

The Truth about the African Samurai

YASUKE



Article by A. R. Turner

Delve into the documented evidence of Yasuke's role and status in Japan. By meticulously examining the available historical records, we shed light on whether Yasuke truly earned the title of samurai.

Yasuke, at this juncture, needs no introduction. The once obscure 16th century historical figure has become a flashpoint in popular media, and a topic argued over with an intensity and ferocity that would make a samurai blush. Well, it's high time the virtual blood-letting cease. Warriors, sheath your swords! Let the feuding be at an end, so that worthy brothers may embrace once more. Here, once and for all, is the definitive truth about Yasuke.

Yasuke has become well known to Westerners of late as 'the African Samurai'. However, this title is bitterly disputed. The first part, 'African', isn't contentious. Whilst Yasuke's exact point of origins are lost to time, it's clear from descriptions that he belonged to a sub-Saharan ethnic group. The area today known as Mozambique is an oft-quoted preposed homeland for Yasuke.

However, Yasuke's status as 'samurai' is the real issue here. This brief article aims to clarify any confusion upon that point by referencing historical sources.

The Texts:

The first quote we will look at comes from a document called the letada Nikki. It is a diary kept by Matsudaira letada, a vassal of Tokugawa Ieyasu, from 1575 to 1594. The diary gives a concise account of each day over many years, with topics ranging from epic wars and political struggles, to banalities about the weather. Here's the entry about Yasuke:

In the original Japanese:

「上様御ふち候大うす進上申候、くろ男御つれ候、身ハすみノコトク、タケハ六尺二分、名ハ弥介と云」 In modernised Japanese: 「信長様が、扶持を与えたという、宣教師から進呈されたという、黒人を連れておられた。身は墨のようで、身長は約 1.82メートル、名は弥助と云うそうだ。」

In English:

Oda Nobunaga gave a stipend to a black man presented originally to him by the missionaries. His body was wholly black, and he stood at six shaku and two (1.82m); name of Yasuke. (English translation is my own; it parses both original and modern Japanese) The second source we'll look at is from the Sonkeikaku (Maeda Clan) version of the Shinchōkōki ('The Chronicles of Oda Nobunaga'), originally written by Ōta Gyūichi:

The original Japanese:

「然に彼黒坊被成御扶持、名を八号弥助と、さや巻之のし付并私宅等迄被仰付、依時御道具などもたさせられ候」

English:

This black man called Yasuke was given a stipend, a private residence,



&c., and was given a short sword with a decorative sheath.

He is sometimes seen in the role of weapon bearer.

Modernised Japanese:

「黒人は信長様から家臣として召し抱えられて俸禄を得た。名前は弥助とされた。短刀と屋敷なども与えられた。時折、信長様の道具を運ばされた」

English:

The black man was made a retainer by Lord Nobunaga and granted a stipend

His name was Yasuke. He was outfitted with a short sword and a house and such. He sometimes would carry tools for Lord Nobunaga.

Here I've provided a separate translation for the original Japanese and a modernised version respectively to show how some nuances can also change based on how the language is updated for modern readers.

Was Yasuke a Samurai?

These two passages from the letada Nikki and Shinchōkōki (Sonkeikaku-hon) demonstrate that Yasuke received a stipend from Nobunaga, and that Yasuke received a residence from Nobunaga. These facts make it unambiguous that Yasuke was a retainer of Oda Nobunaga. Thus, Yasuke was a samurai.

Don't stop reading!

Now I'll attempt to elucidate the details, the missing context, and hopefully leave you better off for it than when we began.

The Stipend:

Firstly, Yasuke's stipend. Both texts contain the term 'fuchi (ふち・扶持)'. This is a stipend given to samurai by their lords. Throughout the Shinchōkōki the term is used exclusively to refer to stipends given to samurai.

The combination of a stipend and a residence being granted is important in establishing the relationship between Nobunaga and Yasuke. Oda Nobunaga wasn't just in the process of unifying Japan when he died; he was transforming it.

In a trend which would define master-vassal relations for the next three centuries, the Azuchi period, during which Oda Nobunaga ruled most of Japan, was characterised by the transition of bushi (samurai) from small, semi-autonomous landowners to retainers wholly dependent upon and beholden to their liege.

