

# BLACK OPS

## Weapons and tools of the Ninja

Researcher Antony Cummins tells the truth about this most misunderstood covert field operative, the ultimate commando of medieval Japan



ABOVE: The Ninja, from a series of sketches (Hokusai manga) by Hokusai  
Woodblock print on paper. Volume six, 1817

RIGHT: The crest or 'Mon' of the Tokugawa family

From its original form the word 'Ninja' has been distorted and manipulated – possibly with very deliberate intention. One of the reasons the term is so common within the English language is that there is no direct translation from the Japanese; the most common interpretation in popular belief is that of a ruthless assassin or sorcerer with mystic powers.

The problem here is that neither is correct. Owing to a long history the Ninja are difficult to pinpoint, but we could classify them generally as spy, scout, pathfinder, tracker and infiltrator, as well as arsonist and cracksman. The Ninja, (also known as the 'Shinobi', the original reading of the word), was a commando, an SOE agent, SAS soldier and US Marine Recon specialist. He was, in short, the ultimate Field Intelligence Agent of medieval Japan.

'Ninjutsu' (also 'shinobi-no-jutsu') in essence is an occupation, the word 'Nin' or 'Shinobu' being the body of these skills and 'jutsu' the practical means of applying them. Nin-jutsu was a set of skills obtained and used

by various people within society: history has shown that people from all social strata could be Ninja, such as members of the Hattori family and the Natori family, who were of samurai rank – down to the unknown shinobi-shu or unnamed Ninja-troops that accompanied armies. In the Sengoku or 'Warring Period' in Japan the concept of a rigid social hierarchy had not yet been fully established, and while the aristocracy and warrior elite did exist, social mobility was not restricted. This period was also the Golden Age of the Ninja.

What unified all of these people no matter which section of society they were from was a loosely based curriculum that today we would consider to be Ninjutsu. However, the whole of this curriculum was by no means understood by all Ninja; consequently, each practitioner would have been assessed or used in accordance with his depth and understanding of this collective system and his particular skills.

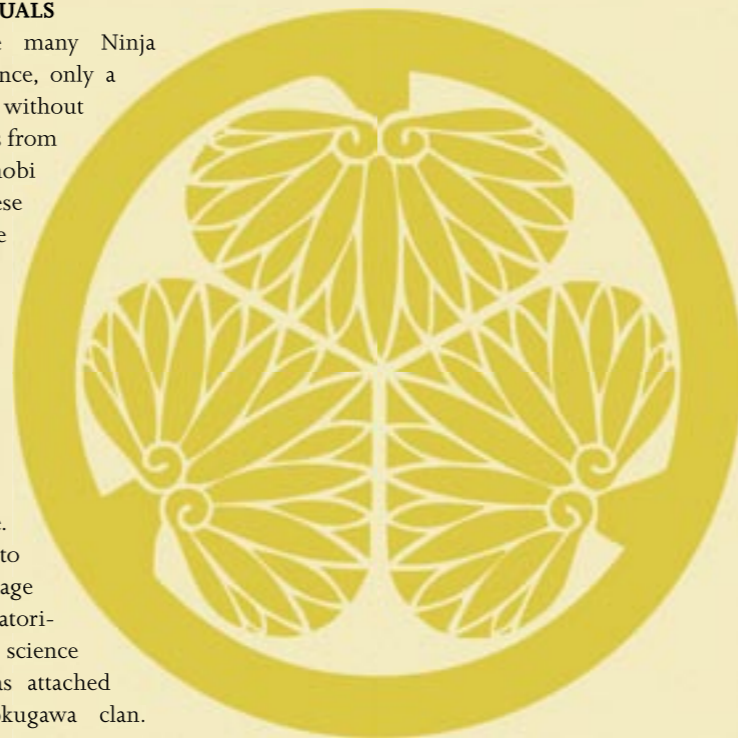
### THE NINJA MANUALS

While there are many Ninja manuals in existence, only a few hold authority without question, left to us from actual Ninja/Shinobi of the past. These manuals are the Bansenshukai, the Ninpiden and the Shoninki. 'The True Path of the Ninja' is an instructional manual written in 1681 by Natori Masatake. It is considered to be the espionage teachings of the Natori-Ryu military science school which was attached to the Kishu-Tokugawa clan.

The book is divided into four main sections and concentrates primarily on spycraft as it was a post-Warring Periods manual. Therefore it has limited uses for gunpowder and highly destructive weapons.

