Shinobi to Ninja:
How Historical Reality Shaped Modern Myth

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Amidst the tumultuous era of feudal Japan, ninjas acted in the shadows, spinning the historical narrative of one of the most influential nations ever seen. It is no secret that they have a profound presence in the modern era, even in the West. Ninjas appear in all sorts of media, ranging from non-fiction military tactic guides to some of the most popular animated children's shows. However, several issues are brought to light when asking these two questions: what are the origins of ninjas, and how did they become so widespread? After tracing the evolution of ninjas back to the source, the Sengoku Period, the situation starts to become dire; discrepancies between historical records and modern understanding of ninjas appear almost instantly. The passage of time distorted everything from the clothing, weapons, and tactics of ninjas. Now, the ninja image is so distanced from historical reality that it is more appropriate to claim their defining features are not authentic, but modern myth.

Even the term "ninja" is a modern fabrication. Historically, the pronunciation of the word 忍者 is *shinobi no mono*, which means "the one who sneaks."[1] British historian Stephen Turnbull, the leading academic authority on all things related to Japanese military history, analyzes the use of the word ninja as opposed to shinobi in his article, "The Ninja: An Invented Tradition?":

> Outside Japan the use of the word ninja rather than *shinobi no mono* has predominated, probably because ninja [slips] readily off the Western tongue. Interestingly, there has been a trend in recent years among ninja enthusiasts to prefer the term *shinobi no mono* or just *shinobi* on the grounds that the frequency of their use in historical accounts confirms their authenticity. The word ninja is then reserved for the exaggerated popular development found in comic books and movies.[2]

The simplification of the word ninja is not incorrect per se, as it is just an alternative reading of the characters. However, it caters to a Western audience who, for lack of better words, were too lazy to learn the proper pronunciation. Moving forward in this essay, the use of the word shinobi will always refer to historically accurate warriors, while the word ninja will refer to the exaggerated interpretation of a stealthy assassin well-known today.

In addition to etymology, the groundwork of the larger historical context that surrounds the Sengoku and Tokugawa periods is necessary to properly analyze both material and textual primary sources. Nancy Stalker is a Japanese scholar with a focus on nationalism, imperialism, and more. She is the author of *Japan: History and Culture from Classical to Cool* and highlights

[1] Joel Levy, *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2008), 12.

[2] Stephen Turnbull, "The Ninja: An Invented Tradition?" *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 9, no. 1 (2014): 9–26, 13.

there that the Sengoku Jidai, 1467–1568, was a "time of civil war, with battles fought at many levels of society."[3] During this period, different warrior classes became firmly established and started to take shape, and then Tokugawa Ieyasu, one of the three Great Unifiers of Japan, ushered in an era of peace. The warrior class lost their sense of purpose (due to the lack of war), were left to their own devices, and subsequently began to develop different values. It was during this time that Yamamoto Tsunetomo (a retired warrior who fought during the Sengoku Period) wrote the concept of *Bushido* down in the *Hagakure*. A plethora of other texts developed during this time, including the ultimate shinobi/ninja triad of manuals that includes *The Shinobi Hiden*, *The Shoninki*, and *The Bansenshukai*. These pieces should be taken with a grain of salt, as with any other literary-historical source, because many were written by authors with an agenda. However, they are some of the only written materials we have of shinobi that have also been translated into English. As time unfolded, the ideas and truths regarding shinobi were transformed exponentially because of people who desired to romanticize the past.

