

MASTERS OF THE SWORD

Janissary and Samurai

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The Hearth of Janissary Corps, like any other group of retainers in history, is an institution of the ruler's personal army of guards established to claim superiority over other potential rulers (and their families) and to make sure that it stays that way. We find *Hippeis* in ancient Sparta, *Companions* of Philip and Alexander in Macedonia, *Mameluks* of the Abbasid and Ayyubid caliphs, *Ghulams* of the Seljukid sultans, Knights of various Orders in the crusaders' era etc. Neither the samurai nor the janissaries were exceptions to the rule. Besides many dissimilarities between the two types of men-at-arms with virtually no contact or whatsoever, they shared at least one common denominator: Being the professional personal guards of their respective masters, the defenders (and at times the demolishers) of the status quo.

The janissaries were crushed and abolished by their master in 1826 (*Vaka-i Hayriyye* The Auspicious Incident) while the samurai met the same fate in 1877 (Battle of Shiroyama). Both were remnants of a bygone era of the early modern warriors and neither their weapons, their tactics, nor their clothing or traditions were apt to the sweeping new methods and weapons of a new era. All the characteristics of their kind which once had made them indispensable for their employers had become obstacles in front of "modernity" and thus their services were no more demanded.

In Japan, the ones who restored political power to the emperor Meiji were samurai just like the ones who opposed it. At the end of the sixteenth century, the samurai class had managed to unify the country by finishing the civil war among the domains. What's interesting in the Japanese case is the fact that the emperors had almost never had real power in their own hands and that they had played a symbolic role all throughout history, a fact which constitutes the fundamental difference between the Japanese and Ottoman experiences.

Unlike the Japanese emperors, the successive sultans of the Ottoman dynasty had managed to keep their firm grip on the political, economic and military power right from the start, and step by step they centralised the state founded by their ancestor Osman Bey. While the Japanese emperors were not able to prevent the emergence of local landlords, the Ottoman sultans had never let any family which might challenge

their absolute sovereignty, to flourish. The founding of the Hearth of Janissaries is yet another outcome of this determination.

The Emergence of Janissaries

The Hearth of Janissaries was founded by Murad I. (reign 1362-1389) around 1364, right after the conquest of Hadrianapolis. The story of the Hearth starts with the law of Penchik (one of five) declaring beg's right over one of the five captives brought by the akinci warriors from their blitzkriegs into the depths of Eastern Europe and Balkans. Penchik was a clear step towards centralization and via this tax-in-kind Murad was openly declaring his (and his descendants') superiority over other frontier lords like Mihaloğulları, Evrenosoğulları, Malkoçoğulları (and their descendants) who participated in those expeditions. His move showed his tendency to end his *primus inter pares* status among lords. This claim of superiority and tendency towards centralization continued and had finally caused the Ottomanid begs to desert the lines of Bayezid I., the Lightning (reign 1389-1402), the son of Murad I., famous for his bursts of anger, and leave the sultan all alone on the battle field of Ankara, against Timur. Their reaction to the centralizing policies had hit the sultan like a "lightning", and triggered an era of turmoil, eleven years of interregnum period full with civil unrest. Interestingly, the ones who did not desert the sultan and fought valiantly until the end were the janissaries, members of the newly established Hearth.

Mehmed I. (reign 1403-1421) who had come out as victorious from the power struggles of the interregnum period, knew well that the way to secure his sovereignty depended on a strong central army loyal solely to him, decided to shift the main method of troop recruitment for the Hearth of Janissaries from Penchik to Devshirme (collection of Christian boys for the central army from among the sultanate's subjects). Thus he had created a consistent and continuous flow of troops without being dependent on the performances of the frontier lords. This new move had irrevocably changed the fate of the Ottoman dynasty.