Rather than maintaining small rural plots here and there, bushi were increasingly consolidated into jōkamachi (castle-towns). Their homes would be delineated from the residences of other castes, in orbit around the lord's residence at the centre of the castle. In exchange for giving up their own land, they would be assigned a residence in the jōkamachi by their lord.

Instead of overseeing their own land, bushi would delegate agricultural responsibilities to peasants. The peasants were then taxed (heavily). Everything went to the daimyō (feudal lord), and then he divvied up his income between his retainers. This was a samurai's stipend.

The Sword:

Yasuke, as per the Shinchōkōki, likely not having a weapon of his own, also received a sword from Lord Nobunaga. It was a small sword or koshigatana (sword worn at the hip). This is just my opinion, but I can't imagine that Yasuke would've had much use for it other than in a dire emergency... such as using it to kill himself. By the way, it's important to remember that the rule about only samurai being allowed - indeed being obliged - to carry two swords came about in the Edo period, so it wouldn't've applied to Yasuke (as an aside, in the Edo period merchants could also buy the privilege of wearing two swords, so it's debatable whether it was really exclusive to samurai).

Yasuke the Page:

Let's turn to the mention in the Shinchōkōki of Yasuke 'bearing tools'. The word 'dōgu (道具)' means 'tools', but it does appear in the context of the original quote to refer to the duties of a sword-bearer. For this reason, historians have suggested that Yasuke likely had the role of a koshō (小姓). A koshō is the Japanese equivalent of a page(boy).

To be clear, there is no document that I know of that explicitly says Yasuke was a koshō. This is our collective assumption, or best guess, as it were. I also need to make this clear: a koshō, though usually a younger man or boy in his teens, was by default a samurai. The heroic Mori Ranmaru, for example, who died alongside Oda Nobunaga, was also Nobunaga's koshō. It was a privileged position and many koshō would go on to be high ranking samurai and daimyō. Only a samurai could be a koshō.

Yasuke the Retainer:

Other terms which have been applied to Yasuke but don't actually appear in the original source materials above are 'kashin (家臣)' and 'kerai (家来)'. These words both mean 'retainer', and, again, necessarily refer to samurai. These sometimes appear in transliterations about Yasuke as a reading aid for modern people familiar with historical terminology. They are inferred from context, but I think it's important to be clear about what the original texts do and do not say.



Again, there is no issue about whether or not these terms apply to samurai; they necessarily do.

Bushi in Transition:

Bushi were an entire class of people. Most bushi were born with bushi status, but in the turbulent Sengoku period, many of the lower born non-bushi, through cunning, grit and opportunism, transitioned classes. You may have heard before of a certain son of an ashigaru (foot soldier / peasant conscript) who went on to become regent of all Japan. Many, many samurai also reverted to farming during this period and were disenfranchised of their bushi status. Big names like Oda Nobunaga juggled enfranchising talented up-and-comers with appeasing long-time loyalists who weren't always acquiescent about having new competition for promotions and stipends. If a samurai found himself on the losing side of a battle, or fell out of favour with his lord, he might lose his way of life. It is also important to remember that whilst bushi were expected to fight and die for their lord, not all bushi were expert fighters or saw personal combat. Bushi occupied many roles both on and off the battlefield. A good daimyō would put his retainers in roles where they were most able to exert their talents, though many positions became hereditary over time.

Yasuke the Samurai:

Whilst we may collectively have a somewhat romanticised notion of what a samurai should be, a samurai was, technically speaking, defined by his relationship to a feudal lord. When it comes to Yasuke, there are several qualities he may have possessed which prompted Nobunaga to enfranchise him by making him his retainer. However, Yasuke's status as a samurai was not dependent upon martial arts training, family lineage, time spent in Japan, feats of strength, his African heritage, his former

experiences, or even his command of the Japanese language; his status as samurai was determined only by his relationship with Nobunaga.

