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Misconceptions About Ninjas

by Timothy Bull

(English 1101)

For decades, ninja products have been a solid franchise. There's something about a black cloaked assassin wielding a sword and throwing ninja stars that has always captivated people's interests. From their historical past, they have "continued into the 20th century as novels, films, television shows, and comics" ("Ninjutsu" 1093). But what if how ninjas truly dressed and preformed has been misrepresented? After doing some research, I became irritated at how different Hollywood ninjas were from historical ninjas. Hollywood got some aspects of them right, but they also got a lot wrong.

Perhaps the first difference that can be spotted between historical ninjas and Hollywood ninjas is their attire. Most Hollywood ninjas are dressed in black shoes, black pants, a black tunic, and a black fabric face covering. While historical ninjas would often train in similar garments to those black garments, they rarely wore them while carrying out their various assignments. One of the most valued traits of the historical ninja was to be able to blend in, which is something someone in a distinct black getup would have a hard time doing in a crowd. Historical ninjas instead dressed in a variety of outfits like those of civilians, a member of an order of monks called "komuso" (Bertrand 19), and a member of the enemy group they were about infiltrate. Each different disguise had its own advantages and disadvantages. Dressing as a civilian allowed the ninja to move through the streets with ease because no one would think twice about why he was there because he blended in. He could also carry pouches that could be used to store a variety of small tools. The disadvantage of this outfit is that it offered little to no defensive armor. Dressing as a komuso allowed the ninja to hide his face because the komuso habit required a wicker basket-like hat be worn, hiding almost his entire face, while still allowing him to see. He could also walk right into most places without raising much suspicion because real komuso monks traveled frequently (Bertrand 19). Dressing as the people you're infiltrating would also sometime allow the ninja to carry larger weaponry without raising suspicion, but this was conditional on the enemy carrying around similar weaponry. One account of a group of ninjas dressing as the enemy led the enemies they had infiltrated to draw the conclusion that "traitors from their own garrison had attacked them" (Zoughari 44) because they could not distinguish the ninjas from their own men. While no disguise was perfect, each was adequate at being able to "deceive the enemy and avoid detection" ("Ninjutsu" 1092), traits highly prioritized by ninjas.

One of the misconceptions about historical ninjas that I find to be particularly bothersome is the Hollywood ninja's usage of shuriken, more commonly known as ninja stars. In many fictional fight scenes with ninjas, at some point the ninja will throw several shuriken at several enemies which kills them instantly. In real life, "shuriken were not designed—nor could they usually be thrown hard or accurately enough—to kill a man" (Bertrand 19). Historical ninjas would usually use them to divert attention to somewhere else. This gave the ninja a valuable head start in his getaway, or distract the enemy so he could be an easier kill by the sword (Bertrand 19). Furthermore, historical ninjas would indeed sometimes use shuriken as weapons. When they did, they would ensure that they threw ones that they had pre-dipped in deadly poison. This would guarantee a kill even if it didn't hit a vital part of the human body, such as the throat, and instead only hit the enemy's arm or leg.

Aside from shuriken, historical ninjas had another tool that they regularly used to help escape that very few films or merchandise include; tacks. Or as the ninjas themselves called them,

“makibishi.” Makibishi are small pieces of metal shaped like either a star or a triangle that had a sharp point on each end that historical ninjas used to “hinder pursuit” (Bertrand 12) by tossing them on the ground behind them as they were being chased. Because the most common material for footwear in those days were straw, makibishi worked remarkably well, as they would penetrate both the straw and the flesh with ease when they were stepped on.

As you may know, breaking in and out of castles is more than raw talent or excessive training, it also requires tools designed to help that almost no movies take the time to include. Some of the most used tools were metal claws, which could not only be used to effectively scale stone walls, but also doubled as a weapon in hand-to-hand combat (Bertrand 12). A form of lockpicking tool known as “kurorokagi,” which could be used to open many locked doors in that era (“Ninjutsu” 1092). They also would sometimes use a “mizugumo,” which was a special type of flotation device used for crossing ponds or castle moats that could be folded for compact storage on the ninja’s body. Among the tools to help break in, ninjas would usually also carry several different tools to help them spy on people in a room, without actually having to go into the room. The two most common tools were “a simple listening device made out of a metal tube that could be used to eavesdrop through walls” (Bertrand 12) and a “tsubogiri,” which was another metal tool that could be used to scrape a small hole into a wall (Encyclopedia 1092) so the ninja could both listen in on conversation easier and see what was going on in the room. This was very useful because it was generally much safer than going into the room and hiding. In addition, ninjas also often carried a compact folding saw that was advanced for its time. To this day rescue personnel use saws that are similar in design because they are so efficient (Bertrand 12).