The Emergence of the Samurai

One of the few attempts which had the potential of evolving into such a central army in Japan, was the organization of the *Kebiishi* established in the beginning of the ninth century. This unit was responsible for the execution of laws in the name of the emperor. But due to the rebellions caused by the warrior monks (*sōhei*), the emperors were forced to call for help from the clans close to the capital Kyoto, who in turn had come to realize the extent of power they could acquire by their swords. The rivalry between

these two clans, namely Taira (or Heike) and Minamoto (or Genji) caused a bloody power struggle to commence (Gen-pei civil war, 1180-85), at the end of which general Yoritomo, of Minamoto managed to establish his absolute hegemony, and start the “Age of the Samurai”. During all this chaos, the institution of Keibiishi had vanished into oblivion and the emperors had to wait until the Meiji period for getting the political power back from the samurai.

Yoritomo, who had used the word “samurai” for the first time in a written document, had made the emperor declare himself “Shogun” (literally Generalissimo, the de facto military ruler of Japan) and established the first military regime (*baku-fu*). On the one hand, just like the Ottomans, he appointed a governor from his household (*gokenin*) to each domain, on the other hand he declared Hachiman, the god of war as his family cult and built a grand temple at Tsurugaoka (Crane-hill), Kamakura.

Thus Yoritomo, just like the Ottoman sultans, was acting as a law-making prince, a state-builder in the Macchiavellian sense. But because during his lifetime he was not able to establish a central army system strong enough to suppress all his allies, the potential future contenders to the Shogun’s throne, within the next century the power once again diffused and the shoguns too became symbolic figureheads. This was the panorama of the multi-headed political situation in Japan while the armies of Chinggis Khan were sweeping through Asia.

Samurai, Mongolian Invasion Attempts and *Kamikaze*

When Chinggis Khan died in 1227, his empire extended from the Anatolian peninsula to the Korean peninsula. His grandson Kubilai who established the Yuan dynasty in China attempted to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. Although with difficulties, both were repelled, but these “victories” had a deep impact on the development of the samurai class and led to the destruction of the Kamakura shogunate. Japanese samurai had faced an enemy which used completely different methods of warfare than what they were accustomed to. The Mongolian invasion attempts were confronted with bravery and seemingly unified the local landlords around the Shōgunate for a brief period of time but soon the alliance dissolved and the country fell into an age of domestic disturbances. The Mongolian invasion attempts showed two things:

- 1- That the Japanese armed forces and their tactics were inadequate to handle a confrontation with foreign foes who employed large scale group warfare methods,
- 2- That a victory may cause big trouble for the fighting sides when the enemy does not have any land to distribute among their allies.

For the first time in history a foreign power was trying to invade the Japanese archipelago. The size of the attack which started 5 October 1274 must have been beyond their wildest dreams. After making preparations for their *blitzkrieg* for over a year Mongolian military forces suddenly appeared at the shores of Kyushu island with 450 ships, 15,000 Mongolian troops and 15,000 Korean sailors and auxiliaries. A contemporary eye-witness account gives us a vivid description of the situation:

The Mongols disembarked, mounted their horses, raised their banners, and began to attack.... (one Japanese) shot a whistling arrow to start the exchange. All at once the Mongols down to the last man started laughing. The Mongols struck large drums and hit gongs so many times... that they frightened the Japanese horses and mounts could not be controlled.... Their general climbed to a high spot and when retreat was in order, beat the retreat drum. When they needed to race forward, he rang the attack gong. According to these signals they did battle.... Whereas we thought about reciting our pedigrees to each other and battling man-to-man in glory or defeat as was the custom of the Japanese armies, in this battle the Mongols assembled at one point in a great force....¹

When this Mongolian force disappeared as abruptly as it appeared, the samurai were determined to be more ready for the next attack. But no preparation could make them ready enough for what they were going to confront seven years later. When the 4,000 Mongolian ships appeared in 1281, they were carrying an immense force of 100,000 strong. The fate of the archipelago was on the verge of changing forever. But this time, “The Divine Wind” (*Kamikaze*) of Hachiman, the God of War, interfered and Mongolian ships were destroyed by a typhoon. Japan was once again rescued. On the other hand, in an era in which the main source of wealth was land rights (*Shōen* in Japan, *timar* in Ottoman state, *feudum* in Europe), the samurai who had acted with the shogun in order to protect Japan against the invaders regarded themselves entitled to land right rewards. The inability of the shogunate to distribute such new *shōen* had turned the “victory” into disappointment. Since Japan is a country of islands with limited (hence the rights of which could be distributed) cultivatable land and the existing land was already shared among the establishment, there was no room for the newcomers. Furthermore, the enemy had vanished without leaving anything behind.

