

# AN INTRODUCTION TO NINJUTSU



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With this article, the *Historical Ninjutsu Research Team* aim to provide a brief introduction to the fascinating story of the Japanese ninja, giving the reader an insight into the world of the Japanese spy and their abilities. The ninja or shinobi as they were known are not only little-understood but are also misunderstood with many misnomers proliferating their story, this introductory guide will help you establish the facts about the arts of the ninja and show you the reality of the fascinating world in which they lived.

## WHAT IS A NINJA?

The first element in the search for the ninja is to truly understand what the word “ninja” meant to those first Japanese who coined the term and to those who used it to convey an idea, persona and meaning, this requires people from a modern audience to cast off the media understanding as the truth, because from its original form it has been totally distorted and manipulated, what a lot of people do not realise is that even with this distortion the world of the Japanese ninja is still marvellous, fascinating and truly one of the gems of history.

## THE JAPANESE SPY AND THE NINJA

One of the reasons the word *ninja* is so common within the English language is that there is no direct translation, the most common translation understood by the masses is that of a Japanese spy or Japanese assassin, the problem here is that neither are correct, the word does not carry the full message to the English reader, the reason for this is that the *ninja* was not just a spy nor was he an assassin, what most people do not know is that in Japan there were other types of spy such as *kancho* 間諜. The *ninja* are so difficult to pinpoint due to their long history and the transient nature of the term and its use, hopefully by the end of this short introduction you will have formed a more concrete understanding of the concept of *ninja* and you will see how it differs to what is normally thought of them, however, in short a *ninja* was someone who could be classified as; a spy, scout, pathfinder, tracker, intelligence gatherer, infiltration agent, arsonist and thief as well as many other things.

## THE ETYMOLOGY AND THE MEANING

To understand the *ninja* better, we must understand the way in which the kanji or Japanese ideogram was formed, while the *ninja* have had many names attributed to them there are two main versions of the root word that have gained popularity and appear to have been understood by most people in their historical context.

忍

**Pronunciation:** *shinobu*, *shinobi* or *nin*

**Meaning:** The basic form of *nin* which consists of ‘blade’ above a ‘heart’, it has the dual meaning of “steal-in” or “perseverance”.

This is by far the most common version of the word *ninja*, it can also be read as *shinobi*, it must be understood that *shinobi* was the original word used for the *ninja* and was the common term used before the Edo period (1603). Historically it was used to refer to the activity of creeping or stealing-in and as a reference to a person; also this is the foundational ideogram that may be used as a verb with the

ending altered to describe ninja-like activities, for example, shinobi-Iru (忍び入る) *to enter in a stealthy way* or shinobi-Iku (忍び行く) *to go discreetly*.

## 忍者

**Pronunciation:** ninja or shinobi no mono

**Meaning:** This is the basic form of nin with the ending of person or a person who “steals in”

This is the most popular ideogram for the ninja, it is the iconic version and now the only one used to mean ninja in modern Japanese, this version of the word shinobi has been used since the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is found in the *Taiheki* chronicle, the ideogram used in this manual has a single stroke variation; however it is accepted as the predecessor of this form which can be seen as early as 1560 in the *Ninpiden* ninja manual.

## 忍術

**Pronunciation:** ninjutsu or shinobi no jutsu

**Meaning:** The art of stealing-in: Nin is the base kanji and jutsu, as we know, means ‘the art of’.

The original reading for this is *shinobi no jutsu* but alternatively it can be read as ninjutsu which is now more popular; this is used to describe the arts of the ninja or for a person who can use the skills of the ninja arts. Remember, this is the action of and not the description for the person themselves.

## 忍兵

**Pronunciation:** ninpei

**Meaning:** shinobi soldiers

This is a rare version of ninja which was used in the written form only; it is rare because it was written by people of high status when referring to people lower than themselves the second kanji 兵 is used

for foot soldiers by the military elite and thus, this means ‘ninja foot soldiers’.

## 竊盜

**Pronunciation:** shinobi

**Meaning:** There are two Kanji here, the first, 竊 means ‘sneaking or spying’ the second 盜 means ‘thief, thievery or stealing’, thus it could be translated as ‘a person who spies and steals’:

This version of shinobi reinforces the aspect of stealing and thievery that the ninja were originally linked to and is considered to be an old version.

### NINJUTSU AS A PROFESSION OR SKILL SET

The first thing that must be understood about ninjutsu is that it is not a social status, a hierarchical position or reflection on social standing, ninjutsu in essence is an occupation or skill set, the word *nin* or *shinobu* represents the main element and the concept of (*no*) *Jutsu* is the art, therefore, ninjutsu is a set of skills that are obtained and used by various people within society that are based around what was and is considered to be the curriculum of the ninja. History has shown that people from all sections of social stratification could be ninja, such as members of the Hattori family and the Natori family who were samurai, down to the unknown *shinobi-shu* or unnamed ninja-troop’s that accompanied armies.

What combined all of these people no matter which section of society they were from was a loosely based curriculum that today we would consider to be ninjutsu, however, the skills of ninjutsu have never been fully defined, nor do they stay within the boundaries of the art itself, from an historical point of view we can try to reconstruct this curriculum by using the manuals and references that have been left telling us about the shinobi themselves, it must be understood that the whole of this curriculum was by no means understood by all ninja, so each ninja would have

been assessed or used in accordance with his depth and understanding of this collective system.

#### THE CURRICULUM OF NINJUTSU AND OTHER REQUIREMENTS

What follows is a basic outline of the skills that come under the label of the arts of ninjutsu.

