft objects--doing anything, in fact, to bring in the money needed to keep up appearances, or even to sustain life. Watanabe Kazan's experience would not have been all that uncommon. Despite his high rank, and what--at least on paper--seems like a good salary, he was as wretched as anybody else, complaining in 1828 that "I am poor and hungry, and painting is my only means of escape; if I fail to paint on any particular day, then I am that much poorer".¹¹

It is also true that the code of samurai ethics known as "Bushidō" developed in the Tokugawa period; the very term bushido does not appear until the seventeenth century so in this sense also the years 1580-1870's might seem to accord most with the samurai myth. But it is no accident that in an age of peace samurai should have begun to sit down and ponder over their calling. For one thing, they now had the time. For another, as a demoralized, largely penurious class of bureaucrats, they needed more than ever the consolation of an ideal, particularly one which asserted--all evidence to the contrary--that they were ready and willing to fight and die at any time. They were also undoubtedly uneasy about their privileged status; their salaries may have been inadequate, but they drew them anyway, irrespective of ability or usefulness, and that is very much more than could be said for the other ninety percent of the population. So of course they felt compelled to justify their prerogatives, and they did so in two ways--first, by glorifying the past in an effort to show how brave their ancestors were--and by extension, how brave they were also. The seventeenth century obsession with genealogies came from this impulse. Second, they began to compile ethical maxims and complicated sets of instructions appropriate to situations which had not arisen for generations--how to cut off an enemy's head, for example, or what to do if taken prisoner ("assume an innocent expression," says one manual.)¹² The more distant the military past, the more eager samurai were to call attention to it, and pretend to be as ready as they every were.

One of the acknowledged classics of this Bushidō tradition is the work known as Hagakure, a product of the early eighteenth century. Since it typifies so much of what most people think of as the samurai code, it is worth quoting some passages from it by way of illustration. It is a work very much concerned with appearances: "In Bushidō", it says, "you must want to take precedence over others in everything To show how brave he is, a samurai should throw out his chest and act like the bravest man in the land...." This attitude extends even down the most minute areas of human behaviour: "it is not seemly to yawn in public; the yawn can be stopped if you rub your forehead. If you do not do this, you should manage to conceal it by licking your lips, keeping them closed, or by hiding your mouth with your sleeve. It is just the same with sneezing, too; a man looks like a fool when he sneezes".¹³

Obviously appearances are important, so equally obviously this work originates at a time when people have the leisure, and the incentive, to worry about such things. In this case, the main character in the book, a retired samurai called Yamamoto Tsunetomo, takes his obsession still further, observing how essential it is that a samurai going into battle should so bedizen himself with lipstick and rouge that he is certain to make the very handsomest of corpses. It is, of course, equally essential in this grim work that a samurai going into battle should be determined to die, since that is the very best things a samurai can ever do. "Samurai" he asserts, "should welcome battle; it would be an intolerable agony to die in one's sleep, because this is unworthy of a true samurai". Prudence, therefore, is to be avoided, since one can expect no acts of bravery from a prudent man. On the contrary, a samurai should be determined to die: "When faced with a choice between life and death, one must choose death".

Were one to take this seriously, it would be very strong meat indeed, and more than enough to still any loose and impious talk about "the myth of the samurai". The problem about it, however, is this: Hagakure was compiled after almost a hundred years of sustained peace, for a group of men who were already beginning to feel uneasy about their role in society. And that is not all. Yamamoto Tsunetomo, whose stream-of-consciousness monologues form the basis of the work, was by no means your battle-scarred fighting man. He had been rather delicate since childhood, so never received much training in any of the military skills, and made his career as a private secretary--a position he was offered, incidentally, because he and his employer shared a love of poetry. There had been no fighting in Japan since 1638, twenty-one years before Yamamoto's birth in 1659, so he lived his entire life without ever having seen a blow struck in anger. All in all, it is not quite the sort of background one would expect of a man so concerned with blood, and death, and glory. The same can be said of his end. After noting what a disgrace it would be for a samurai to die in bed, this was precisely where he died in 1719.