¹ Farris, William Wayne. *Heavenly Warriors – The Evolution of Japan’s Military, 500-1300*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.331.

The ability to redistribute land-rights constitutes one of the main differences between the conquering and the defending armies.

Ocak, The Hearth

Kamakura shogunate had ended in 1333 because the shoguns –like the emperors- had fallen short in keeping their allies under control. While these were happening in Japan, in Anatolia the Ottomans led by Orhan Bey were continuously expanding at the expense of the Byzantines. Orhan had no such problem as warrior insatisfaction, on the contrary due to increase in siege warfare he was in need of an increasing number of infantry in addition to the traditional cavalry. Thus he established the “*Azap*” infantry units, the precursor of the janissary corps. Azaps were recruited temporarily, received a daily wage during the expeditions and were dismissed after the war effort ended.

Consequently, Orhan’s son Murad I. felt the need for a stable army of guards and founded the Hearth of Janissaries (also called “*Yaya beyler*”, the Infantry Masters). The Hearth was established with a thousand personnel organized in ten *Orta* regiments, hundred personnel each. Each regiment was commanded by a captain called *Yayabaşı* (Head of Infantry) . The number of these regiments increased in accordance with necessity and at the time when the famous Architect Sinan (1489 – 1588) was a janissary (mid-sixteenth century) the Hearth had reached its mature state with 196 units. The institution was divided into two basic parts: *Cemaat Ortalari* (Regiments of the Community) and *Ağa Bölükleri* (Squadrons of the Chief of Staff) designed to assist the general commander in his command-and-control duties.

Until the fundamental changes by Murad III (reign 1574-1595) who had allowed non-devshirme muslim subjects to become janissaries, the Hearth, under the influence of Bektashi teachings, had evolved into a perfectly functioning mechanism in terms of recruitment, training, discipline, promotion and individual adherence to group identity. It was binding the Christian-born, devshirme janissaries, who were well aware of their rootlessness, with comradeship bonds and making them a privileged class compared with other layers of the society. Their warrior worldview, concretized in the slogan “*La feta illa Ali, la seyfe illa Zülfikar*” (There is no hero but [Caliph] Ali, No sword but Zulfikar!) made Caliph Ali (599-661) a warrior idol with whom they could identify, and Zulfikar (Ali’s legendary double-edged sword) a symbol which empowered them. “*Kazan-ı Şerif*” (The Holy Cauldron) which they believed was presented to the Hearth, by Hacı Bektaş (The Founder of the Bektashi Order) laid at the center of their semiotic universe.

Just like the other guard units in history, the janissaries were the elite warriors. As professional soldiers whose main occupation was to fight in battles, their uniforms, equipment and weapons as well as their discipline and training were better than their counterparts who could rival them. Their felt caps (*Zerkülah/Börk*) were designed so as to give them an awe-inspiring posture and extending to their shoulders serve as an armour to protect their heads. Their standart weapons were a bow, and a mid-sized sword called “*Yatagan*”. Despite the outward discrepancies, the samurai as elite warriors, had in essence similar privileges within their society.

Goke (The Household)

At the same period, Japan was living in an age of chaos, later to be called the Warring States (*Sengoku*). All the weaponry, armoury, battle techniques and traditions of the Japanese samurai were developed during this period. Once the war was finally over, the shogunal center had become Tokyo and the Tokugawa shoguns had taken all sorts of precautions to protect themselves. According to this complex defense system his residence, the Castle of Edo was protected by the shogun’s own household (*Gokenin*), especially the samurai from Aizu whom he trusted. Some of these who worked close to the ruler were titled *hatamoto* (Bannersmen, in Ottoman *Alemdar*). All the domains were governed by the *daimyō* (literally “the Grand Names”, inheritable title of governor) and they were required to visit Edo annually with few guards, a gesture showing their loyalty. The Japanese society was divided into four main layers, namely the warriors-peasants-artisans-tradesmen (“*Şi-Nō-Kō-Şō*”). Nobody could carry swords except the samurai..