The book includes an introduction, which sets the standard for what it means to be a Ninja and establishes the origins of the Ninja and their basic disguises. The first scroll then deals with the tools and equipment needed for Ninja/Shinobi missions and how to build them. It also deals with travelling incognito and how to infiltrate, providing basic tuition for the penetration agent in accordance with different teachings.

The second scroll of the manuscript covers misdirection, ritual magic, metrology and physiognomy, and the third focusses on the psychology of espionage and the art of deception, specifically the nature of lying, with an emphasis on the understanding of truth and falsehoods in collected information.



Together these manuals deliver the message that the historical Ninja were not shuriken-throwing figures leaping from tree to tree, disregarding the laws of physics. Instead it tells of an elite corps of professionals which conducted espionage and hardline guerrilla warfare, where torture, infiltration, demolitions and pre-emptive strikes were the order of the day. At the heart of this military branch were the innovative tools that helped the Ninja 'cause hell' among the enemy ranks.

### WEAPONS

The first thing one should set in concrete when considering the Ninja is that those objects many of us believe to be Ninja weapons are in fact not, i.e., shuriken (throwing stars), chain weapons, sickles, blowpipes and hidden sword-canes. None of these weapons have ever been attributed historically to the Ninja. They are actually well documented samurai weapons used within many of the martial schools of Japan, with easily traceable history and genealogy. Secondly, Ninjutsu or the art of the Ninja is not a martial art and Ninja weapons are not considered to be objects for hand to hand fighting. Instead, the Ninja had six primary tools which were considered to cover the basic requirements needed to perform their tasks and were listed within the Shoninki Ninja manual of 1681:

### THE SIX BASIC TOOLS

#### Amigasa 編笠 –

'The deep and wide straw hat'  
A basic disguise, the Ninja would use this deep braided hat to cover his face as headwear of this type was very common, making it easier to blend into the background of a crowd and allowing him to move around unnoticed. A samurai in rich silk robes and full sword mounts could hardly move about undetected.



#### Kaginawa 鉤繩

'The grappling hook'

This was considered a major tool and was used for climbing castle walls and obstacles. Its exact weight and hook construction is unknown. However, the Ninpiden shows a larger form, which is used for pulling down structures. Overall the manuals show many forms, leading to the conclusion that the size would depend on the task in hand.

#### Sekihitsu 石筆

'The stone pencil'

This was rolled clay, formed into a pencil shape and was used to collect information or to mark trees and such. A Ninja was primarily an information gatherer, thus the need to record was paramount.

#### Kusuri 薬

'Field medicine'

If the agent became injured or ill on his mission he may have to use the 'worm-killer' medicine, as in feudal Japan it was thought that worms were the cause of all stomach illnesses. We do not know what medicines he took with him, but it is understood that the Ninja had a great understanding of herbal remedies.

#### Sanjaku tenugui 三尺手拭

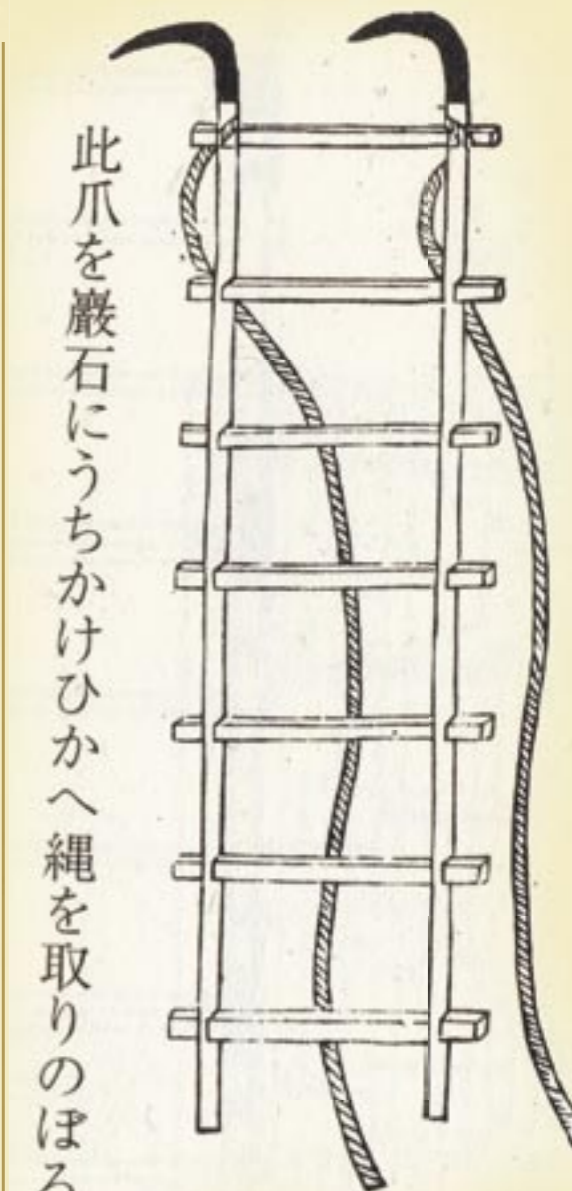
'A 90cm piece of cloth'