Not so surprisingly, it doesn’t stop at a variety of tools few movies touch upon. A ninjas house was also specially designed to give the ninja that lived there an advantage in the case of an intruder. To start, their homes often included “floorboards that were specifically designed to squeak when stepped on” (Bertrand 12) which alerted the ninja if an unwanted guest entered his domain. He would also install “Fake walls and trap doors [which] provided him with places to set ambushes, hide, make an escape or conceal weapons” (Bertrand 12). All of which could be used to gain the upper hand in a fight.

Hollywood ninjas are seemingly magnetized to fighting. If there’s anyone the ninja classifies as an enemy, or even a potential threat, he’ll spring right into action doing either gravity-defying stunts or simply eliminate them with a slash of their katana. Once again, historical ninjas had a more practical outlook on their work. Historical ninjas don’t partake in “attacking men or taking life without reason,” (Zoughari 23), but that doesn’t mean they didn’t know how to fight. Historical ninjas were, in fact, quite lethal fighters both with and without a weapon. The reason isn’t purely because of their endless hours of training, but also because of the specific fighting style they used called “Ninjutsu.” “Ninjutsu” was a fighting style that evolved as time progressed (Zoughari 9), unlike most other martial arts that changed little to none since first created. While still teaching how to disable and kill the common man, “Ninjutsu” focused on adapting to finding and exploiting appropriate counters to whoever was Japan’s greatest threat or enemy at the present time (Zoughari 23). In order to achieve this, historical ninjas had to use many other weapons aside from the katana. The most common alternative was the “*shinobi-gama*, a sickle with a chain attached,” (Bertrand 19) which was used for “binding and killing one’s opponent” (“Ninjutsu” 1092).

Another difference that can be seen is where, and who trained ninjas. In many movies you’ll witness a man in his mid-20’s trek up a large mountain to reach a ninja school that lies at the summit. Ninjas valued practicality, and I assure you, it’s not very practical to live on the top of a mountain. Historically, they had two different housing techniques. The first was to live in their own village where everyone that lived there trained in the art of “Ninjutsu.” In this circumstance, there would be one grand master that taught them all. The second way was to live among average people and pass down techniques through generations, from father to son.

As I've made apparent, "the ninja was far from being a simple mercenary" (Zoughari 47), and the people that hired ninjas were well aware of this. Bertrand even states "Although best known as silent assassins, the ninjas were more often used for reconnaissance and espionage" (12). A ninja tasked with reconnaissance would not single handedly taking out a large group of warriors simultaneously, like you might see in movies. Ninjas were very skilled fighters but given the option to waste time and energy in a fight or flee and hide the ninjas would usually choose the latter. This is much of why it was so crucial that ninjas knew how to infiltrate quickly and efficiently, but also had the patience to wait hours in a small closet, or "underwater for hours at a time while using a bamboo reed to breathe" (Bertrand 12). During an infiltration anything could happen, and ninjas needed to be prepared for it all.

Due to the historical ninja's aggressive training etiquette, it's safe to say that "Although their past is shrouded in myth, the ninjas proved to be one of the earliest and most effective special operations units in history" (Bertrand 19). A true ninja is "an amazing fusion between adaptable, practical survival techniques and a spiritual search for profound self-knowledge" (Zoughari 128), which is unlike most Hollywood ninjas. While watching films, you'll rarely see them craft something from nothing while on a mission to survive, nor will you often see them meditate to clear their mind. I, in fact, searched both online and in stores in an attempt to find a ninja action figure that could pose his legs and arms to be in a position for meditating. I was, unfortunately unable to find a single action figure that could do so. However, almost all of them had a katana and wore black robes. The ninja franchise is more focused on making them appear to be deadly than historically accurate. If action figures and movies were more accurate ninjas would spend much less time fighting and killing and would instead spend their time preforming crafty evading maneuvers and finding peace of mind, even in the midst of battle.

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