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Yoroi-kizome, Genbuku and Taking the Tonsure

Rites of Passage among the *Bushi* in Feudal Japan

The earliest written records extant in Japan were compiled during the Nara period (710–781 A.D.). They are the *Kojiki*, "Record of Ancient Matters", 712 A.D.; the *Nihongi* or *Nihon Shoki*, "Chronicle of Japan", 720 A.D.; and the *Manyōshū*, "Collection of a Myriad Leaves", an anthology of poetry first published in 759 A.D. but also containing material from the Asuka period (ca 500–700 A.D.). Prior to these writings, the only existing evidence of practices which may be defined as rites of passage is archaeological. From the Neolithic Early Jōmon period (4500–3000 B.C.) there are indications of a systematic extraction of teeth among a sizeable proportion of the population, the ratio being about 70 per cent males and 30 per cent females, with considerable regional variations (Blomberg 1990: 243). In its most drastic form this comprised the removal of the canines and incisors of both maxilla and mandible. This kind of mutilation eventually came to include an equally systematic filing down of the maxillary incisors into a fork or trident shape, with examples of both practices in the same individual. From the evidence of burnt clay figurines dating from the Jōmon as well as the Yayoi period (ca 250 B.C.–ca 250 A.D.) it appears that some kind of facial adornment existed. Whether this took the form of scarring, tattooing or painting is of course impossible to ascertain, but it may have been another means of indicating individual distinction or social position. By the Yayoi period Japan was an agricultural society based largely on rice cultivation, and during the Kofun period (ca 250–ca 500 A.D.), so called after the often gigantic burial mounds in a characteristic key-hole shape surrounded by moats which are a typical feature, a ruling class began to emerge in what may have been petty kingdoms. These tombs, of widely varying sizes, are distributed over large parts of central and southern Honshū, with a concentration in the Kinki district around present-day Osaka and Kyoto. The largest tomb, reputed to be that of the semi-mythical "Emperor-Sage" Nintoku, is over 900 metres in length.

The *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*, as chronicles of a united realm politically consolidated under one ruling imperial family, give indications of various

practices which may be regarded as rites of passage, e.g. wedding ceremonies and the use of separate parturition huts. Pollution and its avoidance is a central tenet in Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religion which developed in the agrarian society of the Yayoi period. One of the poems in the *Manyōshū* contains an oblique reference to a woman's teeth as "lily-like", an expression used in the *Kojiki* to describe the teeth of an imperial prince which had been filed down into a trident shape. The *Manyōshū* reference, furthermore, suggests that this form of dental ornamentation was in fact an indication that the woman was married. (Blomberg 1999: 322.)

Not until the Heian period (781–1185) however, do we have clear and unequivocal evidence of various initiation rites practised by the ruling imperial family and the court nobility, *kuge*. This peaceful era saw a great flourishing of the arts, and with the emergence in the tenth century of a Japanese literature in the vernacular in the form of novels and diaries written by *kuge* ladies in waiting attached to the imperial court, we have eye-witness accounts of life in court circles and among the *kuge*. One very striking feature, again concerning teeth, was the fact that both sexes dyed their teeth black with a highly corrosive concoction of *sake*, rice wine, or urine mixed with iron filings or powdered gall-nuts. This practice, later known as *o-haguro*, "honourable toothblack", or *o-kane*, "honourable metal", was regarded as a form of personal adornment and an indication of adulthood as well as social status. Girls usually began blackening their teeth at the onset of puberty, or when they got married, and boys did so after undergoing their coming-of-age ceremony, *genbuku*, at the age of about fifteen. From the cradle to the grave significant stages in a person's life were marked by ceremony in accordance with Buddhist or Shinto beliefs. The novels and diaries of the Heian court ladies mention many ceremonial first occasions in the life of that most important of children, i.e. a male heir to the throne, from the infant's first bath and first haircut to the first wearing of *hakama*, the wide silk trousers with trailing legs worn with formal court attire, when the little boy was five years old. Later there was the *genbuku* ceremony, of which more below, to mark the beginning of adulthood, and in later life very often the taking of the tonsure as a Buddhist monk, an indication of retirement from active life. After the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century the two religions occupied positions of virtually equal importance in Japanese society, including the imperial house. The emperor, as a descendant of the supreme Shinto deity, the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu Ō-mikami*, performed a number of Shinto rites annually for the welfare of the country and people, notably the *Ō-harai*, "great purification", ceremony. Imperial princesses were customarily appointed to the position of high priestess at important Shinto shrines connected with the imperial family, or indeed that of abbess at a Buddhist temple. When the system known as