This section of cloth, roughly of 90cm in length, was used to cover the head or face and was also used as a headband or an extra length of rope. It was kept around the waist or folded away in his kimono jacket.

#### Uchitake 打竹

'A fire starting implement'

The Uchitake is a cylinder used as a fire-lighter, to start a campfire, commit arson, or light hand grenades. It consisted of a perforated bamboo tube which held treated vegetable



ABOVE: The grappling hook rope ladder, sketches from the Gunpo Jiyoshu scrolls of 1681

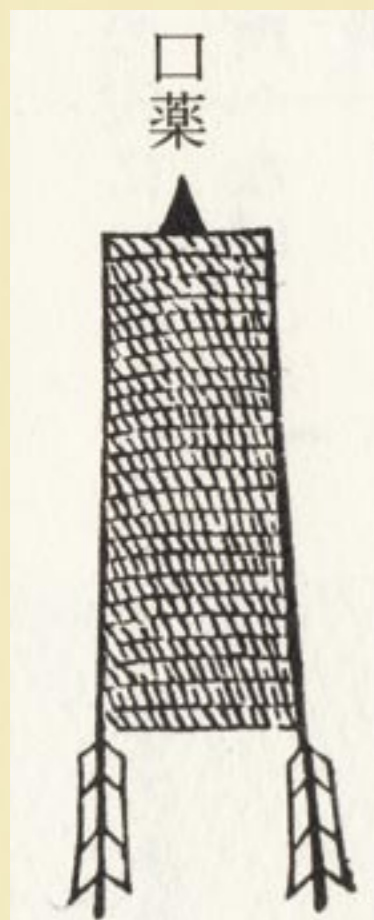
FAR LEFT: The caltrop, often used in bunches and dragged behind an agent to disguise his trail

LEFT: The Ninja watchfire 'gunpo jiyoshu'

matter that would burn slowly and keep embers glowing for a full day.

Other covert ops devices included a rudimentary message system using coloured rice; when working in teams scouting enemy terrain, each team member would be allotted a specific colour for secret communications. The False Wall gambit was a clever tactic used in the defence of a castle or fortress: the defending lord's Ninja would construct a false wall on a mountainside within the natural outline of the fortification, supporting it with guy-ropes to take its weight; when the enemy attempted to scale these false fortress ramparts the lines would be cut, the attackers flung to their destruction. False roads were built on riversides using clumps of reeds – tied together and floated in deep water, then weighted with stones, the anchored reeds would give the impression of shallow water, deceiving cavalry or foot soldiers ▷

into thinking it a ford, and possibly drowning a significant number of horse or foot. The grappling rod was another tool of the trade, constructed roughly from a grappling hook on a rope; but by sliding the rope through sections of bamboo spaced with coins, the Ninja could pull on the loose rope and create a rigid pole, much easier to climb to hand-holds or edges above. Ninja built rafts, using the rivers as a means of transport, designed a myriad of folding and extendable ladders, and constructed basic listening devices such as ear trumpets or resounding tubes for surveillance. As well as these the infiltrating agent would go prepared with basic breaking-and-entering equipment: saw, hand-drill, crowbar,

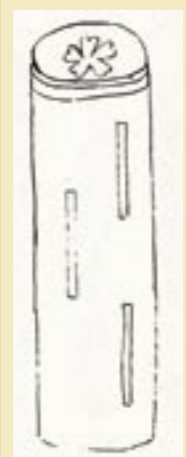
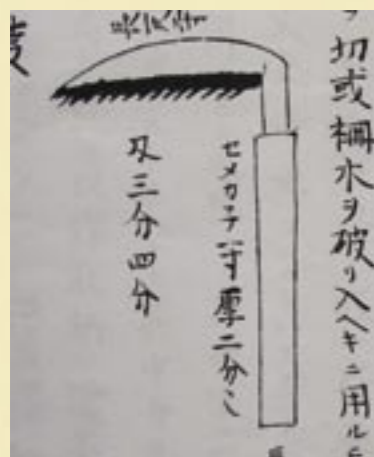


