

2014

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Recommended Citation

Turnbull, Stephen (2014) "The Ninja: An Invented Tradition?," *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol9/iss1/3>

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The Ninja: An Invented Tradition?

Stephen Turnbull

The ninja is a well known phenomenon in Japanese military culture. The popularity of the tradition is centered on the neighboring areas of Iga and Kōka where ninja are a profitable tourist attraction. This paper examines the historical sources on which the ninja tradition is based to see if the pre-eminence claimed by Iga and Kōka is justified. It is shown that they were no different from several other places in their geography or their politics and that only one reliable account of secret warfare can be identified before 1581, the year when Iga Province ceased to exist as an independent self-governing entity. Secret warfare was practiced throughout Japan but this tiny area of Japan claimed a particular expertise in it and thereby invented a tradition that is still resonant today and now has all the hallmarks of a cult.

The ninja has become a familiar figure in popular Japanese culture as the world's greatest exponent of secret warfare. He infiltrates castles, gathers vital intelligence, and wields a deadly knife in the dark. His easily recognizable image is that of a secret agent or assassin who dresses all in black, possesses almost magical martial powers, and is capable of extraordinary feats of daring. He sells his skills on a mercenary basis and when in action, his unique abilities include confusing his enemies by making mystical hand gestures or by sending sharp iron stars spinning towards them.

There is much popular support for the historical truth that is supposed to lie behind this familiar image. It is reminiscent of the passions displayed by the members of a religious cult, because like any cult the ninja's loyal followers staunchly defend both his worth and his authenticity. Yet even the most devoted fans of what might be called "the ninja cult" will acknowledge that a certain amount of exaggeration has probably taken place. Similarly, only the most dogged ninja skeptic would dare to argue in an equally passionate manner that the idea is a total fabrication. The usual approach, even among scholars, is simply to accept the original ninja myth as a genuine historical phenomenon that has for centuries been greatly romanticized and, more recently, highly commercialized.

This modern exploitation of the ninja has proved highly profitable, eclipsing anything derived from Japan's other great warrior tradition of the noble samurai, to whose example of loyalty the ninja provides a dark antithesis of secrecy and deception. The samurai have also been subject to exaggeration and commercialization in recent years, but whereas examples of the samurai tradition are to be found all over Japan, the modern ninja cult has one unusual feature in that its exploitation is concentrated in a very small area. This is the

former province of Iga (now part of Mie Prefecture) and the place with which it shares a border, an area of modern Shiga Prefecture called Kōka. The two places once had much in common and are often linked in the historical narratives. Nowadays Iga-Ueno City has by far the most developed ninja-related infrastructure, making it is the best place in Japan to visit a ninja house and a ninja museum, to enjoy martial arts displays, and purchase a wide range of ninja souvenirs.

The worldwide acceptance of an underlying reality for ninja has meant that is now almost impossible to read even an academic text about Iga or Kōka without finding some reference to its most famous sons. For example, Yūki's account of the medieval castles in Kōka includes references to ninja (1988, p. 121), and Yokoyama's study of Oda Nobunaga's campaigns in Ise and Iga notes that in the latter area "the name of the Iga ninja is celebrated" (1992, p. 29). More recently, Ferejohn and Rosenbluth's *War and State Building in Medieval Japan* begins with a paragraph about ninja who "existed sometime in the mists of Japanese history" (2010, p. 1). Its authors clearly take them for granted because they regard the ninja of Iga as,

... one manifestation of fierce and extensive resistance to encroaching armies in the dying years of medieval Japan. Local farming communities, particularly those in mountain valleys, armed themselves with simple weapons and guerrilla techniques to forestall the trend towards territorial consolidation and centralized taxation. (Ferejohn & Rosenbluth, 2010, p. 1)

This is a perfect summary of an important political trend of the times, but to link it to the existence of ninja must not remain unchallenged, and such challenges have indeed been mounted in the past. As Sugiyama (1974) reminded everyone, "Nowadays ninja are regarded as the stars of Sengoku battles. However, there are very few authentic historical records [about them]" (p. 205).