Insei, "cloister government", in which an abdicated emperor continued to rule from behind the scenes while the actual emperor was a minor, became common in the last two centuries of the Heian period, it was the custom for the retiring monarch to take the tonsure and become a Buddhist monk. Female members of the imperial family and the *kuge* were expected to shave their heads and become Buddhist nuns when they were widowed.

The essentially peaceful Heian society, in which warlike qualities were not at a premium, underwent a profound change with the rise to ascendancy of a warrior nobility, *buke*, from the mid-tenth century. Its members, known as samurai or *bushi*, were descended from younger sons of *kuge* who had moved to the provinces in order to make a living as country squires or commanders of the border guards. Positions at the Heian court and in the civil administration were hereditary among the *kuge*, and since polygamy was widely practised there were many younger sons who had no prospects of promotion. By the twelfth century some *buke* families had gained sufficient influence in the capital to challenge the *kuge*, and after the *Genpei* War (1180–85) between two leading *buke* clans, the warrior nobility ruled Japan for the next seven centuries. The emperor continued to be regarded as the head of state, but the *de facto* ruler was the *Shōgun*, a title which can be translated as "supreme military commander" or "generalissimo". A feudal system developed in which the *Shōgun* distributed land to his vassals, from whom he expected loyal service.

The *bushi*, while retaining many of the manners and customs of the *kuge*, had developed a system of ethico-religious ideas and rules of conduct, known variously as "the way of bow and horse", *Kyūba no michi*, "the way of loyalty", *Chūgi no michi*, or "the heart of the warrior", *Bushi no kokorogiwa*, already by the twelfth century. These values comprised much of the Confucian moral code, notably *Gojō*, the "five cardinal virtues", and the idea of the "five relations", as well as Shinto and Buddhist precepts. The "five cardinal virtues" of Confucianism are benevolence (*jin*), justice (*gi*), propriety (*rei*), wisdom (*chi*), and fidelity (*shin*). They have provided the basis for the Japanese outlook on life since before Heian times and were embraced by the entire population in varying degrees, depending on education and social position. The "five relations" regulate the relationship between lord and vassal, father and son, older brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend–friend. In theory, the subordinate party owes loyalty and obedience to the superior, with no reciprocal obligations necessary, but in practice, however, the superior was expected to show benevolence and even render practical assistance. A woman was always considered subordinate, firstly to her father, then to her husband, and lastly to her son.

There were also a number of characteristic traits which reflected the unique position of the samurai and the rigours of his *métier*, contravening the precepts of both Shinto and Buddhism which categorically forbid the