- The art of making and using gunpowder.
- The art of constructing compressed explosives for aggressive use.
- A full and detailed understanding of fire, its construction, maintenance and characteristics.
- A highly developed understanding of torch construction.
- The art of arson.
- The art of infiltration.
- The art of thievery.
- The art of breaking and entering.
- The art of climbing, scaling and all forms of ascension.
- The art of tunnelling.
- The art of acting.
- Investigation skills and conversation techniques with the aim of deception.
- An understanding of deception in all forms.
- The art of espionage.
- The art of disguise.
- The art of scouting.
- The art of boat handling.
- Water crossing methodology and the construction of floatation devices.
- Underwater skills.
- The art of signalling.
- An understanding of knots and rope techniques.
- The art of cryptology.
- Basic zoology and animal handling/training.
- The art of poison and poisoning.

- The art of ritual magic and esoteric practices.
- The art of physiognomy.
- The art of cold reading.
- An understanding of medicinal herbs.
- Con-artistry
- The art of trap construction.
- The art of surveillance and following.
- The art of understanding torture methods.
- Bridge and platform construction.
- The art of misdirection.
- The art of cartography
- Lateral thinking.
- To ethically accept treachery and theft as a fundamental principle.
- A deep understanding of castle defences in relation to searching and guarding.

-and others.

#### THE ARCHETYPAL NINJA

In reality when the word ninja or shinobi is used the modern audience think they are describing the archetypal ninja, that is of a man whose *fulltime* occupation or function was that of a professional conducting the skills of ninjutsu. This figure can be outlined as a person who was born or accepted into a ninja tradition and who was highly trained in these skills, who then continued to use them in a professional capacity, it is still unclear how many sub-specialisations there were in the world of ninjutsu or just how broadly a professional ninja was trained, however, a full time shinobi would be considered to be the elite in the world of the ninja and a far cry from the local person who when given money to disclose information, was surprisingly also called a shinobi.

#### THE HIERARCHY OF THE NINJA

Due to a 20<sup>th</sup> century mistranslation it is commonly misunderstood that the ninja held a three tiered hierarchical system,

the *jo-nin*, *chu-nin* and *ge-nin* or high, middle and low ninja, in reality this system did not exist and there was no social hierarchy connected with ninjutsu, a person's social status in ancient Japan was derived from either blood, family connections or martial dominance, we must not therefore confuse social status with achievement, historical evidence has shown that some shinobi were better than others and were recognised for it.

#### HIGH AND LOW LEVEL NINJA

It must be stated that, even in Japan this concept is still being debated, as the only known historical references for this confirmation of ability comes from a ninjutsu manual called the *Bansenshukai* (1676) and the *Taheiki* chronicle.

上忍 or 上ノ忍 "jonin" or "jo no shinobi" – Great or high levelled shinobi

上手ノ忍者 "jozu no ninja" - good ninja

上巧ノ忍者 "joko no ninja" - skilful ninja

四達ノ忍者 "shitatsu no ninja" - excellent ninja

中吉ノ忍者 "chukichi no ninja" - ninja of the middle level

庸忍 "yonin" - ordinary ninja

中分ノ忍者 "chubun no ninja" - ninja of the middle level

中下ノ忍者 "chu ge no ninja" - ninja of the middle or lower level

中下ノ庸忍 "chu ge no yonin" - ordinary ninja of the middle or lower level

下人 "Genin" - the lower class people

陰忍ノ上手 "in-nin no jozu" - skilful performers of night infiltration

忍ノ上手 "shinobi no jozu" - skilful shinobi

As one can see the descriptions are not standardised and generally they tend to describe the ability of the ninja and not his social level, this then leads to the question of the categorisation of the ninja, did they themselves see the ninja as having separate subdivisions within the ninja networks, which brings us to Sun Tzu's *Five Types of Spy*.

#### GOKAN - THE FIVE TYPES OF SPY

Influenced by ancient Chinese classics the shinobi adopted the 5 types of spy and made use of the system, which they added to their own understandings, the kanji or ideogram used here is "kan" and means spy, there are slight connotations of difference between ninja and spy, however in essence they are part of the same category and a shinobi was without doubt at times a kan or spy.

Inkō no kan - Local Spies

Their purpose is to gather information and to achieve their goals by utilizing local dialects.

Nairyō no kan - Inward Spies

This refers to the method of secretly tempting/bribing an enemy retainer or someone who is close to the enemy and utilizing them for the ninja's own benefit.



### Hantoku no kan - Converted Spies

This refers to getting hold of the enemy's shinobi and then converting them, this was so they could be used for your own purposes and with their co-operation a ninja would be able to either obtain information or feed misinformation back to the enemy.

### Shichō no kan -Doomed Spies

This was a spy who was expendable and was normally only used once.

### Tensei no kan - Surviving Spies

This refers to the spies who were recognised as being highly skilled at espionage; therefore it was beneficial for them to survive, being able to continue to perform as field agents.

This above section does not cover all of the ninja; it was predominantly used by the ninja when they were actively employed as spies.

## A NINJA TIMELINE

The ninja, either described as such or under one of their alternative names have existed for hundreds of years in Japan, but it must be understood that the label of ninja did not always represent the same image at all times, remember that as time went by the outlining requirements of the shinobi changed and their skill sets altered to fit the requirements of the social context they were in.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE NINJA

The original origin of the ninja is lost to history and without any further findings to help establish its start, it must at this moment in time be left as unanswered, one of the reasons that it is a matter of such difficulty is due to the slight nuances of difference between shinobi and kancho. The word shinobi does not seem to have been adopted until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and many people connect kancho and shinobi together, however at other times they appear to be separate entities, therefore, as we can trace the word kancho or Ukami back further, (translates as those *who peep*), we know that spies have

existed since before the concept of shinobi, however the question of when did the shinobi first appear may never be answered.

