HISTORY OF SAMURAI WOMEN

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Krista Force

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INTRODUCTION

There have been hundreds of books written and several movies made to portray the history and life of the samurai warrior. The majority of this information discusses the male warriors and their place in Japanese history. However, there has been little discussion about samurai women and their important place in history as well.

The following pages are comprised of information detailing the history and significance of the samurai, but more specifically, the women who helped shape Japanese history. These are wives, daughters and mothers with influence and military exploits as great as any male warrior. However, even though there are few, truly authentic accounts of Japanese women in battle compared to that of the male samurai, there is enough information available to prove that female warriors have had a powerful impact on samurai history. Over a period of several centuries female samurai warriors can be found on battlefields, ships and on the walls of castles. (Samurai Women, Turnbull 4).

These women include the accounts of Tomoe Gozen, fighting the battle of Awazu in 1184, Tsuruhime of Omishima taking part in naval fighting in 1541, the female defenders of Omori castle in 1599, and the women warriors of Aizu and Nakano Takeko in 1868. These historical accounts will reveal their military influence and the most commonly used weapons among the samurai women. Along with these stories, one will read about the expectations of society that were placed upon samurai women during these early years of Japanese history.

WHO WERE THE SAMURAI?

Before discussing samurai women in history, it is important to first give a brief explanation of who the samurai were and their place in Japanese history. According to Stephen Turnbull in his book, Warriors of Medieval Japan, the word 'samurai', literally means "those who serve". The original samurai were servants of the imperial court. They were typically wealthy landowners, along with those who followed and worked for them. In order to protect themselves, their families and the land where they lived, they trained in martial arts. In light of this training, the samurai quickly became associated with military duties and soon became soldiers of the imperial court.

Aside from being soldiers, the most significant roles they played, were as bodyguards and policemen. Tribesmen of northern Japan, who were rebels against the imperial court, soon became aware of the samurai's abilities and training when they were faced with conflicts by the samurai, protecting the emperor.

The early samurai were the elite in the military, with excellent skills as horsemen, fighting with bows and arrows and of course the samurai sword, which has become a legendary weapon, synonymous with the samurai. (Warriors of Medieval Japan, McBride and Turnbull 7, 8).

By the 11th century AD, it was only a short period of time before some of the samurai families began developing excellent reputations for their fighting skills. As a result of these reputations, their confidence had grown to a point of significant influence to have a direct impact in the affairs of state and the imperial

court.

In 1156, and again in 1180, arguments over the progression of the lineage of the throne, brought about conflicts being resolved through the use of force by the samurai armies. (Warriors of Medieval Japan, McBride and Turnbull 8).

Samurai Warriors on the Battlefield, Figure 1

Traditional Samurai Warrior, Figure 2

LIFE OF THE SAMURAI WOMAN

In the midst of feudal times among the samurai, it is interesting to learn what life was like for the samurai woman. Samurai marriages were arranged by someone who held the same rank or higher than those being married. Arranged marriages were especially beneficial for those samurai of a higher rank. Most in this position had little opportunity to meet women. For the lower ranked samurai, the arranged marriages were simply a formality.

The majority of the samurai men married women from other samurai families. Those samurai who held lower ranked positions were allowed to marry outside of the samurai families. The woman would bring a *dowry* (money or property brought by a bride to her husband at marriage) to help the couple start their life together.

Samurai were permitted to have a mistress. Her background was investigated by the higher ranked samurai to give their approval. Their relationship with the mistress was treated like a marriage.

If samurai wanted to marry outside of the samurai family, marry a commoner, they would manipulate the situation to get what they wanted. The samurai would send a messenger with money and a note to the parents of the woman he wished to marry. Written in the note was an exemption from paying taxes in order to gain the parents acceptance to marry their daughter. In most cases, the parents would agree. Also, if the wife of a samurai gave birth to a son, he would immediately be considered samurai.

Samurai were permitted to divorce their wife for a variety of reasons, however, they must have the approval from a superior to go through with the divorce. But, divorce was rare among the samurai. One of the reasons for divorce would be if the wife was not producing a son. But, adoption would be arranged and approved as an alternative to divorce. Samurai were permitted to divorce if he simply did not like his wife any longer. However, this reason for divorce was typically avoided so that it would not bring embarrassment upon the samurai who arranged the marriage.

A wife was allowed to arrange a divorce, however, it was presented in such a way that it was perceived that the samurai husband was the one choosing the divorce and not the wife. One of the requirements of divorce was the samurai returning the dowry originally brought by the wife. In light of this requirement, it would tend to deter samurai from going through with the divorce. If a divorce was allowed, this brought shame and dishonor on the wife. As a result, she would be permitted to commit *jigai* (suicide). ("Samurai". New World Encyclopedia)

Maintaining the house and basic household responsibilities was the main role of samurai women. During the early feudal ages, when samurai warrior husbands traveled and engaged in battles, it was the responsibility of the wife to manage the household, take care of the children and even be ready to physically defend the home. Because of their need to protect the household while their husbands were away, the women of the samurai class trained in the use of a *naginata* (polearm).