The aim of this present study is quite modest. The Iga-Kōka ninja tradition as it is understood today began to take shape when Japan's civil wars started to come to an end during the early Tokugawa Period (1603-1868). There is no space here to trace its subsequent development into a modern cult that involved the appearance of so-called ninja manuals and ended with superheroes. I shall examine instead the historical sources that relate to the Sengoku Period (conventionally 1467-1603, the time of Japan's great civil wars) to see if they provide any justification for the ninja tradition beginning in the first place. I shall explore the issue in the light of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) classic notion of an invented tradition, which they define as:

... a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (p. 1)

"The invention of tradition" is not necessarily a pejorative term. None of the examples given in Hobsbawm and Ranger's book have been dreamt up from nothing and they note that, "There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned that has not seen the 'invention' of tradition in this sense" (1983, p. 4). They also identify "the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes"

(1983, p. 4) that, “extends the old symbolic vocabulary beyond its established limits” (1983, p. 7).

All these points could apply to the development of the ninja, but if the ninja are indeed an invented martial tradition they are by no means alone, because military societies are particularly vulnerable to the creative approach. For example, the popular image of the pirate derives almost entirely from the American author and illustrator Howard Pyle (1853-1911). Pyle regarded the look of ordinary eighteenth century sailors as too dull for these romantic figures, so he added elements drawn from the Spanish folk costume of his day, especially headscarves knotted behind the head, large hooped earrings and wide trailing sashes, to a somewhat mistaken notion of authentic seafaring dress (Konstam, 2011, pp. 26-27). Nor is Japan exempt from such a process. The story of the vendetta carried out by the Forty-Seven Rōnin of Ako derives almost entirely from an unashamedly fictionalized play that was staged shortly after the incident on which it was based (Turnbull, 2011, p. 5). Even the modern understanding of *bushidō*, the virtually sacred “way of the warrior,” owes much to *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, a book first published in 1900 by a Japanese Christian living in America (Nitobe, 1905). As *bushidō* is such an important concept for defining the way of the noble samurai it is ironic indeed to consider that the cult of the underhand ninja may predate it by almost three centuries.

I must however declare an interest. It is not uncommon to regret the excesses of one’s youth, and to have produced a book where enthusiasm sometimes overwhelmed common sense is part of my own history. In *Ninja: The True Story of Japan’s Secret Warrior Cult* (Turnbull, 1991) I translated the historical sources that were then available and interpreted them as I understood them at the time. However, I allowed myself to become a little overdependent on compilations of these sources, in particular the books by Sasama (1968) and Yamaguchi (1969), neither of whom makes clear the age and reliability of the material they include. In their books contemporary descriptions of secret warfare are juxtaposed with accounts that were written well after the establishment of the ninja myth and therefore liable to have been influenced by it. In this article I shall therefore re-examine the evidence with a degree of academic rigor that may have been lacking in 1991.

The Elusive Ninja

For the purposes of this article, I propose that if the ninja have any basis in fact the following three criteria must be satisfied:

1. A unique corpus of military techniques involving secrecy existed in Japan during the Sengoku Period.
2. The exercise of these techniques was confined to certain skilled individuals rather than being spread more widely within Japanese society.
3. These skilled practitioners were identified in particular with Iga and Kōka, from where they sold their services to others.

The first criterion appears easy to satisfy. Activities conducted in secret on or off the battlefield are common to all martial societies throughout world history so it would be surprising indeed to find that Japan, with its long military tradition, was an exception. The difficulty lies in identifying a uniquely Japanese version of it or a unique Japanese expertise in it. The second criterion, that secret warfare was carried out only by a highly skilled,

highly specialized and perhaps hereditary corps of elite warriors, is complicated because Japan's samurai class were precisely that: highly specialized, hereditary, and elite. The historical ninja would therefore have to be the "super-samurai" beloved of modern ninja movies. In that case no ordinary samurai, no matter how good he may have been at the martial arts, could perform these techniques of castle-entry, battle-disruption, or intelligence gathering. They were the exclusive preserve of the ninja. The third criterion, that the ninja came from Iga and Kōka, forms the basis for most of the modern commercial exploitation. It is also the most difficult one to accept because it defies common sense, but it is the feature maintained most fiercely by ninja enthusiasts. During the Sengoku Period fighting was carried out from Okinawa to the fringes of Hokkaido, yet we are required to believe that a tiny and relatively insignificant area of central Japan produced a warrior caste so skilled that its talents were to be widely exported on a mercenary basis.