## THE NINJA DARK AGES

*The Ninja Dark Ages* was a time that we know that the shinobi were active and it is without doubt that the concept of the shinobi as a person exhibiting and maintaining the skills of ninjutsu were known to the people of Japan. This time period would fall loosely between the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the Sengoku period - 1603 within this time frame the shinobi are mentioned many times and are recorded in the public records, this then shows that the people of Japan knew and understood the term shinobi or ninja.

## THE AGE OF THE WARRING STATES

The Sengoku period comes under the above category and is considered the *Golden Age of Ninjutsu*; this is because during that time the skills and crafts of the ninja were being utilized more than ever. A better understanding of the ninja has been made possible because of the writings of soldiers from the warring period, who in their later life described or commented on the skills of the shinobi, because of their writing that they have left we can determine that the skills of the ninja at this point in history concentrated on scouting, espionage, explosives, infiltration and arson.

## THE EDO PERIOD

The Edo period (1603-1868) is itself a problematic period (division can be a modern concept); a samurai at the start of the Edo period could be considered totally different to a samurai at the end of the Edo period. With the coming of peace many shinobi found themselves both unneeded and without employment, for the fortunate few who were landed samurai they would have been able to stay with their families living off their estates, however it is recorded that a selection of ninja found employment as castle guards, some being stationed at Edo castle, what is not so well known was the fate of the rest of Japan's shinobi, many tales tell of rouge shinobi bandits, but a more realistic theory is that the

professional ninja, who realising that most of his skills were no longer required or even needed and being without work or land would most likely have become involved in the medicine or firework trades, unfortunately because of this some of the skills they knew were simply not passed down and as time and the generations passed many of the old family ninja skills would simply fade, either way the onset of peace certainly heralded the demise of the ninja.

## THE BASIC EQUIPMENT

### The 6 Basic Tools

The ninja had 6 primary tools which were considered to cover the basic requirements needed to perform many ninjutsu tasks, these tools are listed within the ninja manual *Shoninki* of 1681.

1. The deep and wide straw hat called the *Amigasa* 編笠
2. The grappling hook known as a *Kaginawa* 鉤縄
3. A stone pencil called a *Sekihitsu* 石筆
4. Field medicine called *Kusuri* 薬
5. A 90cm piece of cloth called a *Sanjaku tenugui* 三尺手拭
6. A fire starting implement called an *Uchitake* 打竹

A shinobi at times would wear the *Amigasa* hat, the reason being that this type of deep braided hat covered their faces, helping to keep their identity unknown, it was also a very commonly worn hat that was used throughout all of Japan, wearing this type of headwear made it easier for any shinobi to travel or to blend into the background of any crowd, the grappling hook that he carried would help him to scale the sides of buildings and over walls, there he could use his stone pencil to record the layout of a place or use it to record the number of men stationed in a complex as well as any

other information that his lord may require, if the ninja was to become ill on his mission he may have to use the “worm-killer” medicine as in feudal Japan, it was thought that worms were the cause of all stomach illnesses, to add to this a shinobi may have needed the use of his 90cm section of cloth, which would normally be kept around his waist or folded away in his kimono jacket, this could be used as extra rope or to cover his face, lastly they used the *Uchitake* fire starter, this would be used to start camp fires, light hand grenades, or to commit arson.

### TORCHES

A ninja when meeting or just seeing another person could tell if that other person was also a ninja simply by the way his torch burned, this was attributed to the fact that the shinobi had multiple ways of constructing travel torches, examples can be found of torches that were used for most situations from hand held distance running torches to braziers to flames in the palm which would ignite when the hand was opened, alongside this we see examples of torches that used pine resin which could be separated and passed around to be used as smaller light sources, there were even versions that were water and wind proof, all in all the ninja was a master at constructing portable fires and they considered the art of torch construction to be of a high priority.

### BLACK POWDER & FIRE

It could be said that these are the core elements in ninjutsu, black powder is a mixture of charcoal, potassium nitrate and sulphur and is used in both conventional fireworks and explosives, the shinobi used this black powder to create a varied number of tools and weapons, from landmines and hand grenades to explosive rockets and long distance burning lights, black powder was at the centre of the ninja’s ingenuity and was a staple element of their skills. Fire was also of primary concern; it is highlighted across the manuals that a shinobi should always “carry fire with him”, this could be in the form of a flint and steel or in the more elaborate method of conserving smouldering vegetation to be used at the next

destination, the key issue here is that a shinobi should never be without fire and this is representative of the ninja need to cause arson and damage, further to this the ninja was required to have a good grounding in the construction and maintenance of defensive fires and to be able to construct long burning watch fires, as well as knowing how to evade them.

#### BREAKING & ENTERING TOOLS

A ninja was most certainly a spy, and he would have needed the abilities of a burglar/thief, he would also have to be skilled at infiltrating enemy complexes and rooms, to aid him in this skill the shinobi had a series of tools that allowed him to enter traditional Japanese structures, with castle walls the ninja would use a simple saw to open gun ports allowing him to gain entry, from there he would use other kinds of saws to open holes in the buildings and lattice work, a drill would be used to open small holes allowing him to peer inside, with his array of tools he could even lock doors, thus stopping any watch leaving the guard room or someone from a neighbouring building discovering his presence, if a warehouse was latched from the inside, the shinobi had a set of hooked keys that were used to probe the inside and unlock the door, even the basic crow bar along with a hammer and chisel were part of the tool kit and were considered essential for gaining entrance to restricted areas.

#### THE ROLES OF THE SHINOBI

Across the years the ninja have taken on many different roles, the requirements needed of them would change depending on the situation at the time, this does not mean however that a ninja was limited to only one role, the shinobi have always played an important part in the history of Japanese warfare, be it from scout to military tactician.