There were specific traits valued in women of the samurai class. They were "humility, obedience, self-control, strength, and loyalty". ("Samurai". New

World Encyclopedia)

A samurai wife needed to be skilled in all functions and management of the family and household including, "managing the property, keeping records, dealing with financial matters, educating the children, and caring for elderly parents or in-laws who might be living under their roof". ("Samurai". New World Encyclopedia)

Confucian ideals during that time helped to define personal relationships and ethics of the warrior. This required that women be subservient to their husbands, give the utmost of respect to parents and the elderly and be dedicated to the children. They were not allowed to spoil the children in any way in order to exercise discipline.

All women, even samurai women from wealthy families, were considered to be beneath men. A woman would never be considered the head of their household and were prohibited from involvement in any political discussions. ("Samurai". New World Encyclopedia)

THE SAMURAI WOMAN IN BATTLE

As we begin to explore the accounts of famous samurai women, it will be noted that women had much more influence than society may have initially expected of them. We will see from the following historical events that these women undoubtedly matched and maybe even exceeded the male samurai warrior in their heroism, loyalty, bravery and selflessness in the defense of their families and kingdoms.

Tomoe Gozen: the beautiful samurai, 1184:

Tomoe Gozen, was the samurai woman warrior from the Gempei Wars. There is story of Tomoe Gozen fighting at the battle of Awazu in 1184. The account of that battle is as follows;

"Tomoe had long black hair and a fair complexion, and her face was very lovely. But, she was also a fearless rider, who neither the fiercest horse nor the roughest ground could dismay. She dexterously handled the sword and was a match for a thousand warriors, and fit to meet either god or devil. Many times she had taken the field, armed at all points, and won encounters with the bravest captains. So, in this last fight at Awazu, when all the others had been slain or fled, Tomoe Gozen stayed in the battle".

The account continues, describing the last maneuvers of the fight. Then it moves forward from there describing the end of the fight: "They were reduced to just five survivors, with Tomoe being one of the five still standing. One of her companions, named Kiso Yoshinaka, said, "As you are a women, it were better

that you now make your escape. I have made up my mind to die, either by the hand of the enemy or by mine own…"

Even though he strongly encouraged her to escape, Tomoe would not leave Kiso. She stayed with him, ready to fight as she waited on top of her horse for the enemy to appear. Then came, "a strong and valiant samurai, riding up with 30 followers, and Tomoe, immediately dashing into them, threw herself upon the lead warrior and grappling with him, dragged him from his horse, pressed him calmly against the pommel of her saddle and cut off his head. Then, stripping off her armor she fled away to the Eastern Provinces." (Samurai Women, Turnbull 36, 37)

Tomoe Gozen, Figure 3

Tsuruhime of Omishima: the sea princess, 1541:

On the island of Omishima, there stands the Oyamazumi Shrine. For centuries, before going into battle, samurai would offer up prayers to the diety of the Oyamazumi Shrine. The daughter of the shrine's chief priest was Tsuruhime, born in 1526. "During the time of her birth, the island was under threat from the growing power of Ouchi Yoshitaka (1507 – 51) from Yamaguchi on the mainland of Honshu. Fighting took place between the Ouchi and the Kono family of Iyo Province on Shikoku Island, under whose jurisdiction the shrine fell".

Tsuruhime's father died of an illness when she was just 16 years old. As a result of his death, she inherited the position of chief priest of the Oyamazumi Shrine. Tsuruhime had been thoroughly trained in martial arts from the time she was a child. When the Ouchi made advances against Omishima, she took over the command of the military resistance against the Ouchi. She stated to them that she was not just the inheritor of the shrine's protection, she also claimed to be the incarnation of the shrine's deity. In light of this proclamation, when the Ouchi raided Omishima in 1541, Tsuruhime led the army into battle against the Ouchi samurai and pushed them back out into the sea. (Samurai Women, Turnbull 38)

Painting of Tsuruhime in naval battle, Turnbull 39, Figure 4

The female defenders of Omori Castle, 1599:

During the reign of Hideyoshi in the 1500's, he set up the "Taiko Kenchi", which was a process where the use of land and it's ownership throughout all of Japan needed to be surveyed, the value determined, and if necessary reallocated and placed under his control in order to produce a higher yield on taxes. In 1598, the year that Hideyoshi died, the majority of Japan had gone through the "Taiko Kenchi" process of their land, but there had been strong resistance building in several locations where the process had caused riots.

Otami Yoshitsugu was a representative of Hideyoshi who oversaw the land surveying process. In 1599, members of the Onodera family were faced with an attack by Yoshitsugu's army against the fortress of Omori. The resistance

against the land surveying was affecting all people of all social levels throughout Japan. So, there was a mixed army made up of the Onodera family samurai and farmers throughout the area who banded together to defend Omori castle against Otami Yoshitsugu's army. The battle took place in the middle of a bitterly cold winter, where especially the women made valuable contributions to the protection of the castle. (Samurai Women, Turnbull 46)

Following is an excerpt from the *Ou Eikei Gunki*, the chronicles of the war of north Japan. (Warriors of Medieval Japan, McBride and Turnbull 134): At a set time, Yoshitsugu's army "rode their horses to the steep side to the west and left them there, then advancing on foot they broke down the post set up by the samurai and crossed the moat, but when they were at the spot to attack the castle, every single one of the two to three hundred women from within the castle came out, using makeshift catapults they began to throw down an abundance of large and small stones which they had prepared in advance, shouting as they defended the castle, where upon more that 20 men were suddenly hit and killed and many others wounded".