Beginning with the first criterion of a unique secret warfare tradition in Japan, there are enough references to the Chinese military classics in the historical accounts to demonstrate that the *daimyō* were familiar with their contents, including material on spying and undercover operations. Mōri Motonari (1497-1571) the *daimyō* of Aki, certainly knew his *Sonshi* (Sun Zi's *Art of War*) (Shimizu, 2009, p. 34). Secret warfare was therefore not an isolated Japanese specialty, nor was it confined to the Sengoku Period. Undercover operations are to be found throughout Japanese history, and one component of the modern ninja cult has been to exaggerate this fact by crediting certain historical figures with being ninja or "proto-ninja." The legendary Prince Yamato Takeru resorts to subterfuge on at least one occasion including dressing up as a woman, making him a ninja in some eyes (Aston, 1972, p. 201). One particularly romantic example of secret activity from the fourteenth century is the account in the *Taiheiki* of the murder of Homma Saburō by the youth Kumawaka, who escaped by climbing up a bamboo trunk (in itself no mean feat) and allowing it to deposit him in a place of safety (McCullough, 1959, pp. 47-49). This is a good story that may with complete justification be described as a "ninja-like assassination," but the boy was not a ninja. Kusunoki Masashige (1294-1336), lauded for his devotion to the emperor, used guerrilla tactics including booby traps and dummy warriors (McCullough, 1959, p. 185), but to go beyond this type of statement to claim that these activities prove that Masashige was a ninja or even the founder of a specific *ryū* (school or tradition) of *ninjutsu* (ninja techniques) would indeed be the inventing of tradition. Most ninja enthusiasts do not go this far; instead they accept that throughout its history Japan possessed individuals like Masashige who were skilled in secret warfare along with their other martial accomplishments.

Secret operations were therefore common in Japan but by no means exclusive to it, nor were intelligence-gathering activities always successful. In 1630 the idea of a Japanese invasion of the Philippines was revived for the last time, largely at the hands of the daimyo Matsukura Shigemasa (1574-1630), who believed that it would provide an answer to the Christian problem by cutting off the main source of supply of priests. He sent two Matsukura retainers as spies to Manila disguised as merchants, ostensibly to discuss reopening trade (Hayashi, 1954, p. 980). The Spanish were not fooled, as their records reveal: "Although in Manilla warning of this double object had been received, this was not made known; and they were received and regaled as ambassadors from the Tono of Arima and Bungo. A ceremonious reception and very handsome present were given to them; but

the city was put in readiness for whatever might happen” (Blair and Robertson, 1903, pp. 245-246).

The Exclusive Ninja

The first criterion can therefore be easily dealt with. The latter two require more analysis, and much depends on the use of words. “Men of secrecy” is a very loose translation of the two ideographs *nin* and *ja* (or *sha*, as in “*geisha*” for example), but this is a comparatively modern development. In the vast majority of accounts the two characters are separated by the particle *no*, so that the name of the practitioner under question is read in a different style and becomes a *shinobi no mono*. If the *no* is absent in an old account no clue is given as to whether the original reading was *shinobi mono* or *ninja*. Outside Japan the use of the word *ninja* rather than *shinobi no mono* has predominated, probably because *ninja* trips readily off the Western tongue. Interestingly, there has been a trend in recent years among *ninja* enthusiasts to prefer the term *shinobi no mono* or just *shinobi* on the grounds that the frequency of their use in the historical accounts confirms their authenticity. The word *ninja* is then reserved for the exaggerated popular development found in comic books and movies.

The latter two criteria will be tackled in reverse order, beginning with Iga and Kōka’s overall claim to exclusivity. It must be stated in all fairness that the Ninja Museum at IgaUeno does offer a grudging recognition that secret warfare was carried out elsewhere in Japan, although the point is always made most firmly that the tradition was centered on Iga and Kōka, that the very best secret operatives came from there and that any other *ninjutsu* traditions were developed by emigrants from Iga-Kōka. This belief is reflected in the wording chosen for some historical accounts, where the use of “Iga-mono” or “Kōkamono” for practitioners of secrecy rather than *shinobi no mono* suggests that a casual assumption is being made by the authors that if secret warfare is being carried out then they must have been derived from those two places in some way.