And it should be noted that Yasuke wasn't just any retainer, he was - it's pretty clear - a kinshin (近臣), wherein '臣' means 'retainer' and '近' means 'close' or 'near'. Yasuke was a close retainer of Nobunaga, an attendant - and likely page - in the generalissimo's entourage, or inner circle.

What did Yasuke do?

I haven't touched on them yet, prioritising Japanese documentation, but there are also Jesuit accounts of Yasuke. I don't read 16th century Portuguese, but these accounts would imply Yasuke knew at least some Japanese, and was able to converse with Oda Nobunaga. Another missionary account pertaining to what went down at Honnōji implies that Yasuke may have engaged in combat during the incident, but the details are unclear, and it is said that he surrendered to Akechi Mitsuhide's troops and was delivered back into the care of the Jesuits "in India".



“Yasuke, as per the Shinchōkōki, likely not having a weapon of his own, also received a sword from Lord Nobunaga. It was a small sword or koshigatana.”

What didn't Yasuke do?

Although there are many details we don't know about Yasuke, and his deeds are not well documented, these are some things he most certainly didn't do... He did not act as Oda Nobunaga's kaishakunin ('second'); it is widely believed that Ranmaru assisted Nobunaga in his seppuku shortly before the pair of them were both incinerated at Honnōji. Yasuke did not carry away either Nobunaga's head or a death-mask from Nobunaga.

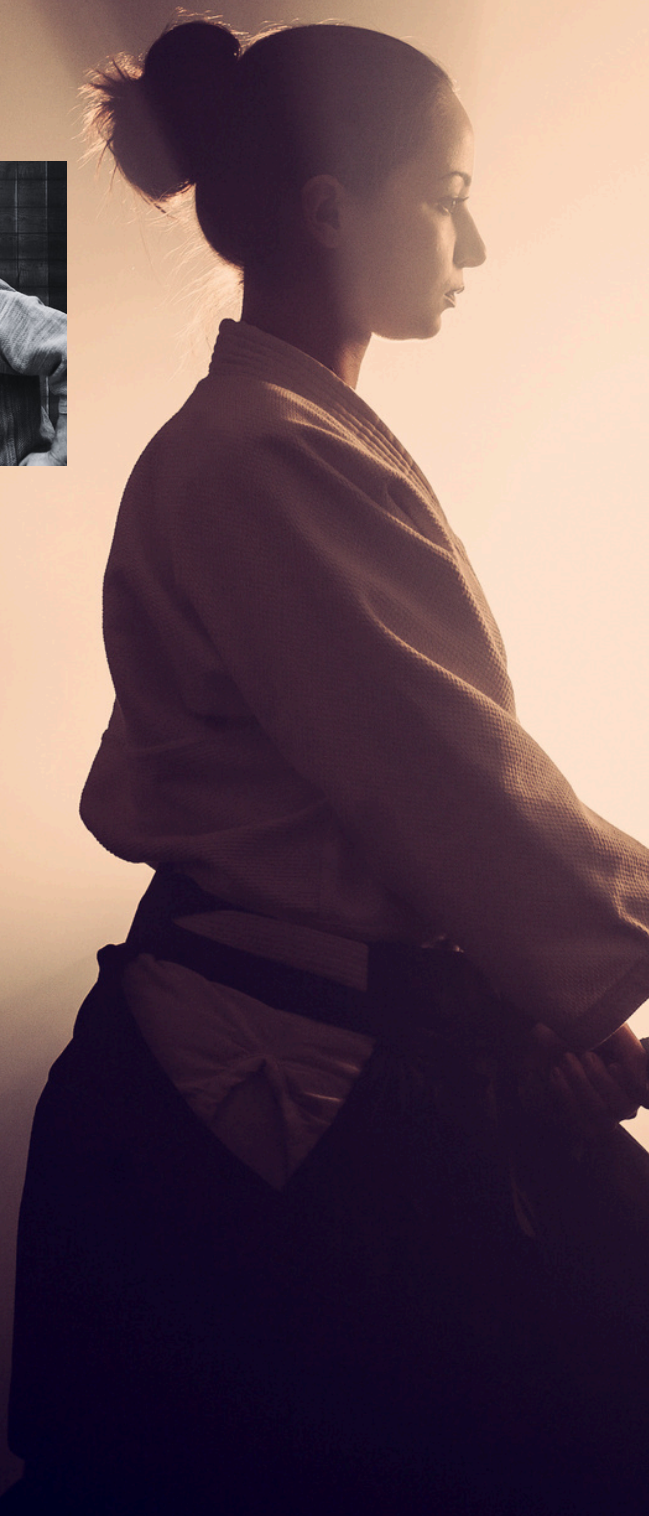
Yasuke the Legend:

Given the paucity of detailed information about the life and deeds of Yasuke, many people have taken to speculation. We have established that Yasuke was Oda Nobunaga's retainer, but we don't know why Nobunaga decided to enfranchise Yasuke. Was it because he thought Yasuke would be of some use as a bodyguard; because he found Yasuke intriguing; or, did he just want yet another exotic curio to parade around? People will make up their own minds about that as they like. We despise a void! As is inevitable with the human experience, we'll pour into the unknown our imagination, aspirations and creativity, and so fill in the unknown with legend. For better or worse, we have in recent years witnessed the birth of the legend of Yasuke, African Samurai.



1950

THE YEAR RENOWNED
JAPANESE MARTIAL
ARTIST TETSUZAN
KURODA WAS BORN. THE
15TH HEAD OF
SHINBUKAN KURODA
BUJUTSU PASSED AWAY
EARLIER THIS YEAR





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TYPES OF
PRACTICAL
TRAINING
FOR SHINOBI
ACCORDING
TO THE KOKA
RYU DENSHO

1. SPIRITUAL 2.
MEDICINAL 3.
CRAFTSMANSHIP 4.
FARMING 5. THE
ARTS

1000

DISTANCE IN FEET A
SHINOBI COULD HEAR AN
APPROACHING CAVALRY
UNIT WITH THEIR EAR TO
THE GROUND

60

NUMBER OF MILES A NINJA
COULD COVER IN ONE DAY
ACCORDING TO THE ORAL
TRADITIONS OF KATORI
SHINTO RYU

NINJUTSU BY NUMBERS



New video series delves into the history, skills, and tools of Japan's iconic warriors.

What does it take to become a ninja or samurai? These legendary warriors required a unique blend of skills: precise weapons handling, stealthy movements, expert social engineering, wilderness survival, marathon endurance, and top-notch navigation.

In a new series from the makers of 'Inside Ninjutsu', *Ninja Quest* takes you on a journey into the world of the famed Japanese soldiers and renowned medieval spies. Host Chris Kaye sets out to learn the skills that made these revered warriors the iconic figures they are today.

NINJA
Quest

In these exciting featurettes, Kaye immerses himself in the rich history and rigorous training of the samurai and ninja. The journey begins with a visit to a military museum, where viewers can delve into the history of the samurai and explore their formidable weapons and armour.



Kaye then drops into a martial arts class, where ancient techniques are still taught and practiced, offering a rare glimpse into the disciplined training regimes that shaped these legendary warriors. But the adventure doesn't stop there. Kaye also gets hands-on with the infiltration tools the shinobi would have used



during their intelligence-gathering missions.

Ninja Quest promises to be a captivating series that not only educates but also entertains. By combining historical insights with practical demonstrations, it provides a comprehensive look at what it truly means to be a ninja or samurai.