There are many aspects of the shinobi identity that have changed but none are more obvious than the appearance they take. As masters of disguise and deception, shinobi used a variety of methods to conceal themselves during the war-torn Sengoku period. Generally, they would wear certain types of clothes that depended on the nature of the mission they were executing; espionage was one of, if not the most important, responsibilities for a shinobi. To appear "invisible" during operations, shinobi often concealed themselves as common folk to hide in plain sight. A disguise in the form of a *komusō*, a flute-playing beggar, was favorable and convenient for a spy.[4] Taking advantage of the komusō attire was a technique extremely beneficial to shinobi—komusō had the special privilege of being able to travel the country freely, which was typically only available for the aristocratic elite. The *Buke Meimokusho*, a warrior manual written around 1806 says, "They travelled in disguise to other territories to judge the situation of the enemy, they would inveigle their way into the midst of the enemy to discover gaps, and enter enemy castles to set them on fire, and carried out assassination, arriving in secret."[5] For a shinobi with the task of traveling into enemy territory undetected, the komusō's ability to move freely was indispensable. However, if the situation made it impossible to don the uniform of a komusō, a more subtle guise in the form of an average farmer or villager would still provide that camouflage effect. Or, if they were scoping out the enemy's position, the disguise of a woodcutter in the forest could also prove advantageous. The *Buke Meimokusho* writes, "Their duties were to go into the mountains and disguise themselves as firewood gatherers to discover and acquire the news about an enemy's territory."[6]

During this era and up until the westernization of Japan, the outward appearance of an individual would immediately indicate to an observer what social and political class they belonged

[3] Nancy K. Stalker, *Japan: History and Culture from Classical to Cool* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 112.

[4] Stephen Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 8.

[5] Stephen Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650*, 17.

[6] Stephen Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650*, 27.

to. For example, poor clothing and hair indicated that someone was of a lower class. On the other hand, ornate fabrics and lavish hairstyles would signal that they were important figures and that they needed to be treated with a certain amount of respect. Nonetheless, espionage was not the only duty of Shinobi (arguably). Assassinations and night raids were in the shinobi repertoire, and their clothing changed drastically when performing those operations. For missions like these, shinobi most likely often opted to wear an ensemble of navy-blue peasant clothes. *The Shoninki*, written by Master Masazumi Natori, illustrates that, "The clothes you wear should be brown, black, or dark blue. The environment can assume the most varied appearances and you should choose the most appropriate color in order to blend in with it. Clothing like a raincoat (*ama-baori*) or a cape (*kappa*) will allow you to skillfully alter your appearance."[7] Generally, it is believed that in real missions, dark blue would have been the color of choice. If a mission took place during the night, the moonlight would expose a shinobi wearing all black. Nevertheless, the fictitious notion of shinobi wearing black would continue through the present day.

With the introduction of new values and innovations during the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate period, the typical clothing of a shinobi disappeared. Replaced with the attire of the stereotypical modern-day ninja this image persisted. When the Sengoku Period ended, and the Tokugawa Shogunate ushered in an era of peace, Bunraku puppet theater became ingrained into Japanese culture around the 17th century. Many of the stories that would have been told, including the *Heike Monogatari*, or *The Tale of the Heike*, reminisced great battles. The *Heike Monogatari* was a catalyst that marked the beginning of the celebration of warrior culture as a whole in Japan. The events of the *Heike Monogatari* occurred in the late 12th century, but the story did not get penned until 1371. Like classical Greek epic, the *Heike Monogatari* is an oral retelling that details the conflict between the Taira and Minamoto clans. While samurai culture appears persistently in the *Heike Monogatari, since it tells the story of the Genpei War (a bloody conflict that saw the rise of the samurai as a warrior class)*, shinobi are represented as well. The *Heike Monogatari* reads, " . . . He provided himself with a long dagger which he put on under his long court dress, and turning aside to a dimly lit place, slowly drew the blade, and passed it through the hair of his head so that it gleamed afar with an icy sheen, causing all the stare open-eyed."[8] This excerpt depicts a scene where the character Taira Tadamori prevents an assassination attempt by using a ninja ability. If and when, a scene like this is played in Bunraku theater, it is implied "that to dress a character in black is to indicate to the view that he cannot see that person" according to Turnbull.[9] So, when retelling stories featuring ninjas via the medium of puppet theater, the stagehands would always wear all-black ensembles; these people were known as Kuroko.[10]

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[7] Masazumi Natori, *Shoninki: The Secret Teachings of the Ninja: The 17th-Century Manual on the Art of Concealment*, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2010), 26.

[8] Stephen Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2007), 145.

[9] Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650*, 17.

[10] John W. Turner, "History and Sustainability of Bunraku, the Japanese Puppet Theater," *Education About ASIA* 23, no. 1 (2018): 51–54.

