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Midterm Essay

“Understanding Samurai/Bushi”  
“And what we have learned”

Q1.

Early Samurai/Bushi culture seemed to have started during the Heian period around the eighth-ninth century. During that time the emperor first moved the capitol to Hein-kyo (today's Kyoto), and then started the “Shogunate” to help battle forces in the north because he was trying to expand the empire. The Shogunate was a temporary title given to those men who fought as military commanders, but later in the thirteenth century, it would eventually become a court position. The men that helped fight in those battles was from many different clans, but some clans were more powerful than others. As time went on the emperor slowly lost his power to the Fujiwara clan. Because Fujiwara married off many of his daughters into the royal family he was able to establish absolute power (Lecture Notes).

The Fujiwaras made all agricultural lands private institutions instead of belonging to the imperial court. Because land owners from many clans now had wealth and property, they needed to protect it from other invading clans. This is where early Samurai/Bushi started to appear (Lecture Notes). The land owners and aristocrats started to hire men to protect their interests. At first these men were of noble and high ranking status but eventually included the lower class, which were kind of like servants but slowly started to learn the ways of battle themselves. This act of protecting their master later helped develop the art of Bushido itself. Bushido is the code that the nobles/servants would abide by, would dictate their actions to, and give honor for.

An example of this code can be seen even today in stories, artists, artisans, and films. In the modern film called “Chonmage Pudding,” the main character is driven by his bushido code to

help a mother and child. He is confused but still holds his beliefs no matter the situation and acts upon them with honor.

Also during the Heian period, many men were sent to defense outposts throughout the land to help inform and protect the regions. These men were basically drafted by the government and had to purchase their own armor and weapons. In time the outposts were dwindled down and the men went back to their homes and farms. But they were always encouraged to sharpen their skills as warriors by the government. So the government would pick certain men to continue the training. Usually the men chosen had a descent life already and had good abilities with horses and weapons. They were given two subordinates and provisions to stay in shape. After a while many of the warriors started local groups within their communities. Today these men can be considered some of the first Samurai/Bushi as well (Sato, Introduction xvii).

According to the lecture notes, part of developing Samurai/Bushi culture can be connected to the influx of art, literature, Shintoism, and Buddhism during the reign of the Fujiwaras around the late tenth century. Some very progressive concepts came out of the practice of these cultural ideas. One concept, which was adopted by the Samurai/Bushi, is called “aware.” Aware is the belief of having sensitivity or the capacity to be moved by and have empathy towards things. Also, aware is the understanding and awareness of impermanence and transience of all things. This concept is very Shinto/Buddha like. The early Samurai/Bushi would eventually incorporate this concept into every day exercises and meld it with their training in weapons and combat.

Overall, early Samurai/Bushi started from a noble or well-to-do lifestyle with many influences from the arts. They were eccentric but capable warriors on the battlefield with flashy armor. They had their own lands but different classes would start to pick up the Samurai/Bushi

style, eventually resulting in Bushido which is the code of the Samurai today. With the lectures, films, and readings, it was very educational and helped the critical thinking process about early Samurai/Bushi history.

Q2.

There was so much new content provided in the course about Samurai that has stirred many interests. One such interest would be the study of Kyudo. Almost immediately I was amazed in the dedication, focus, and meditation that could come from archery. The fact that Samurais were great archers trained to kill with their bows is completely reversed with the study of Kyudo. Kyudo was not about hitting the target but spiritual concentration and diligence striving for perfect form. It would teach calmness, meditation and in some strange way harmony. There were eight fundamental movements which challenged mental discipline and were used to judge competitions. Because of the roots of Japanese archery along with spiritual beliefs makes Kyudo uniquely Japanese (Japanology Video).

Another Interest is the fact that the west has stereotyped the Samurai into a boastful killing machine and/or superhero, but in reality this is far from the truth. A particular story of a man named Norimitsu was a samurai that cut down three men in a flash. According to the ancient text he did not seek out to kill them but defend himself from an ambush. Even as people started to gossip and say whoever did this was superb, Norimitsu wanted no recognition. This seems to suggest that not all samurai are in it for the glory but in fact are very smart at reading situations (Sato, pg52-58). Norimitsu would not have to deal with unwanted questioning or maybe with a title of a great swordsman he would have too many challenges. Whatever the reason, it was decided with a calm and collective conscious which seems to describe a Samurai that is unfamiliar to the west. However, the swordsmanship is very stereotypical.

The images of a Samurai have changed profoundly due to what has been taught throughout this course. Originally I believed that Samurai armor was all the same. But after watching a Japanology video, it became clear that Japanese armor is unique. The symbolisms that were used to make each style of armor are amazing, which ranged from animal motifs to Chinese characters. The art of making a suit of Japanese armor is incredibly time consuming as well as highly technical. I now can understand the value of armor as national treasures due to their magnificence and story.

However, the largest change in the Samurai identity that I found would have to be the fact that Samurai were more proficient with their bows and arrows compared to their swords. The amount of battles that a warrior was likely to be in is amazing as well, depending on the time period. But within Japanese Samurai history starting from the Heian period till the seventeenth century there were so many wars.

The stories that I have read from the book “Legends of the Samurai” have definitely made me look at the Samurai in a different light. The translation from the oldest written history of samurais is the closest to understanding of what the culture was like. These writings tell in great detail in a way that is like poetry at times. The book challenges the way I think and get information, and at the same time I become more curious and start to ask more questions about Samurai culture and what it would be like to live during those times.

Finally, learning from the past, regardless of which culture, we can learn new ideas, find better solutions, and communicate to each other. The films, books, and lectures have helped me understand these concepts immensely, and for that, I thank you.