taking of life. The vassal owed his lord unquestioning loyalty and was expected to lay down his life without hesitation. The practice known as *seppuku*, taking one's life by cutting open the abdomen, developed in the twelfth century, originally as a way of avoiding falling into enemy hands when incapacitated on the battlefield. By committing this particularly painful form of suicide a samurai could lay bare his soul in order to prove his innocence or sincerity of purpose, as the case might be, expiate a crime, or even remonstrate with his wayward lord about to commit an error or an indiscretion. *Seppuku* was the honourable punishment for a crime, an execution carried out by the condemned man himself. *Junshi*, "following the lord in death", was practised by some of the chief retainers of a feudal lord until legally prohibited in 1663. This ultimate show of loyalty beyond the grave and into the next existence might perhaps with some justification also be regarded as a rite of passage. After 1663 an instance of *junshi* was liable to be severely punished by the *shōgunal* government, *Bakufu*, e.g. by confiscating the fief of the heir to the lord whose death had caused it, although the practice did not entirely cease. The law prohibiting *junshi* first appeared in the version of the *Buke Sho-hatto*, "Laws of the Military Houses", promulgated by the fourth Tokugawa *Shōgun*, Ietsuna (1641–80, reigned 1651–80). One of the most famous instances of *junshi* occurred as late as 1912, when the hero of the Russo-Japanese War, General Nogi Maresuke, committed *seppuku* at the very moment, announced by a gun salute, when the funeral procession of Emperor Meiji (1849–1912) left the Imperial Palace. Mrs Nogi severed her jugular vein on this occasion, accompanying her husband in death.

To the common people of feudal Japan, the *bushi* were not only the holders of political and military power and paragons of all warlike virtues, they were also regarded as arbiters of culture and taste, whose manners and customs were to be emulated. Heian court life had been refined, imbued with an aestheticism which bordered on the precious and effete, whereas the Minamoto clan, founders of the first *shōgunate*, the Kamakura *Bakufu* (1192–1333), and their vassals prided themselves on leading simple and frugal lives without luxury or ostentation, valuing their warlike skills far above their talents for composing poetry or incense.

From birth the life of a *bushi* was punctuated by rites and rituals marking every step on the way to becoming a warrior. In addition to the ceremonial first occasions of babyhood there was the ceremony known as *yoroi-kizome*, "the first wearing of armour", which was celebrated when a boy was six or seven years old as a sign of his future status. Boys of *bushi* stock were trained from childhood in martial arts, and taught the proper demeanour of a warrior. Horsemanship and the techniques necessary to use the long-bow, which was their chief weapon until the Kamakura period, and to wield the two-handed, single-edged sword were essential skills for all males born

into the warrior class. Women in *bushi* families, incidentally, who were brought up to be the wives and mothers of future generations of warriors, were taught to wield a halberd, *naginata*, in self-defence, as well as how to use the dagger which they carried about their person to sever the jugular vein when in extreme danger of dishonour, or when following their husband in death.

The young *bushi* male came of age at fifteen or sixteen, with the celebration of his *genbuku* ceremony. This was a very solemn event, which began with the initiand spending a night in solitary vigil in a Buddhist temple. There is one famous example of this vigil having taken place in a Shinto shrine, namely the *genbuku* of Minamoto Yoshiie (1041–1108), also known as *Hachiman Taro*, "the eldest son of Hachiman", i.e. the Shinto God of War. Yoshiie's famous sobriquet is variously said to derive from his legendary martial prowess or from the place where his *genbuku* was performed. The following day the young man was clothed in the formal robes of a *bushi* and received his adult first name, *jitsumyō*, which was henceforth used instead of his childhood name, *dōmyō*. We may note that the next change of name took place if and when he took the tonsure and became a Buddhist monk, and that the final name, *shōmyō*, was bestowed upon him posthumously. To further complicate matters, high-ranking *bushi* holding public office within the *Bakufu* were commonly addressed by their titles. The initiand's first *eboshi*, the formal male head-gear made of stiff black gauze or horse-hair, was tied on by his *eboshi-oya*, "hat-godfather". Originally the head-gear donned at the *genbuku* ceremony of a *kuge* was the *kanmuri*, a flat skull-cap with a horn-like appendage at the back which covered the wearer's top-knot. The *eboshi*, worn on non-ceremonial occasions at the Imperial court, was either a soft paper or cloth cap which could be worn underneath a helmet, or a stiffened black conical cap with cords tied under the chin. Its top was folded over slightly, and the members of the Taira and Minamoto families enjoyed the exclusive privilege of wearing their *eboshi* bent towards the right or left respectively. The *eboshi-oya* was usually an older male relative or friend of the family, preferably someone of high rank or holding an influential position in society, and the relationship between him and his protégé lasted throughout their lives. The adult *bushi* male also wore his hair in a distinctive style, with the hair at the back and sides grown long and gathered in a tightly bound queue which was bent upwards and forwards and rested on the shaven crown of the head. This hair-style appears to have developed originally in order to provide a cushion when a helmet was worn. In the Heian period a young man's teeth were blackened for the first time on the occasion of his *genbuku*. After the *Genpei* War, however, during which the Taira warriors had worn blackened teeth and the victorious Minamoto side had not, the custom of tooth-blackening among *bushi* males gradually became obsolete. By the fourteenth century