Artists celebrated and romanced these extremely stylized images of Kuroko throughout Japan's history in several mediums. Even the legendary ukiyo-e artist, Hokusai (painter of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*) illustrates ninjas in this fashion.[11] However, Hokusai was following in the footsteps of an artist who already imagined ninja in this way. Turnbull notes that "The earliest pictorial reference to a ninja in black is a book illustration of 1801, which shows a ninja climbing into a castle wearing what everyone would immediately recognize as a ninja costume. However, it could simply be that it is pictures like these that have given us our image of the ninja rather than vise-versa."[12] This sketch of a ninja established the model for how ninja would be represented in all sorts of media up until the 21st century in addition to Hokusai's illustration.[13] The first ninja movie, *Shinobi no Mono*, or as it is known in the West, *Ninja, a Band of Assassins*, debuted in Japan in 1962.[14] *Ninja, a Band of Assassins* set the precedent for how ninjas would be represented in film and other types of media for decades while perpetuating the stereotypical image of a ninja wearing an all-black ensemble.

While clothing was one of the most notable aspects of shinobi identity, there is much to gain from analyzing the weapons that they had in their arsenal. Combat was not the main duty of shinobi, but there are a plethora of records detailing the different types of weapons utilized in the line of duty. Surprisingly, the most trusted weapon for a shinobi was the *katana*, the weapon of choice for all samurai.[15] It is most accurate to assert that shinobi were a subclass of the samurai, so, there is a lot of overlap between the two different warriors. Additionally, *The Shoninki* implies that the use of the *wakizashi* was almost as popular as the katana.[16] The wakizashi, simply put, is a shorter katana that would have been more convenient for a shinobi to carry around as opposed to a regular-sized one. However, if the shinobi was wearing the disguise of a *yamabushi* (a warrior monk who had the privilege to carry a weapon in addition to mobility like the komusō), no one would think twice seeing them carry around a regular-sized katana. It may be surprising that shinobi did not utilize many different weapons, however, their primary duty was espionage, not night raids or assassinations.

Even modern-day ninja weapons appear vastly different from those of shinobi. One of the most popular ninja weapons is that of the *Shūriken*, also known as throwing stars. Turnbull says, "There are also no descriptions of the secret operative's personal armoury apart from the sword.

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[11] Katsushika Hokusai, "Ninja by Hokusai," *World History Encyclopedia*, Last modified May 30, 2019, https://www.worldhistory.org/image/10813/ninja-by-hokusai/.

[12] Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650*, 17.

[13] Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650*, 13.

[14] *Ninja, a Band of Assassins*. Daiei Motion Picture Company. 1962. *IMDb*. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0164882/.

[15] Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 161.

[16] Stephen Turnbull, *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2018), 127.

Shūriken, the spinning 'ninja stars', are totally absent."[17] However, despite this, modern media depicts ninjas with a wide variety of weapons in their arsenal. In the 1981 movie, *Enter the Ninja*, weapons like Shūriken and nun chucks are used in abundance. Even one of the film's promotional posters integrates the shuriken into the design.[18] Fictitious weapons such as these have maneuvered their way into modern ninja media as they provide an entertaining experience. At the same time, the gap between ninja and shinobi grows even wider.

In addition to weapons, shinobi utilized several types of tools to aid them during their reconnaissance missions. A majority of these tools were practical, and never used for combat purposes. The *Bansenshukai* (*Ten Thousand Rivers Flow into the Sea*) is a manual from the 17th century written by a man named Fujibayashi Yasutake, who was probably from a notable Iga family, a region where *ninjutsu* is thought to originate from along with the Koka. These men took it upon themselves to preserve the tactics, weapons, and tools of the shinobi, known as *shinobi no jutsu*.[19] Along with the *Shinobi Hiden* and *The Shoninki*, *The Bansenshukai* is the third book of the shinobi manual triad that preserves the tactical knowledge passed down from each generation of shinobi. Illustrations and directions related to various shinobi are examined in *The Bansenshukai*. Of those, the *mizugumo*, or water spider, is a seat that floats in water.[20] Occasionally, the water spider is also described as a device that is to be worn on both feet to cross not bodies of water, but swampy terrain.[21] *The Shoninki* also provides a list of essential tools for a shinobi, and they are as follows: "A straw hat (*amigasa*), a rope with a hook attached to one end (*kaginawa*), stones for engraving (*sekibitsu*), medicine (*kusuri*), a piece of cloth (*san shaku tenugi*), and material for making fire (*tusketake*). The details concerning the use of these tools are transmitted secretly (*okuden*)."[22] These devices support a shinobi to help him perform his essential duties (i.e., reconnaissance) by supporting either their movement or camouflage capabilities.