The samurai, contrary to the popular belief, were not only mounted knights but most were infantry (*Ashigaru*). Riding a horse was a privilege for the commanders, governors and their guards. The standart weapon of the ashigaru was *naginata* (a short spear with a blade attached) and it was effective against the cavalry. In later centuries, with the spread of firearms, like janissaries, the samurai also had started to use muskets. The cavalry on the other hand, used to carry long-bows together with a long sword (*katana*) and a short one (*vakizaşi*). For defense purposes they wore a helmet (*kabuto*), a body armour (*yoroi*) and sometimes a face mask (*menpo*).

Bushido (Way of the Warrior) and Yol (The Path)

A major difference between the janissaries and the samurai was their attitude towards the importance of lineage. The eye-witness account of the Mongolian invasion mentioned above, shows how reciting pedigrees was a part of samurai's combat ceremony. On the contrary, until the late sixteenth century the janissaries were rootless warriors away from their families, having no right to marry or have children. They depended solely on their own performances and the meritocratic nature of the Ottoman state system. A European visitor, Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq (an Austrian ambassador to the court of Sultan Suleyman I) to Sultan's palace had seen this meritocratic tenets of the Ottoman social system. In his letter dated September 1, 1555, he summarizes his views:

....In Turkey, anybody has the opportunity to change the conditions he was born in and to determine [his own] fate. The people who hold the highest positions under the Sultan, are generally the sons of [mere] shepherds. More than being ashamed of this, they even are proud of it. The less they feel they owe to their ancestors or to the environment they accidentally had been born into, the bigger is their pride. They do not accept that talents pass by birth or by inheritance. For them, talents are partly God's gift and partly the product of the training and morality they receive and the effort they show, the motivation they feel. As the talent in music, arts, mathematics and geometry does not pass from father to son, they think character is not hereditary either, that a son does not necessarily resemble his father and [his] qualifications are godsend. Therefore among Turks; prestige, service and administrative positions become the rewards of talent and virtue.... Our methods are very different. We have no room for merit. Everything depends on birth and nobility only may open the road to high positions....²

Yet it is only natural for these two warrior classes living in so remote areas and cultures to be different, what's interesting is to find similarities. For example they both saw themselves as members of a privileged group, they both praised loyalty and bravery as warrior qualities, and they both attributed profound meanings to their swords. As professional soldiers, both were members of a military organization governed with strict regulations and both walked with loyalty and endurance on a road at the end of which there was death. The samurai called this road "*Bushido*" (The Way of the Warrior) while the janissaries named it merely *Yol* (The Path) and called themselves as *Yoldaş*

² Busbecq, Ogier Ghislain de, *Türk Mektupları*, (Istanbul, Doğan Kitap, 2005), pp.50-51

(Path-sharer/Comrade). For both; the primary condition to be a warrior was to accept death with bravery.

Religion was a vital instrument in shaping the early modern warriors' spiritual paths. For the European Knights it was Christianity, for the Janissaries it was Islam and in the case of the samurai it was an amalgamate of Shintoism and Buddhism. Yet a closer scrutiny on the content of their respective beliefs reveals the fact that the warriors were attracted to certain Orders rather than adhering to the orthodox or popular conceptions of those religions. For instance, we find the Order of the Garter (established in 1348), Order of the Teutonic Knights (established in 1199), Order of the Hospitallers (established around 1100) in Europe most of which were established during the crusaders' era. In the Ottoman Empire, the Bektashi Order had evolved to become the official order for the imperial guards. In Japan, we come across a composite set of beliefs –though not coined yet as an Order - with distinct characteristics and modes of conduct. Instead, the term “*Bushidō*” (Way of the Warrior) or “*Budō*” (Way of the Martial Arts) was (and is) commonly used for representing the combination of beliefs, principles, and rules of conduct of the Japanese warrior as well as their habits and traditions. On the other hand, this seemingly secular usage of the term stripped off its religious connotations, conceals the deep impact of religion in the lives of individual samurai.