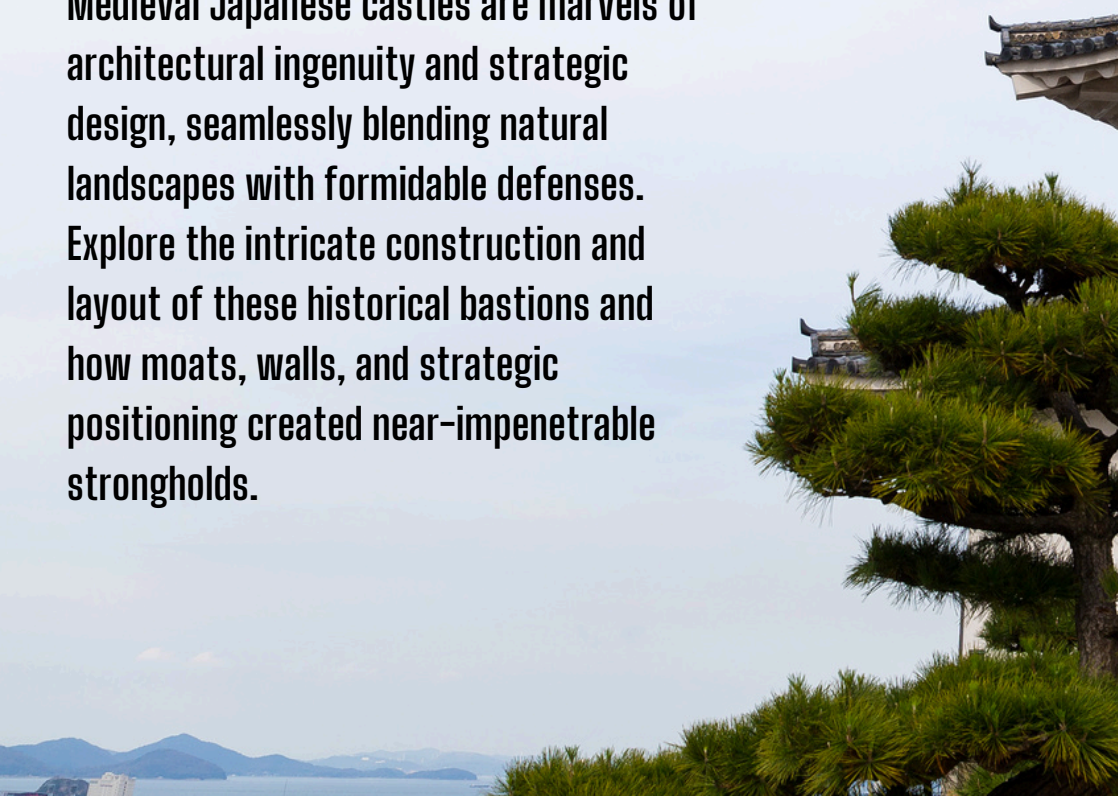
Watch the new series on the Inside Ninjutsu YouTube channel, and prepare to be transported to the fascinating world of Japan's iconic warriors.



SAMURAI

STRONGHOLDS

Medieval Japanese castles are marvels of architectural ingenuity and strategic design, seamlessly blending natural landscapes with formidable defenses. Explore the intricate construction and layout of these historical bastions and how moats, walls, and strategic positioning created near-impenetrable strongholds.







UNYIELDING DEFENDERS:

JAPANESE CASTLE FORTIFICATIONS

Japanese castles, known as "shiro" or "jō," are enduring symbols of Japan's feudal era, constructed primarily from wood and stone. These fortresses evolved significantly over time, reaching their most iconic forms in the 16th century. Initially designed as wooden stockades, Japanese castles were strategically placed to protect vital locations such as

ports, river crossings, and crossroads, with their defenses often integrating seamlessly with the natural landscape.

Despite their robust construction, Japanese castles were predominantly wooden, making them vulnerable to destruction, particularly during the tumultuous Sengoku period (1467–1603). Many of these castles were rebuilt during the Edo period (1603–1867) or more recently restored as national heritage sites and museums, preserving their historical significance.

Typically constructed atop hills or artificial mounds, Japanese castles not only benefited

from natural defensive advantages but also commanded impressive views and imposing presences. This strategic positioning was similar to European motte-and-bailey castles, enhancing both defense and intimidation.

The Structure of Kuruwa

The "kuruwa" refers to areas enclosed by moats, earthen walls, or stone walls, crucial for the defense of a castle. These enclosures, also known as "maru" in the Edo period, include the main enclosure or "honmaru," with additional layers such as the "ninomaru" (second bailey) and "sannomaru."

Outer Compounds and Defense Lines

As castles transitioned from temporary military bases to permanent seats of power, outer defense lines, or "sotoguruwa," were established to protect the castle towns and their inhabitants. These outer compounds incorporated natural features like mountains and rivers, adding layers of defense.