Of course, it is always important to include women and the roles that they played throughout history. Many people hold the misconception that female ninjas are known as *kunoichi*. However, that can be attributed to the misreading of the word, 女, which simply is another expression for "woman". The historical term that refers to a female warrior, 女武者, can be transliterated in English as *onna-musha*.[23] No ancient Japanese author ever suggested that onna-

[17] Turnbull, *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth*, 119.

[18] *Enter the Ninja*. Golan-Globus Production. 1981. *IMDb*. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082332/.

[19] Fujibayashi Yasutake, *The Book of Ninja: The First Complete Translation of the* Bansenshukai *– Japan's Premier Ninja Manual*, ed. Antony Cummins, trans. Yoshie Minami (London: Watkins Publishing, 2013), 11-12.

[20] Yasutake, *The Book of Ninja*, 11-12.

[21] Turnbull, *Ninja AD 1460–1650*, 21.

[22] Natori, *Shoninki: The Secret Teachings of the Ninja: The 17th-Century Manual on the Art of Concealment*, 26.

[23] Rochelle Nowaki, "Women Warriors of Early Japan," *Hohonu 2015 Academic Journal*, vol. 13 (2013): 63-68, 63.

musha ever played the role of a shinobi, it is quite the opposite. Instead, these women were frequently characterized as samurai. Most illustrations depicting female warriors opted to show them wearing the iconic *yoroi* armor.[24] However, unlike regular samurai, the weapon of choice for onna-musha was the *naginata*.[25] Depicting onna-musha in this distinctive fashion remains consistent until the modern day once the transition to kunoichi (a pop-culture icon), began.

Even though there is a lack of concrete historical evidence pointing to the existence of kunoichi (female ninja warriors), they are still extremely widespread in modern media. Turnbull concludes that this misunderstanding can be narrowed down to an excerpt in *The Bansenshukai* where a phrase reads "久ノ一術," or *kunoichi jutsu*.[26] Turnbull explains, "[This] is commonly taken to mean the activities of female ninjas, even though there is no suggestion of this in the original. It is to the 1950s novelist Yamada Futarō that we owe the elaboration of the meaning of kunoichi from 'female' to 'female ninja'."[27] Whether he knew it or not, Yamada Futarō altered the course of the representation of women as ninjas forever. Of course, this is not to say that the inclusion of women into the ninja narrative is a bad thing, it can (and should), be argued the opposite. However, historically, shinobi women did not exist, at least from what scholars can extrapolate from various texts. Instead, it is more appropriate to assert that the female warriors of feudal Japan were so exceptional that they deserved to be studied in their own unique category.

The discrepancies between shinobi and ninja exponentially grew over time until they developed more differences than similarities. The changes in clothing, weapons, tools, and even the role of women widened the divide between shinobi and ninja. Unfortunately, textual evidence that does survive from the Tokugawa era (i.e., *The Shinobi Hiden*, *Shoninki*, and *The Bansenshukai*) must be carefully read as their respective authors were already romanticizing war stories. The lack of a war-torn state brought about peace, but once authors were left to their own devices, these stories lacked authenticity. In essence, the transformation of the shinobi/ninja identity reflects not only historical evolution but also the very human desire to romanticize the past. As scholars continue to navigate between layers of myth and reality, it is evident that the legacy of these elusive figures captivates people worldwide, transcending cultural boundaries and even time.

[24] Stephen Turnbull, *Samurai Women 1184-1877* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 19.

[25] Turnbull, *Samurai Women 1184-1877*, 20.

[26] Turnbull, *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth*, 125.

[27] Turnbull, *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth*, 125.

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