Kasaya Kazuhiko, with reference to Nitobe Inazō's work “*Bushidō*”³, gives the keywords to Bushidō as honesty (*shōjiki*), courage (*yūki*), love of humanity (*jinai*), courtesy (*reigi*), integrity (*seijitsu*), honor (*meiyo*), loyalty (*chūgi*), self-denial (*kokki*), honourable suicide (*seppuku*), vengeance (*katakiuchi*), and Japanese sword (*nihontō*).⁴ Joseph Herbert summarizes the unwritten code of the samurai as “Loyalty to one's lord, wisdom, courage and benevolence, disdain of saving one's life (in certain situations), impassivity under duress, and above all the maintenance of personal honour”.⁵ Cameron Hurst, on the other hand (again basing his argument on Inazō) extracts seven principles of Bushidō: “Justice, courage, benevolence, politeness, veracity, honor,

³ Nitobe, Inazō, *Bushido, the Soul of Japan*, (The Project Gutenberg Ebook, Released in April, 2004, Ebook No:12096)

⁴ Kasaya, Kazuhiko, *Bushidō to Nihon Nōryokushugi*, [Bushido and Japanese Meritocracy], (Tokyo, Shinchōsha, 2005), p.16

⁵ The “Heike Monogatari”: Buddhist Ethics and the Code of the Samurai, Herbert S. Joseph, *Folklore*, Vol.87, No.1. (1976), pp. 96-104

loyalty”.⁶ These or similar words may be used for any group of soldiers, at any period of time, at any geographical location depending on the level of admiration one has for that particular group.

Likewise, the janissaries had an established code of ethics which they called “*Adab-ı Tarik*” (Ethics of the Path) based on the principles of the Bektashi Order⁷:

A janissary,

- 1- Shall be superior to his comrades who entered the Hearth after him
- 2- Shall keep his promises in all circumstances
- 3- Shall not be punished by a non-janissary
- 4- Shall not steal
- 5- Shall not wear a beard until he grows old
- 6- Shall be celibate
- 7- Shall not exercise any trade or craftmanship, nor shall he acquire wealth
- 8- Shall act with the consciousness that the Hearth is the arms and wings of the Ottomans
- 9- Shall be the sworn brother of his fellow janissaries
- 10- Shall prove to be a hard-boiled fighter
- 11- Shall protect anybody who takes refuge in the Hearth
- 12- Shall be taken care of even if he is retired due to old age or injury
- 13- Shall obey the orders of his commanders even under captivity.

Similar to the Japanese Bushido, the Yol of the janissaries was also defined as way on which the individual warriors would walk with his comrades and embrace their death at the end. While the Japanese samurai would start their journey on the way of the warrior by a ceremony called “*Genpuku*”, the Path of the janissaries would begin with an initiation ceremony called “*Ikrar*” (Testimony). During this ceremony the newcomers would experience spiritual death and symbolically would leave death behind them. The Path then continued with fourty steps full with spiritual hardships and relevant preparations set forth by Hacı Bektaş. The final step was called “*Mushahade*” (To witness) that is to witness the Beauty of God (*Cemal-i Hakk*). Interestingly the root of this carefully selected word is “*Shuhud*”, exactly the same root for “*Shahid*” that is

⁶ Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushido Ideal , G. Cameron Hurst III *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Understanding Japanese Values. (Oct., 1990), pp. 511-527.

⁷ K.Yalcin, Erdal, *Turna'nin Kalbi: Yeniçeri Yoldaşlığı ve Bektaşılık* [The Heart of the Crane: Janissary Brethren and the Bektashi Order], (Istanbul: Bogazici University Publications, 2010)

“martyr”. Thus the spiritual journey of each janissary on the Bektashi Path would end with martyrdom, a perfect solution for a warrior brethren.

The notion of a spiritual journey on a path, exaltation of warrior values, reverence for warrior idols and sacred weapons (especially swords), adherence to unorthodox orders of their religions that promote martyrdom and offer a solution for violence and death, initiation ceremonies, codes of conduct and symbols of identification among others, are some common features of medieval and early modern warrior classes, in which neither the samurai nor the janissary were exceptions.