and the beginning of the Ashikaga *Bakufu* (1330–1573), the only males to adhere to this custom were the *kuge* and members of the imperial family. Emperor Meiji ceased blackening his teeth in 1868, soon after having been seen for the first time by Western diplomats in audience. How closely associated with men of high rank the practice of blackening the teeth had become, also in the minds of lower-ranking samurai, is illustrated by a memoir recording events in the late sixteenth century. The author, Yamada An, had been present at a siege as a young girl, and had personally helped to blacken the teeth of severed enemy heads in order to increase their value, as there were substantial rewards and great honour attached to the feat of taking the head of a high-ranking opponent in battle. (Blomberg 1990: 246.) Among women, the practice of tooth-blackening continued, and in fact spread to all social strata, so that the use of *o-haguro* became an indication that a woman was married. When a young girl blackened her teeth for the first time, at the age of thirteen or when she was engaged to be married, she was assisted by a “god-mother”, *kane-oya*, and sat facing the south, the most auspicious direction, in a ceremony reminiscent of the *genbuku* among the *bushi*. The second day of the first month was traditionally chosen as the day when women first blackened their teeth in the New Year.

One of the corner-stones in the education of a *bushi* was *Bun-Bu*, “learning and the art of war”, a term which appeared already in the first legal texts written specifically for the *bushi*, the so-called “house laws” of Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–99), the first Kamakura *Shōgun*, compiled for the use of his personal vassals. *Bun*, “learning”, referred to the Chinese classics, i.e. the Confucian texts, which continued to be required reading for all schoolboys until modern times. *Bu* included every martial pursuit, from strategy and the drawing of maps to horsemanship and swordfighting techniques. Great emphasis was placed on literacy and mental agility, and although there were many samurai who adhered to Amidist Buddhism, e.g. the *Jōdo*, “pure land” schools, the more intellectually demanding Zen Buddhism, especially the *Rinzai* school, also held a great attraction for pragmatic warriors.

The chief attribute of the *bushi* was without question his sword. From the thirteenth century the two-handed, single-edged sword, slightly curved at the tip for greater force to the blow when used by a mounted swordsman, superseded the long-bow, also a formidable weapon. The sword was inseparable from its owner, and often given a name to commemorate some particular feat performed with it. The actual process of forging a sword required great skill and lengthy preparation, and became surrounded by a great deal of ceremony. The smith, who ranked far above other artisans, was not infrequently of *buke* or even *kuge* stock. He underwent various purification rites, sometimes including a pilgrimage, before undertaking his work, and women, for reasons of possible pollution, were banned from

the smithy at all times. Buddhist or Shinto deities were invoked during the process of forging, including Kannon (Sanskrit: Avalokiteśvara), the Bodhisattva of Mercy, and Inari, the Shinto god of rice and hence prosperity who was the patron of swordsmiths. For the final ceremony, when the finished blade was signed and invested with its *tama*, "vital spirit", the swordsmith wore the robes of a Shinto priest. The association of Buddhist deities with swords goes back to the idea of the "sword of wisdom" (Sanskrit: *prajñā*) and the many minor deities, e.g., the *Myō-ō* and the *Shi-tennō*, who are depicted brandishing swords with which to repel enemies of the faith. The names of such deities were often inscribed on the blade, just below the hilt, in the form of *bonji*, cyphers, of modified Sanskrit characters, and images of *Fudō Myō-ō*, the terrible aspect of Mahavairocana Buddha, a sword, or a dragon were also engraved. By shedding blood and taking life the warrior sinned against the central tenets of both Shinto and Buddhism, knowingly condemning himself to an unfavourable rebirth as an *asura*, "infernal spirit", in one of the Buddhist hells, of which there are ten cold and ten hot ones. If he died on the battlefield grasping the hilt of his sword, engraved with a *bonji* or religious image, there was a chance, however, of a more favourable rebirth. Because of its power to repel evil influences a sword was customarily put in the room of a newborn infant and beside the bier of a corpse.¹