Because of the women's determination and the opportunity of throwing the stones, the men from Yoshitsugu's army were scrambling, driven out from the castle, jumping into the moat and running away from Omori castle. (Samurai Women, Turnbull 46)

Painting of women defending Omori castle, Turnbull 47, Figure 5

The women warriors of Aizu and the story of Nakano Takeko, 1868:

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 provided another opportunity for samurai women to exhibit their heroism on the battlefield. In 1868, the Boshin Civil War began between the government of Emperor Meiji and supporters of the *shogun* (feudal lord of Japan) who had been ousted by the government.

Throughout the war, the government's plan was to take over the northern areas of Japan one by one. Even though everyone fought hard and bravely, eventually most surrendered against the government military who were well trained and better armed.

The Meiji Government had planned to leave Aizu as their last location to attack. However, the general of the army pushed for an immediate attack before the cold and snow of winter began. Since the soldiers were used to the warm

climates of Satsuma, it would be difficult for them to handle the cold northern Japanese winter. In light of this decision, the government army was quickly advancing upon the Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle.

The women during the battle of Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle in 1868 provides one of the most authentic stories of women samurai warriors in Japanese history. They were highly motivated by their devotion to the previous shogun and they also were aware that if they were defeated by the Meiji military, they would be put to death. This brings us to the story of one women in particular, Nakano Takeko, who fought bravely alongside the men in the Aiku battle.

Nakano Takeko led a group of courageous women charging into the gun-fire of the army's modern weapons. The women were armed only with their naginata and swords. When the army realized they were being charged by women, they were told to hold their fire and not to kill them. This allowed the women to overtake them and Nakano Takeko alone killed five or six men with her naginata, before they shot and killed her. (Samurai Women, Turnbull 53, 54)

Painting of Women fighting the Imperial Army at Aizu, 1868, Turnbull 55, Figure 6

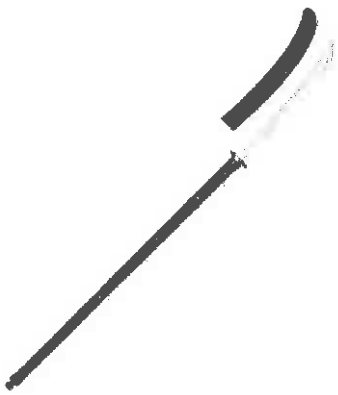
WEAPONS USED BY SAMURAI WOMEN

Throughout the stories of samurai women, there has been mention of the weapons they carried into battle. There are two weapons in particular that were often used by these women; *naginata* and *tanto*.

The *naginata* was a commonly used weapon for both men and women samurai, but especially for the women. According to the International Naginata Federation website, "The naginata is a weapon comprising of a wooden shaft approximately 1.2 to 2.4 meters in length with a curved blade (30 to 60 centimeters) attached to the end. This was the most common weapon used by soldiers from the eleventh until the fifteenth centuries. When a time of peace arrived during the seventeenth century, the naginata became the primary martial art studied by women. ("What is Naginata". International Naginata Federation)

"The blade was used to slash with wide, circular movements, and the shaft could block or knock opponents off balance." ("Weapons". Shotokai)

Women fighting with naginata, Figure 7



Naginata, Figure 8

Another commonly used weapon among the samurai women was the *tanto*. A tanto, or short sword, "is a common Japanese single- or double-edged knife or dagger with a blade length between 15 and 30 cm (6-12 inches)". The tanto was designed mainly as a stabbing weapon, but the edge of the knife can be used for slashing as well. ("Tanto". Wikipedia)

The samurai typically wore the tanto by itself, but at times accompanied it with a long sword. The tanto was used as a thrusting weapon in close contact battles, but it could also be thrown. ("Weapons". Shotokai)

Tanto, Figure 9

CONCLUSION

The society standards of early Japanese history placed samurai women in a subservient role. Their role was to manage the functions of the home and train the children. However, through the study of samurai women, in particular those who went to battle, one can see that these women were very strong and courageous and capable of levels of bravery that could exceed that of the samurai male warrior. They were willing to risk their lives for their imperial dynasty, feudal lord and their families.

There may not be much in written history on the lives of samurai women, but what has been written of the exploits of these female warriors, really is the greatest untold story in samurai history. Following are two farewell poems composed by sisters who were killed at the battle of Aizu in 1868:

"Each time I die and am reborn in the world
I wish to return as a stalwart warrior." Written by the older sister.

"I have heard that this is the way of the warrior
And so I set out on the journey to the land of the dead." Written by the younger sister. (Samurai Women, Turnbull 54)

These words represent their courage, bravery and willingness to live and also die as warriors. The stories of these women are inspirational and they are reminders to go to battle for what is important, regardless of being a man or a woman or what society may impose.

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