The grounds are fortified with a myriad of defences



Defensive Features: Kirigishi, Moats, and Walls

Defensive bluffs, known as "kirigishi," along with moats and earthen walls, were foundational in early mountain castles. Over time, stone walls became more prevalent, particularly during the Azuchi-Momoyama period, as civil engineering advanced and the need for fortified structures increased.

Castle Entrances: Koguchi

Castle entrances, or "koguchi,"

were designed with winding paths and fortified gates to prevent direct access by enemies. Main gates like the "ote-mon" and rear gates such as the "karamete-mon" were heavily protected. Innovative bridge designs, including retractable and drawbridges, further secured these entrances.

Defensive Fences and Turrets

Fences, or "hei," and turrets, or "yagura,"

played vital roles in the defense and functionality of a castle. Fences varied in design, from mud walls to fire-resistant plastered walls, and featured loopholes for firing weapons. Turrets served as lookout points, warehouses, and additional defensive structures, often named based on their location or function.

The Majestic Tenshu

The "tenshu," or castle keep, stood as the ultimate stronghold and symbol of the castle. Originating as large watchtowers, tenshu evolved into multi-story structures, with some reaching heights of 20 to 30 meters, like the renowned Himeji Castle. These grand edifices epitomized the peak of Japanese castle architecture during the Battle of Sekigahara and beyond.

Japanese castles, with their intricate defenses and strategic designs, remain a testament to the ingenuity and resilience of Japan's feudal era. Their historical and architectural legacy continues to captivate martial artists and historians alike, preserving the rich heritage of Japan's past.

Notable Sites



Originally constructed in 1583 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, it played a crucial role during the unification of Japan in the late 16th century.



Often referred to as the "White Heron Castle" due to its elegant, white-plastered walls, is renowned for its beauty and sophisticated defensive design. Built in 1609, it remains one of the few original castles still standing in Japan





Matsumoto Castle

Matsumoto Castle, known as the "Crow Castle" due to its striking black exterior, is one of Japan's premier historic castles, located in Nagano Prefecture.

Constructed in the late 16th century, its five-story main keep is a National Treasure of Japan, showcasing classic Sengoku period design with its wooden interiors and stone foundations.

FACTS

Originally known as Fukashi Castle

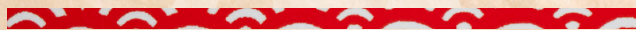
It still has original wooden interiors and external stonework

It is a flatland castle not built on a hilltop

The second floor of the main keep features a gun museum

TOOLBOX

Take a glimpse at the arsenal of Japan's revered medieval warriors. Delve into the diverse array of weaponry employed by the samurai and ninja.



Naginata

Resembling a halberd or glaive and consisting of a long wooden shaft topped with a curved blade, the naginata was used both for its versatile combat capabilities and its impressive reach. Its design allowed for powerful sweeping and slashing motions, making it effective against both mounted and foot soldiers.

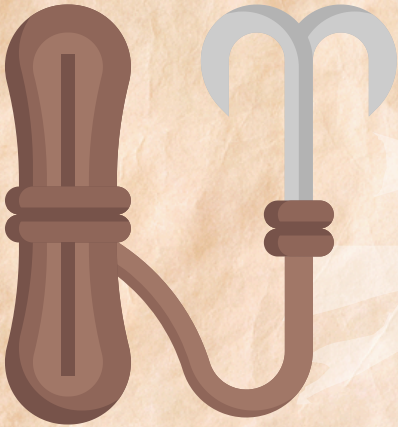
Katana

The iconic sword of the samurai, is renowned for its sharpness, and exquisite craftsmanship. Traditionally forged using a labour-intensive process that involved folding and hammering layers of high-carbon steel.



Kaginawa

Used for climbing and scaling walls. This versatile instrument consisted of a sturdy rope attached to a metal hook or hooks. It could be thrown over walls or other obstacles to provide a secure anchor, allowing the user to climb or descend safely.



Jutte

One-pronged truncheon, typically made of iron. It features a main shaft with a side prong near the handle, designed to catch or block an opponent's blade. The name "jutte" means "ten hands."



Shuko

Metal bands with claws worn on the hands.



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