#### THE MERCENARY AND NINJA FOR HIRE

The popular image is of the ninja is of a hired agent, while this can true it is not consistent in all periods and situations, if one

considers the author of the Shoninki ninja manual to be a ninja, then he was in the employ of the Tokugawa family as were many other ninja figures, however, the ninja as a mercenary is by far the greatest picture we have of how the ninja applied their skills, it is relatively unknown to what extent the shinobi were hired out, but it is a fact that they were hired. In 1789 three displaced samurai tried to gain employment through the Edo magistrate but were refuted, this episode will be discussed in more depth later in this introduction to the ninja, however what is understood is that because of the lack of war the flow of employment to the shinobi had come to an end, this forced some of the Koka “ninja families” to cease their shinobi training, this combined with the factor that the provinces of Iga and Koka were no longer under the direct control of these “ninja families” shows that these clans had a certain amount of reliance on mercenary work.

What is commonly not understood about the Japanese warrior culture is that in times of war mercenary bands would be hired by different warlords, this means that mercenary movement was more prolific than we once believed, because of this a system of passwords and identifying marks had to be established, this was to help stop any shinobi agents infiltrating armies for the purpose of information gathering, while this does not clarify if the infiltrating shinobi was a loyal retainer or mercenary, it clearly shows the nature and level of mercenary action at that time, also it was not unknown for the families of the hired shinobi agent to be taken as hostages by the very person who had hired the shinobi agent, this was to ensure the loyalty of the hired shinobi, displaying how the shinobi could have shifting loyalties. Lastly, historic writings from the “samurai perspective” show a distrust of the shinobi and the information that they held, as it was not uncommon for a ninja to give away information to other shinobi about their own side, leading to the understanding that there was a mercenary relationship.

#### THE LEADER IN THE NIGHT

One of the most unlikely relationships to come from historical records is that between the ninja and other troops. Samurai

warfare was not quite so “Homeric” as we perceive, especially towards the end of the warring periods when there was a tradition of sneak attacks and surprise night raids, because of his skills it was the job of the shinobi to lead groups of warriors from their battle camp to the enemy lines and to take charge of the night raids, it was also their responsibility to plan and conduct retreats, according to the Shoninki manual, the name Yato 夜頭 means “leader in the night” and reflects this position however, later on the name Yato changed to 夜盜 meaning “thief in the night” which reflects a shift in attitude due to the end of the wars and the changing use of the shinobi.

#### THE LOYAL RETAINER

To understand if the ninja was ever a loyal retainer, we have to establish the fact that the warrior culture during the warring periods and before was not as straight forward as the four tiered and rigid system of the Edo period, the “samurai” or varying levels of warrior in the warrior culture meant that some people acted as mercenaries while others had varying levels of devotion of servitude; therefore, some of the samurai in the employ of warlords as permanent retainers will have understood ninjutsu and would in our understanding be ninja. The Japanese warrior Fuma Kotaro is a prime example, he is known due to the Hojo Godaiki document which is a semi-fictionally embellished account of the Hojo clan, whether Fuma was a real person or not is unproven, however what is certain is that he is attributed with having an annual salary in exchange for leading a gang of Rappa (shinobi) with the task of clearing the Hojo domain of thieves and brigands, also it is stated that the author of the Shoninki is considered the grandmaster of the Natori Ryu School, which contained his ninjutsu style thus making him by definition a shinobi under permanent contract. It must be stated that he was hired as a squire and entourage and known as a master of a school of military science, so it is logical to assume that his shinobi skills were not unused or unknown to his lord, other examples exist, however, it is enough to understand that some ninja



were classed as loyal retainers and that not all shinobi were hired mercenaries.

#### THE THIEF AND THIEF CATCHER

One theme that continually crops up within the shinobi manuals and documents is the concept of the ninja as a tracker or thief catcher, in all correctness the term used is “criminal” which is best translated as target, the shinobi were used to hunt down wanted men and those deemed to be considered dangerous enough to be pursued by the clan, this brings into usage the three main forms of “criminal catching rakes” or special pole arms designed to ensnare those who you wish to apprehend, interestingly the author of the *Bansenshukai* manual hints at his disapproval of the ninja being used for such a task, presuming believing that the shinobi were above this chore.

The ninja as a thief is one as old as any and is as close to the truth as any other image, an old form of ideogram used for shinobi translates as thief-stealer 竊盜 and shows that the concept of a ninja as a burglar stretches back to at least to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, predominantly the ninja was an *intelligence thief* and information trafficker, feeding his commander with battle information and intelligence about the opposition. In his manual, Natori Masatake states that the *Nusubito* (thief) and shinobi are the same in skill, the only difference being in motivation, the shinobi were also required to damage any weaponry or targets with the aim of hampering the efforts of the opposition by “stealing in” to carry out this destruction, overall in one way or another the ninja must be seen as a thief, a label that would earn mistrust and the connection of dishonesty and banditry that they later become associated with.

#### THE SCOUT

One role that the shinobi were highly active in was the role of army scout, the ninja would often be sent out to lead an army on

the march or to investigate the lay of the land, martial poems of the times say that a ninja (who without delay) should map out the rivers and mountains and return with the information and give it to the tactician.

When two armies' battle camps were lined up opposite each other, there could be quite a distance between the two opposing forces, it would then be the job of the shinobi to "haunt" those areas, either to attack sections of the enemies battle camp or to defend their own against any enemy who may try to infiltrate or attack, the war chronicler Matsuda Ichiraku Nyudo Hideto writes that Komatsu Castle, the castle of Niwa Nagashige was being scouted by a commander from the army of Maeda Toshinaga and so in response the castle inhabitants sent out shinobi to intercept them.