When a vassal entered the service of a feudal lord a ceremony was held in which he swore an oath of fealty and received a gift in confirmation of the contract, often a sword or a horse. During the Tokugawa *Bakufu* (1603–1868) this ceremony, *genzan*, came to resemble the traditional Shinto wedding, with an exchange of toasts in *sake* between lord and vassal. In this context it is worth noting that the oath of fealty was usually undertaken for the duration of three existences, *shūjū sanze no katame*. The oath was made orally, but in times of grave crisis a written oath, *kishōmōn*, might be necessary, sometimes signed with a *keppan*, "blood-seal", a fingerprint made with the signatory's own blood, beneath his official signature. (Blomberg 1994: 91–104.)

The sword, being present at every important event in the life of a samurai, came to be regarded as a symbol of its owner or even as his soul. The state of the sword reflected a man's character, and to keep the blade spotless was to keep his honour intact. After 1588, when the peasant population was disarmed after a prolonged period of internal strife, the sword became the exclusive property of the *bushi*. The pair of swords, one long, *katana*, and one short, *wakizashi*, was known as *dai-shō* and became the outward sign of the privilege of belonging to the warrior nobility, an advantage

1 For a discussion of the significance of swords in Japan see Blomberg 1994: 48–71 and *passim*.

which was jealously guarded by the samurai. This prized possession was the last thing a destitute *bushi* would part with, since it symbolized his very being, set him apart from the *profanum vulgus* and represented the allegiance he owed his lord.

From the fourteenth century, when the term *daimyō*, "great name", was first used to denote the feudal lords, they gained a certain amount of autonomy due to a weakening in *shōgunal* influence. After the period of civil war, *Sengoku jidai*, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Tokugawa *Bakufu* was established in 1603, and a dynasty of Tokugawa *Shōguns* ruled for over 250 years, enforcing a rigid class system. The *daimyō* were obliged to swear personal allegiance to the *Shōgun* and were prevented from contracting alliances of any kind, including marriage, across the boundaries of their fiefs without his express permission. The same applied to their own vassals, whose lives were regulated in minute detail, including the colours and materials used in their clothing, authorisation to travel in a palanquin, *norimon*, and even the number of dishes which could be served at a formal banquet.² The Tokugawa period was peaceful, and the *bushi* were employed as civil servants rather than as active warriors, although they were never allowed to neglect their martial skills. During this period of strictly enforced peace in Japan the term *Bushidō*, "the way of the warrior", was first used by the Confucian scholar Yamaga Sokō (1622–85), who began codifying the concept of chivalrous behaviour and discussing the *raison d'être* of the samurai in his writings in the 1650s.

From the time of his *genbuku* a vassal was under his lord's orders. A lordless samurai, *rōnin*, had little hope of being accepted into the service of another lord, and one of the few careers open to him was to take up a position as fencing-master. Particularly during the centuries of intermittent warfare it was also not uncommon for a *bushi* to take the tonsure and become a Buddhist monk in order to pray for those he had killed in battle. Whatever his social status, whether he was a wealthy *daimyō* or a penniless *rōnin*, the samurai was an object of awe and admiration on the part of the common people. There was also an element of terror, due to the fact that a *bushi* had the right to cut down an insolent commoner on the spot.