LEFT: The fire-arrow, a type of medieval Bangalore Torpedo, consisting of two bamboo shafts packed with gunpowder, it could be used as an incendiary or explosive device in sieges

BELOW RIGHT: The sickle saw, 'ninpiden', part of the Ninja's burglar equipment

BELOW: The Uchitake firelighter – a tube of bamboo packed with slow-burning paste, always ready to ignite fuses or start fires, lasting a whole day. (Natori Scrolls 1681)

RIGHT: The composite grappling hook with loose hooks, quickly assembled for a night assault and disassembled again for later use



chisel and skeleton keys: he was the ultimate cat burglar, who could lock watchmen in their rooms and unlock armouries and munitions stores.

**EXPLOSIVES**

The control of fire and the construction of torches was one of the mainstay skills of Ninjutsu, considering that most of their activities were conducted at night; indeed one Ninja could tell another by the way his torch burned. The Ninja had many ways of making travel torches, but usually it consisted of sections of wood or bamboo filled with flammable material and a form of black powder. There can be found examples of torches for any situation needed, from hand-held distance-running torches to braziers to flames actually cupped in the palm, which ignited only when the covered hand was opened – this apparently magical ability was simply the control of an oxygen-hungry ignition agent. Others abound, such as pine resin torches, as well as water- and wind-proof versions. All in all, the Ninja was a master at making portable fire devices and considered the art of torch construction to be of top priority. Consequently he was also the explosives expert in any army.

While the use of black powder to maim and confuse the enemy is archaic to the 21st century reader, the Ninja were at the top of the gunpowder game in the Middle Ages. Some research has estimated that black powder had been used in fireworks by the Chinese since the mid-9th century AD. The Ninja employed it in many forms, from earthenware fragmentation hand grenades to spring-loaded gunpowder-filled bamboo landmines, its usage the heart of Ninjutsu. To be ever-ready on a demolition op, a Ninja was instructed to 'carry fire with him'. The following extracts are taken from the 'Ninpiden' by Hattori Hanzo and the Gunpo Jyoshu by the samurai Ogasawara. They represent a short look at the Ninja's use of black powder and shed light on the reality of Ninja weapons.

'It is essential for a shinobi (Ninja) to carry embers. You have to sleep outdoors in the fields or the mountains, and in the enemy's province, thus, making it hard to ask a local resident for fire without causing suspicion. Alongside this, you sometimes need to make smoke signals, for example, when you are waiting for

your allies and such. Therefore, it is vital to have fire on you:

- Put embers in a small censer, and put it in a drawstring pouch to carry.
- Mix black burnt Sugihara paper and seaweed (Gloiopeltis Complanata) into a solid form, ignite it and sandwich it between two boards to carry. (Details to be orally taught)

**FOR TINDER:**

You should mix fine pieces of black burnt stems of the tobacco plant to the measurement of 5 momme (approx. 18.75g) and Potassium Nitrate to the measurement of 1 momme (approx. 3.75g).

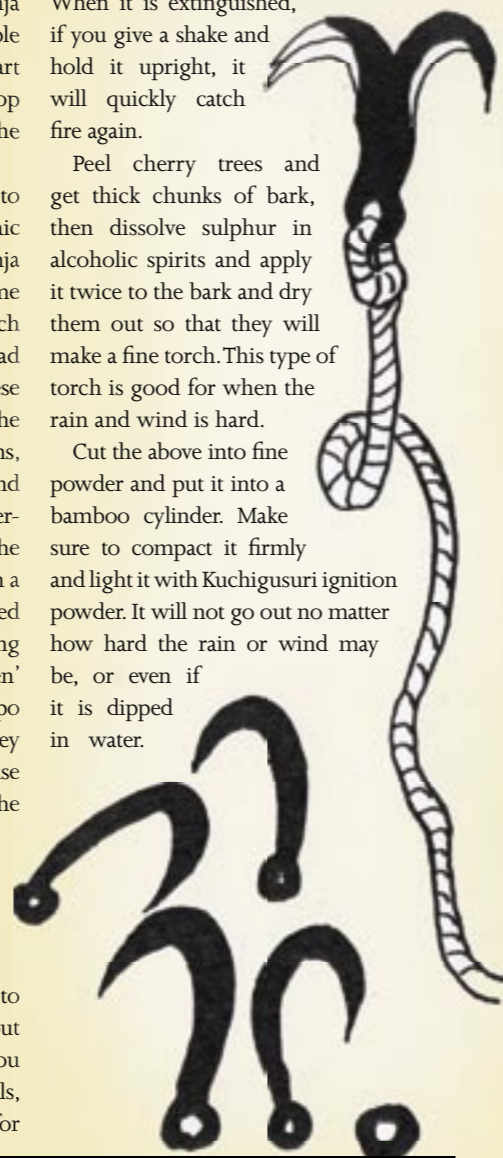
Then put it into a bamboo cylinder and carry it. It can be ignited amazingly easily.