Further to being a field scout the shinobi was the agent that would scout out enemy fortifications, interestingly most of the evidence for this comes from the defensive measures that were used to counter act this, there exists the skill of *Kamaritsuke* or "detection skills of the ninja" this was a thorough investigation of the castle or battle camp, the regular guards would make their usual rounds followed by people trained in these search methods, the aim was to search all areas of the castle and its groups looking for any enemy ninja, to add to this form of defence an elaborate system of passwords and identification marks were set up to catch any enemy ninja from gaining entrance through disguise, this led to the requirement of shinobi or shinobi trained soldiers helping to secure and guard castles.

#### THE CASTLE GUARD

The shinobi took an active role in guarding castles, but it is unknown to what extent this happened, or if the regular guards themselves were simply taught some elements of ninjutsu, however, a fact recorded within some manuals is that a number of castle guards were taught to understand some of the basic tricks that the shinobi would use to create misdirection, this included such things as placing objects outside of doors or creating a noise just to see how the guards themselves would react. Having the special search skill known as *Kamaritsuke*, "the detection methods of the ninja

(Kamari)” these shinobi trained guards would search every inch of the castle, from the darkest corners to the lowest drains, searching for any ninja who may try to infiltrate, strangely, one technique used by the shinobi to test the guards reactions was to play a musical instrument or to sound some drums this was to establish if the guards were alert and on form, if it was the case that the guards were “on form” the probing shinobi would simply retreat and wait until a time that was better suited, another place you would find the ninja when not trying to infiltrate or guard castles was with an army and on the march.

#### SHINOBI GROUPS WITHIN AN ARMY

One fascinating subject the historical records have left us is the fact that the ninja were used as army squads and were termed as *shinobi no shu* 竊盜衆 or shinobi troops, we can reconstruct the tasks the shinobi were given by cross referencing public records and contemporary documentation, all of which lead to the common conclusion that the ninja were used as scouts, infiltration agents/ arsonists and commando groups, when “on the march” the army lists of the time tell us that for every 4,000 soldiers within that group the ninja would number around 20 and that they were a distinct and separate group, it is unknown if these were mercenaries or salaried members of a clan, however, logically and as stated previously each situation would be an independent issue with the mercenary taking prominence. An interesting factor here is that the shinobi troops do not appear not to be in disguise nor do they appear to be hidden, accounts from the warring states period show that those people trained in *shinobi no jutsu* or the arts of the ninja were known to their comrades, however, in sharp contrast the post war shinobi were kept a clan secret, this does not mean that in the warring states period no shinobi were a secret commodity, it simply reflects the acceptance of them as part of an army on the march.

The roles of the shinobi, as highlighted above were varied and vast, and differed much during their history, however the archetypal shinobi or the ninja common to our image and

understanding, is that of the infiltration unit, the secret agent of the Japanese Middle Ages.

#### IN-NIN & YO-NIN

*In* & *Yo* are the Japanese equivalent of the Chinese *Yin* & *Yang* and hold all the same philosophies, In-nin and Yo-nin are the basic and fundamental division in ninjutsu as all aspects of the ninja arts can be placed in either one of these categories, on a basic level, In-nin is the art of dark ninjutsu or to infiltrate the enemy lines without being seen while Yo-nin can be summed up by all the arts used by the ninja to infiltrate an enemy position while being in disguise, this means that the ninja adopted two differing tactics, one was the night time infiltration unit and the other was a travelling undercover agent.

#### THE UNDERCOVER AGENT

Yo-nin as described is the practice of infiltrating the enemy lines in the open and doing this by adopting a disguise and travelling incognito, this was done by adopting certain identities which helped with ease of travel and which became formalised as the 7 ninja disguises.

The seven basic disguises of the ninja are a set of 7 identities that the shinobi will use to move around the cities and highways of Japan, disguises that allowed them to go by virtually unnoticed and unquestioned, there are also variants on these 7 depending on the sources used, the following 7 are taken from the Natori's Shoninki. The Ninpiden manual is less formalised and simply suggests certain disguises, which include a monkey trainer or samurai.

1. *Komusō Zen monks.*
2. *Shukke monks.*
3. *Yamabushi mountain priests.*
4. *A Merchant.*
5. *Hōkashi street entertainers.*

*6.Sarugaku theatre performers.*

*7.Tune no katachi or street clothes.*

It must be mentioned that this list is not exhaustive and represents only the most popular disguises adopted by the shinobi, the historical manuals do warn that ingenuity is at the top of a shinobi's needs.

#### THE NIGHT TIME INFILTRATOR

The art of In-nin or night time infiltration, is just one of the arts of the ninja, it may have consisted of having to trek across vast wildernesses and scale mountain ranges just so as to be able to infiltrate the enemies lines, then having to cross moats, steal into castles all to perform certain set tasks, be it espionage, thievery, confusion, damage, arson or just intelligence gathering, on these missions a ninja may have had to undertake these endeavours alone or at other times as part of a team, while it cannot be determined to what percentage of the ninja's time was spent operating in such a way it can be logically concluded that In-nin was largely required in the periods before the era of peace. It is because of these exploits that we have our modern day view of the ninja and it has helped promote their phenomenal fame, this has drawn generation after generation to marvel at their feats.

We can see the reality of In-nin from the following historical documentation:

Tamon-in nikki:

“The Iga Group (ninja) entered Kasagi castle in secret and set fire to a few of the priest's quarters.”

The Ou Eikyo Gunki chronicle:

“Within Hataya Castle was a person with renowned shinobi skills and that night he entered secretly into the enemy camp”

The Iranki war chronicle:

“In addition to this from the skilled men of Iga, twenty men who had mastered shinobi no jutsu set fire to various places outside the castle” (still under guard).