In a sense, of course, the Tokugawa period saw very much more loyalty being given by samurai to their employers, inasmuch, at least, as there were no battle-field desertions. Of course, since there were no battle-fields either, this was only to be expected. There was simply no opportunity for samurai to change masters. Nor, for that matter, was there any chance of alternative employment; most military overlords, from the shogun down, had more samurai than they needed, and would not have wished to employ any more. Even simple disobedience, therefore, was very much more hazardous than it had once been, and this made the samurai very much more docile, allowing their overlords to cut their salaries with some degree of impunity as the Tokugawa period wore on. Complaints could lead to dismissal, as one group of samurai were to discover in 1678 after addressing a petition of complaint to their employer, who promptly dispensed with their services.¹⁴ On the other hand, there were occasions when samurai did have rather more leverage than usual--during succession disputes within their employer's household for example, and it was at just such times that all the old samurai propensity for intrigue came to the fore, sometimes provoking noisy public vendettas of the kind known as oiesodō.¹⁵ Once samurai were locked into these power struggles, the virtue of stoic loyalty tended to be forgotten.

The samurai of the Tokugawa period were certainly not noted for their adherence to the other classic samurai virtue--indifference to

material things. It is quite clear that those who moved into the castle towns and the cities were very quick to aspire to a way of life in which physical comfort and enjoyment were paramount; indeed, to some extent their general economic malaise sprang from just such circumstances. Samurai and their families made up at least half of the population of almost all major Japanese towns, and were beset by the temptations of consumer society--not just more varied foods, and finer clothes than their rustic forebears could ever have imagined, but other seductions as well: gambling, theatres, brothels, and parties. They were certainly as fond of their creature comforts as the next man, and were far from the puritanical ascetics of the samurai myth.

Perhaps this account of the samurai as they really were, and not as the myth would have them, sounds rather unpleasantly like the old Australian sport of knocking. In fact, it is the reverse. In denying the validity of a stereotype in which the samurai appear as humourless and blood-happy psychopaths I am really asserting their essential humanity. They were not a race of specially trained and dedicated killers, but rather ordinary people like ourselves, no better and no worse. Certainly they do not deserve to be idealized above the rest of their fellow countrymen. If samurai were courageous, then so too were other Japanese. It took courage to put out to sea in flimsy boats, day after day, as fishermen did throughout Japanese history. It took courage to engage, year after year, in crippling--literally crippling--agricultural work, but farmers in Japan have always done so. It took courage, too, for such people to protest about their tax burdens, as they sometimes did, in the knowledge that such protest could cost them their lives. These people deserve quite as much credit as their samurai masters. None of them, samurai or commoner, deserve to have their descendants saddled with so unflattering an image as that presented in the myth of the samurai.

NOTES

1. Among the more notable of these: the Jowa incident of 842, the Masakado rebellion of 935-41, the Anna insurrection of 969, the Hogen rising of 1156, and its Heiji successor three years later, the Gempei war of 1180-5, the Jokyū revolt of 1221, the risings of 1324, 1331, and 1399, the Eikyō and Kakitsu disturbances of the early fifteenth century, the Ōnin War of 1467-77, and the various sixteenth century wars of unification.
2. For example, the Former Nine Years War and Latter Three Years War in the north-east during the eleventh century, or Fujiwara no Sumitomo's campaign in the Inland Sea during the tenth.
3. Notably the battles between major religious institutions, like the Kōfukuji and the Enryakuji, which disfigured much of the period.
4. Those, for example, against the Ebisu in the north, and against "robbers", "pirates", and "rebellious peasants" everywhere.
5. See Jeffrey P. Mass, Warrior Government in Early Medieval Japan, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1875), and Peter Judd Arnesen, The Medieval Japanese Daimyo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

6. Kenneth Butler, "The Heike Monogatari and the Japanese Warrior Ethic", in Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 29 (1969), pp. 93-108.
7. See John Keegan, The Face of Battle (Ringwood: Penguin, 1978), Ch. 1.
8. Cited in *ibid.*
9. See Mary Elizabeth Berry, Hideyoshi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), Ch. 5.
10. Note the reaction to Perry's arrival in 1953, when samurai in Edo were obliged to purchase armour and weapons from pawnbrokers. Naitō Chiso (ed.), Tokugawa jūgodaishi (Tokyo: Shin Jimbutsu Ōrai-sha, 1969), Vol. 6, p. 3038.
11. Sato Shosuke (ed.), "Watanabe Kazan" and "Takano Nagahide", in Nihon no Meichō, vol. 25 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron-sha, 1972), p. 45.
12. Shinji Yoshimoto, Edo jidai buke no seikatsu (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1961), pp. 41-60.
13. Naramoto Tatsuya (ed.), "Hagakure", in Nihon no Meichō, vol. 17 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1969).
14. Nakamura Naokatsu (ed.), Hikone-shi shi (Kyoto, 1960), Vol. 2, p. 440.
15. See Kitajima Masamoto (ed.), Oiesōdō, (Tokyo: Jimbutsu Ōrai-sha, 1965).