Under the peaceful conditions of Tokugawa Japan there was increasing prosperity, however, and a bourgeoisie of wealthy merchants and artisans began to appear in the late seventeenth century. For their entertainment new forms of literature, music and theatre developed, e.g. *kabuki*, a colourful popular theatre very far removed from the hieratic and restrained *Nō* play favoured by the *bushi*. The burgeoning city life also attracted less desirable elements, and an urban sub-culture of actors, strolling players and other kinds of entertainers emerged, joined also by runaway apprentices, ab-

2 For a discussion of the rigours of *bushi* life see Blomberg 1993: *passim*.

sconded peasants and low-ranking samurai. Among these there developed a group of criminal or half-criminal men engaged in extortion or protection schemes in connection with gambling and prostitution, the so-called *otokodate*, "stalwarts", who swaggered about wearing *kimonos* with particularly eye-catching, usually chequered, patterns and carrying exceptionally long swords or long and heavy metal tobacco pipes which could be used as lethal weapons. The *otokodate* formed gangs, known as *kin-gin gumi*, "gold and silver gangs", where the distinguishing mark was a gold or silver inlay in a maxillary incisor, an interesting revival of dental ornamentation among males. Tattooing was chiefly used as a form of punishment for convicted criminals in Japan. The polychrome tattoos depicting dragons and mythical scenes which occurred among the *otokodate* seem to have originated in an effort to conceal the convicts' stripes tattooed around the upper arm, one for each conviction, and to this day there is a strong association in Japan between tattooing and criminals. Not all tattoos belonged to criminals, however. Fishermen and firemen traditionally decorated their bodies with luxuriant polychrome tattoos. Minor Buddhist deities, particularly *Fudō Myō-ō*, dominated among the motifs chosen, and were considered to offer protection against harm.

With the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when the political power reverted to the emperor and the *shōgunate* was abolished, the privileges of the *bushi* came to an end. The samurai class was abolished in 1876, but everything connected with the former rulers, including the ideas of *Bushidō*, continued to be regarded as an ideal and in fact spread to all classes of society. Vestiges of *bushi* rites of passage still exist to this day, beginning with the *shichi-gosan*, "seven-five-three", a ceremony which is traditionally held in November. Girls aged three and seven and boys aged five are brought to a Shinto shrine, the girls wearing colourful *kimono* with all the accoutrements and the boys dressed in the formal male costume of *hakama*, wide silk trousers which are nowadays ankle-length, and *haori*, the short black silk coat bearing the family crest, *mon*. The *genbuku* ceremony may perhaps be said to have been replaced by the university entrance examination, a major stumbling-block in the lives of a very significant proportion of young men and women in Japan. Once accepted at a university, however, they are virtually assured of receiving a degree when they leave. During the last terms at university most students enter the competition for acceptance as trainees in a large company or corporation. Although the famous system of life-long employment appears to be on the wane in today's Japan every company employee, from the lift attendant to the managing director, is regarded as a representative of the firm and expected to behave accordingly. When the new recruits enter the company to begin their training a collective ceremony, *nyūshashiki*, is held. This often contains an element of trial or austerity, with the initiands, as it were, undergoing some physical hardship together. They

might, for example, be assigned to spending a week as mendicant monks soliciting alms, cleaning the office lavatories, or living in a hut by the grave of the firm's founder, weeding and cleaning the tombstone and grave site.

Marriage is the definitive step into adult life, and still regarded as indispensable for a man who wishes to advance in his career, although there are signs that this is about to change, especially where female employees are concerned. A woman traditionally married into her husband's family, but in recent years an increasing number of widows have declined to be buried in the family tomb, stating quite bluntly that they have no wish to continue waiting hand and foot on their husband during subsequent existences. This is very different behaviour from that of the obedient and subservient samurai wife, who was expected to suffer in dignified silence during her marriage, and renounce the world and become a Buddhist nun in her widowhood.

Suicide still remains an honourable means of surmounting an impossible situation in the eyes of society at large, and a man who shows exceptional courage or fortitude in adversity is still commended for living up to the ideals of *Bushidō*.

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