The reality of these skills would have been tremendous, as an In-nin agent would have perhaps had to cross a moat, scale the castle foundations, conquer the heights of the palisades and then breach the actual castle with its complex of buildings all the while remaining undetected, these tasks would sometimes be performed by an individual and at other times by teams, the sheer ability to perform these tasks alone sets the standards and reinforces our respect for the medieval ninja, from historical sources we do know that when the ninja were sent to prepare or weaken a castle for an external assault, before they left for their mission they would be given a password and a symbol, the assaulting force would be informed of this, then when the assault was taking place the shinobi who had infiltrated the castle could hide so as to not be killed by their own side, if they did need to escape and return to their own camp then they would use both the password and symbol to pass the frontline with safety.

The *Bansenshukai* of 1676 lists by name those who were considered true masters of the art of infiltration and In-nin.

- 1.Nomura no Odaki Magodayu
- 2.Shindo no Kotaro
- 3.Tateoka no Dojun (Or Igasaki)
- 4.Shimotsuge no Kizaru (Or Taro)
- 5.Kozaru (Hachiro)
- 6.Ueno no Sakoba Saemon (Or Shiro)
- 7.Yamada no Yemon (Or Seto)
- 8.Kambe no Konan
- 9.Otowa no Kido
- 10.Kabutoyama Taroshiro
- 11.Kabutoyama Tarosaemon

In the Edo period of peace, In-nin seems to have concentrated on infiltrating manor houses or house complexes and

sometimes appears to be mixed with Yo-nin, an example is as follows; a pair of disguised shinobi will argue outside of a house gate while a third waits nearby, when the occupants of the house come to see what the commotion is the third shinobi sneaks inside and opens some of the window locks and sees what the arrangement of the rooms is like, then quickly exits, later when all is quiet the three will “steal in” and go about their business.

It is unknown to what extent a ninja would divide his skills between In-nin and Yo-nin, some shinobi may have only operated in one, while some may have been skilled in both branches.

### THE THREE MAJOR TEXTS

#### THE BANSENSHUKAI

The *Bansenshukai* or *The Myriad or Rivers Joining One Ocean* was written in 1676 by a man called Fujibayashi, it is a self-professed collection of information collected from other ninja manuals with the aim of concentrating the wealth of ninjutsu knowledge into one area for prosperity and recording, it is considered the largest and most concentrated information on the arts of ninjutsu and covers a vast amount of subjects.

#### THE NINPIDEN OR SHINOBI HIDEN

The *Ninpiden* or *Shinobihiden* means *The Secret Ninja Tradition* and is thought to be written in 1560 and is considered to be written by Hattori Hanzo I, however there is confusion to the original date as it is constructed of four parts, the first of which appears to be written later, this entire document was later transcribed in or around 1731, however, this manuscript deals heavily with the tools used by the shinobi and gives explanations of hidden skills and techniques for hiding and assaulting castles.

#### THE SHONINKI

The *Shoninki* or *True Ninja Account* was written in 1681 by Natori Masatake who was a samurai of the Kishu Domain. As the

head of the family Ryu or school, Natori wrote this now famous manuscript which was kept secret for generations, the contents differ slightly from the other major manuals and deal primarily with the espionage elements of ninjutsu, such as; infiltration, information gathering, criminal capturing, the psychology of lying and travelling undercover, alongside this the manual also deals with esoteric practices such as ritual magic and physiognomy.

#### OTHER TEXTS

There are scores of other ninjutsu manuals which claim to teach historical ninjutsu and some which have more claim than the above examples, however the world of ninja manuscripts is fraught with embellishments and forgeries and strangely it hides its truest gems within other works, there are many fine examples of the use of ninjutsu and its teachings held within ordinary military manuals of the time and show us true glimpses of the skill sets of the shinobi.

#### ADVANCED NINJA TOOLS

The ninja were ingenious in their construction of the tools and implements needed to conduct their activities, it must be qualified that the ninja normally constructed “tools” for specific jobs and that the “weapons” they created were explosive or outside that of hand to hand combat.

##### The Hand Grenade

This explosive weapon was constructed from thin earthenware and packed with gunpowder and shrapnel, its fuse construction is unknown; however it was to be thrown into crowds of people or guards, effectively making it comparable to the modern nail bomb.

##### The Fire Arrow

Similar to those used in China, this was a bamboo shaft that held a cylinder which contained gunpowder, once fired the arrow would rocket its way into a castle and start fires.



### Coloured Rice

When in teams and scouting the mountains, the ninja would leave signs and signals in coloured rice, each team member would be allotted a colour and they would work out an independent system of signals to help keep their communications secret.

### The Gripping Rake

By taking a grapple on a rope and fitting sections of bamboo spaced with coins, the shinobi would have a tool where he could pull on the loose rope and create a rigid pole; this was to help reach hand holds above.

### Rafts

The shinobi had various rafts that they used to float downstream; this meant that they could use the rivers as a means of transport.

### Ladders

The ninja had a wide selection of climbing ladders, from folding to extendable and from hooked to dismantling; each of the ladders would help the ninja gain infiltration in various situations.

### Listening Devices

Listening to conversations was a primary requirement for the ninja, be it in a conversation or while infiltrating, the ninja would construct aids to help the sound resonate and so that they could catch the vibrations.

### Palm Flaring Fire

A secret method of illumination was to have a flammable compound in their hands that would flare up upon their hands opening, sometimes used to see if there were any people asleep within a room.

### The Caltrop Train

Contrary to popular belief the shinobi did not just throw caltrops in any direction, the ninja would sometimes tie caltrops to a string and trail it behind them, if they did need to scatter caltrops they would first try to identify from which direction they were most likely to be chased from.

### The False Wall

One shinobi method was to construct a false wall on a mountainside using the natural outline of a fortification, the ninja would support this wall with guide lines which would take its weight, when the enemy were climbing the wall the lines would have been cut and the enemy would fall to their destruction.