The manual then goes on to detail the construction of torches and lanterns:

To make torches for regular use, you should split pine wood into thin pieces, tie them up with a thin rope as this will be the centre of the torch, then cover it all with a layer of bamboo. When it is extinguished, if you give a shake and hold it upright, it will quickly catch fire again.

Peel cherry trees and get thick chunks of bark, then dissolve sulphur in alcoholic spirits and apply it twice to the bark and dry them out so that they will make a fine torch. This type of torch is good for when the rain and wind is hard.

Cut the above into fine powder and put it into a bamboo cylinder. Make sure to compact it firmly and light it with Kuchigusuri ignition powder. It will not go out no matter how hard the rain or wind may be, or even if it is dipped in water.



However, it makes a loud noise so it is not suitable for a shinobi to carry.

Another design was for the Monomi Scouting torch, used to peer in windows or cavities.

Split a cedar board to get a piece of 4 or 5 Sun (12 or 15cm). Apply a little sulphur on the tip and hold it out.

Being demolition and ordnance experts, the Ninja were equally employed in the creation of explosive fire-arrows – effectively an early form of incendiary Bangalore Torpedo. Consisting of a hollow bamboo shaft packed with gunpowder, the launched arrow would embed itself in thatched rooves or penetrate walls and detonate structures, much like a modern tactical rocket. Even though self-propelled rockets were of Persian and Indian origin, this fire arrow of the Ninja was almost as effective.



**EXPLOSIVE DEVICES OF THE NINJA**

**Hand Grenade**

This was constructed from thin earthenware and packed with gunpowder and shrapnel. The nature of its fuse is unknown. It was designed to be thrown into crowds of the enemy like the standard British Type 36 of WWII, effectively making it comparable to the modern nail bomb.

**Landmine**

The Ninja used a box made of split bamboo and set up a pressure-activated compression trigger that would ignite a densely packed charge when stepped upon.

**Arson**

Ninja would cause supreme havoc by starting fires with compacted



ABOVE: One of the authoritative Natori-Ryu Ninjutsu scrolls by Natori, 1681

ABOVE RIGHT: Illustrated Ninjutsu instructions from one of the first spycraft field manuals (Private collection of Dr Nakashima Atsumi)

BELOW: The Ninja at work having penetrated an enemy fortification. (Print, possibly by Kuniyoshi)

black powder, having infiltrated an enemy fortification ahead of the main attacking army. It was a common trick for teams of Ninja to set multiple simultaneous fires in various buildings, resulting either in the destruction of the castle or compromising its proper defence through diversion.

**Throwing Torch**

This was a torch with a nail on its tip, thrown in groups at wooden structures before a night attack, used for illumination and general arson.

The above is only a small number of the tools used by the Ninja and represents the level of their technology and understanding in a world where the bow, spear and sword were the supreme weapons. This shows us the extraordinary levels the Ninja achieved and their knowledge should be celebrated. However, for a collector of military artefacts the Ninja is truly a ghost in the shadows. Most of the weapons he deployed either rotted away or exploded – archaeologically it is as if the Ninja never existed. It is only through their historical manuals that we know anything about them and their unique skills. ☒

For translations of five of the Ninja scrolls please see Antony Cummins' work 'True Path of the Ninja' and 'True Ninja Traditions' or for free downloads and other information go to [www.natori.co.uk](http://www.natori.co.uk) 'True Path of the Ninja' By Antony Cummins & Yoshie Minami is the first of a series of original Ninja manuals and will be released on 10 March 2011, by Tuttle Publishing. Visit [www.natori.co.uk](http://www.natori.co.uk)

**Further Reading**  
For information on Ninja tools, see 'True Ninja Traditions - The Ninpiden & the Unknown Ninja Scroll'.