### False Reeds

To create a false sense of depth to a river, the ninja would construct bundles of reeds which would be tied together and then attached to a line with either a weight or a stone, the aim was to securely anchor the reeds in place, even if the water was deep with enough reeds the river would look shallow and the mounted samurai would wade in to their destruction or they would waste valuable time trying to find other routes.

### THE PARADOX OF THE NINJA SUIT

The ninja “suit” or “uniform” is alien to a western audience, however when reflected upon, the ninja “outfit” as known to the modern media is in fact a historically accurate section of medieval Japanese dress, therefore what we would consider as the ninja “get up” would just be normal clothes for a Japanese individual of that time. The issue at hand is not, *did the ninja uniform exist*, as that was impossible, the ninja “suit” is a reflection of the times, the question here is, *was the ninja suit black and did it have the iconic mask?* the answer is both yes and no, black was favoured by the shinobi but only because of its popularity, just as was dark red, dark blue and brown, the iconic mask was also a popular piece of Japanese culture and had various incarnations, it was not a “ninja mask” but just a

face covering used to hide the identity of any individuals who did not wish to be known, this phenomenon was so popular the *shogunate* tried to ban these masks, but without success.

The Fukumenzukin – Face Covered Hood



The Kidokuzukin – Strange or Free Hood



Taking all factors into account, the ninja did wear what we consider to be the ninja “uniform”, however, when placed into historical context it was not out of the ordinary and should be considered as normal everyday Japanese dress, the main element that made a shinobi stand out was not, his “costume” but the fact that he was infiltrating a restricted area.

## WHAT DO THE SCROLLS TELL US ABOUT WHAT HOW THE NINJA DRESSED?

Interestingly the ninja scrolls do inform trainee ninjas of what colours they should wear and the outfits that they should adopt, the Shoninki manual states that a ninja should wear brown, dark red or *Numerigaki*, black, or navy blue as these were common colours and would enable the shinobi to blend/disappear in the general public, another reference to colour comes from a collection of *Tanka* poetry which states that, when the moon is full a shinobi should wear white and when there is no moon he should wear black, further to this the Shoninki also states that a ninja needed to travel in fur as it is normal that he should remain in the mountains and be lacking in shelter.

This means that our modern-day image of the ninja is a high probability; however it is not a static “uniform” but simply historical clothes which could vary in colour with the possibility that the ninja may have hide his face on occasions.

## NINJA V SAMURAI THE MYTH

When trying to understand the social position of the ninja you must first look at the historical period that is under investigation, before the consolidation of Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate the concept of social class was of a transient nature and any man with an incline could join the warrior class and work his way into a position of acceptance and respect. Equally one did not need to remain part of the warrior class as a warrior, if he so wished could give up the life of the sword, this means that the stigma of the rigid Edo period class system was not an issue and the concept of the samurai versus the other classes was not so apparent.

The second factor to consider about social positioning of the ninja is that a ninja is in essence a man who does ninjutsu as a job or who performs ninjutsu skills at a given time. A lawyer is in essence a

lawyer he still has an identity and a social status yet to some he is named as “lawyer” while to others he is personally identified, the same is used for the shinobi, the warrior class of the Sengoku period or warring states was stratified and the ninja, when performing ninjutsu was a part of that stratification and was in essence of the samurai or warrior class, this also means that a samurai by social classification became a ninja when he was performing ninjutsu. The Go Fundo-ki manuscript highlights this point well:

*“As the castle is built upon a formidable precipice we will be condemning many of our allies to suffer great losses. But by good fortune there are among the go-hatamoto (close retainers) some men associated with the Koka-shu of Omi province. Summon the Koka people through their compatriots and then they can sneak into the castle”*

The people of Koka were famed for their ninjutsu skills and the fact that they were samurai did not interfere with their ability to be used as ninja, to add to this some of the most famous ninja were in point of fact from the samurai class. The Hattori line were samurai as was Natori the author of the Shoninki, the Fujibayashi family of the Bansenshukai, even more so were the major families that made up the union of the Iga and Koka clans they were Jizamurai or landed gentry. However, while the shinobi were of the warrior class we must remember that the warrior class was not a domain of equality, often we can identify the ninja by another name, that of the ninpei, or shinobi soldiers, this ranking has been recorded and has connotations of lower class soldiers which were lower than that of “common” samurai status. Therefore, the concept of the ninja in juxtaposition to the samurai was an impossibility, as a ninja was a warrior who performed the skills associated with ninjutsu be it samurai or not.

#### THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NINJA HOMELAND

As the origins of the ninja are shrouded in mystery and a lot of their secrets hidden, it is difficult to pinpoint a historical

homeland or point of origin, however in the study of the ninja, be it a modern or an ancient investigation one name comes above all as the heart of the ninja and that is Iga, this is an area within a mountain range in the modern prefecture of Mie and is considered to be the centre of shinobi activity and to have produced the greatest shinobi, however this mountain “paradise” peaked in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and the ninja “back” was broken.

#### THE NINJA HOMELAND – IGA & KOKA

While Iga is considered by both contemporaries and modern scholars as being the centre of ninjutsu you must not fall into the trap of thinking that this area was the only one, adjacent to this area are the lands of Koka (commonly and wrongly spelt as Koga), Kishu and Kawachi, these are places that have strong connections to the ninja and share in its history, even though these areas were independent of each other they were not estranged from one another and shared bonds, we also know that the ninja of Koka and Iga shared information as well as secrets, they even worked alongside each other on many occasions, evidence of this can be found in manuals that were written and co-authored by shinobi of both the Iga and Koka, the fact that Koka ninja applied for positions using the Bansenshukai ninja manual which was of Iga and a shared pact called the *Ichigun Ichimi* 一郡一味, the friendship oath of ‘one district and one band’. This ninja “heartland” was allowed to prosper as it was not subject to external rule, the mountains of Koka and Iga held a system of clans and families which bonded together to form an alliance to hold off the Japanese government and its forces and allowed them autonomy which relinquished any taxation duty. This self governing system was the “ninja hotspot” and the people of Iga and Koka honed their ninjutsu skills and were subsequently hired as “commando squads” and military specialists throughout all of Japan. But this self governing system could not be tolerated indefinitely and for the warlord Oda Nobunaga to realise his dream of a unified Japan Iga, among others would have to fall.

## THE INVASION OF IGA

In the late 1500's the son of Oda Nobunaga, Oda Nobuo attacked the mountain strongholds of Iga but failed in his bid to take the area, it was only when his father Oda Nobunaga himself with a force of 40,000 men invaded the area in a war that is now called *Tensho Iga no Ran* that the area fell and the landed Samurai of Iga lost their positions, their fortresses were displaced and to be ruled by others, interestingly it was men of Koka who led Nobunaga's men, guiding them through the mountains and towards the now famous incident, from that point on the ninja homeland was never again self-governed and the power of the Iga and Koka families died, but this led to the unification of Japan.

## THE TOKAGAWA ERA AND THE DECLINE OF THE NINJA.

The fall of Iga and Koka displaced the ji-zamuraï warrior families of that area and left the shinobi without a major station or centre of power, this combined with a new era of peace saw the end of the ninja position and a decline in the demand for his skills. While this did signal the end of the ninja as a profession their decline was not so rapid, the start of the Edo period brought about the need for the ninja to codify their skills and start recording their knowledge in the manuals we have been left, while the ninja as a battlefield agent was needed at the rebellion at Osaka and in the Christian rebellion which took place in the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it can be said that their battlefield skills came to a grinding halt. The shinobi generally fall out of the historical records and are not recorded as being used as military units, the shinobi then continued to pass on their skills but the cost of training full shinobi became too expensive for these ninja families and we can see by an account in the Ohara document that the world of the shinobi was falling down around them as the foundations of peace grew stronger. In 1789 the Jisha Bugyo or magistrate of Edo, modern Tokyo had a visit from 3 representatives from the Ji-Zamuraï of Koka, they were Koka Koshi or old samurai of Koka and their names were; Ohara Kazuma, Ueno Hachizaemon (or Yazaemon) and Oki Moriichiro, they carried with

them the Bansenshukai ninja manual as proof of their shinobi skills and tried to gain employment and support for themselves, they also said that out of 21 koka families, 10 still were transmitting their techniques while 8 could not afford to do so and that 2 had died out completely, unfortunately the magistrate did not hire them but gave them a small gift of silver to take back with them. This episode shows that the ninja traditions at least in some form were being passed down through the families and for nearly two centuries after the need for the ninja had declined.

#### THE GUARDS OF EDO

As Edo became the capital and the Tokugawa family reigned supreme, a select group of shinobi which had been in the employ of the Tokugawa family took up positions at the gates at Edo Castle and worked as guards for the shogun, it is understood that the Hanzomon gate was guarded by groups from Iga and Koka under the direct command of the Hattori Hanzo of the Hattori family, alongside this, the Otomon gate was manned by 4 groups, 2 of which were of Iga and Koka and rotated with the other groups, each with 100 men. Later as the Shoguns came and went the Tokugawa clan of Kii came into succession and the shogun formed the Oniwaban, a form of secret police, the men of this force were taken from the shogun's homeland. Kii is the domain in which the Natori family served the Tokugawa family and it was Natori Masatake who wrote the ninja manual the Shoninki, we cannot conclude if the Oniwaban were shinobi or if the ninja manual was ever an influence on them, however they are considered to be shinobi by some or at least they are thought to have used *shinobi no jutsu* to perform their tasks.

#### DIRTY TRICKS & AMAZING FEATS

As the world of the ninja is one of massive misconceptions, misnomers and is filled with hurdles for any historical researcher it is best to finish this short introduction with a selection of their dirty tricks & amazing feats, doing this will allow you to understand the variety and flavour of the world of the shinobi and hopefully lead you into further research of this colossal and amazing area of study.



### Black Mist

The ninja used to use the crushed ash of the Kiri tree (*Paulownia*) which has a rather fine texture, at night they would hold this powder in a bag and gently throw it into the air spreading it around their person, the reason for this was to use the blackness of the powder against the blackness of the night, this would help disguise any outline they presented.

### The Landmine

The ninja developed a form of land mine which was constructed from split and flattened bamboo, this would be constructed in a box-like shape and would be packed with gunpowder and buried in the path of the enemy, the trigger mechanism was based on external pressure which would allow a match to hit the ignition powder, however the intricacies are still unknown.

### The Talk of Insects & Birds

The skill of *kuina onkyō* is the skill of imitating the sounds of birds and insects; if a shinobi was caught and held captive, he could still communicate with his fellow shinobi by mimicking these sounds, thus continuing to be able to transfer any information he had back to the shinobi group.

### Hiding of the Breath

When passing a sleeping person a shinobi would hold a piece of paper in his teeth, this helped to dampen or even stop the sound of his breathing.

### Physiognomy

It is known that the ninja placed some trust in the art of physiognomy, this is the art of understanding a person's character by their physical appearance.

### Hiding inside a Dog

A ninja would use the head and fur of a dog, either climbing inside the carcass or draping the skin over his shoulders, in this way when it was dark he may be mistaken for a dog or another animal.

### The Art of Emaciation

Some ninja would stop eating and starve themselves to the extreme; this was in order to actually change their physical appearance so they would not be easily recognised.

The ninja was a special breed of person, one who would be expected to undertake special tasks, the rulers of medieval Japan used them as commandos, scouts, thieves and information gatherers, the legends that have grown around these people have helped to create the modern image of the ninja, but through historical research we can now see how truly amazing the truth is behind the mask of the shinobi.