As for the mercenary element, if men from Iga and Kōka acted as mercenaries that alone would make them unique in Japan. A mercenary is a soldier who comes from outside the society for whom he fights, who is not part of its regular forces and who is motivated primarily by the desire for private gain, such as the mercenary bands of Europe who would fight for an Italian city-state one month and fight against it the next (Urban, 2006). This model, which was very common in Medieval Europe, was totally absent from the Japanese scene, although some Japanese warriors did serve as mercenaries overseas. Between 1593 and 1688 Japanese fighting men, most of whom were exiles and many of whom had experience of piracy, were in the service of the kings of Siam and Cambodia, the Spanish colonists in the Philippines and the Dutch East India Company. There is nothing comparable within Japan itself. Rather than preferring such a casual model, the emerging *daimyō* (warlords) valued loyalty and long-term commitment. The only “swords for hire” within Japan were small groups of desperate *rōnin* (immortalized forever in the film *Seven Samurai*), and even they would tend to become quickly integrated into a *daimyō*’s army. Nevertheless, one of the earliest and most reliable accounts of a *ninja*-like operation seems to include a mercenary element. The source consists of a brief mention in *Tamon-In nikki*, a diary kept by Abbot Eishun of Tamon-In, a sub-temple of the Kōfukuji in Nara. The entry for the 26th day of the 11th month of the 10th Year of Tembun (1541) reads as follows:

This morning, the Iga-shū entered Kasagi castle in secret (*shinobi itte*) and set fire to a few of the priests' quarters and so on. They also burned down outbuildings in various places within the third bailey and are even said to have seized the first bailey and the second bailey. According to Kizawa Nagamasa's castle commander, a man called Ukon who was his nephew and who had only 70 or 80 men to defend the castle with, they were from Kōka in Ōmi. (Sugiyama, 1974, p. 206)

This account has everything that one could wish for. It is a factual record made by a dispassionate observer writing long before the ninja cult developed. The word *shinobi* is present and men from Iga and Kōka take part, the latter being included within the Iga organization. As a consequence, much has been extrapolated from these few sentences to make the reference into the most important proof text for three crucial points: that the ninja came from Iga and Kōka, that they had unique skills and that they exploited them on a mercenary basis.

However, different conclusions may be reached on examining the passage carefully, and the first consideration concerns the status of the Iga unit who carried out the raid. They are identified using the suffix *shū* (military unit, troop, or company). The usual meaning of *shū* at this time in Japanese history is a unit under the command of a *daimyō* whose *kokka* (domain) consisted of a composite of separate fiefs either held directly by the *daimyō* and his family or indirectly by his followers, for whom the European term "vassal" is customarily employed. The Hōjō of Odawara, for example, controlled about 500 samurai retainers who were identified using the term *shū*, a suffix added to the name of the castle where they would be mustered in times of war. This model of local governance was one consequence of the breakdown of central authority under the Shogun following the Ōnin War (1467-77), but it did not apply everywhere in Japan, and Iga was one of those other provinces. The provincial border between Iga and Kōka may have meant as little as it did in the case of the Hōjō's *kokka*, but there the resemblance ended, and their situation is summed up by Sasama in the following words: "In Iga Province at about the time of Ōnin, [the family of] Niki Iga-no-kami were its provincial governors, but in later generations their authority declined and in Iga no one controlled the *jizamurai* (country samurai)" (Sasama, 1968, p. 83).

In other words, the rule by the Shogun's appointee had ended, but he had not been replaced by a rising *daimyō* family. Instead the province was still divided among the *jizamurai*, landowners who operated on a much smaller scale and had not entered under anyone's vassalage. "Iga-shū" in the *Tamon-In nikki* therefore refers not to a military unit identified with a *daimyō* but to one drawn from the *kunishū*. This term can simply mean "the people of the province," but during the Sengoku Period it had the more specific meaning of local warriors who possessed certain superior rights over some land and its workers and who would both work the land and fight in armed *shū* as part-time samurai (Hall, 1981, p. 24). In Elisonas' (1991) discussion of *kunishū* he distinguishes them from *daimyō* by using a useful analogy from medieval Europe and calling them "barons" (p.365). When danger threatened individual *shū* would join forces in an *ikki* (a confederation or league). Some *ikki* had an almost permanent status and ruled lands as a loyal confederacy, making an area controlled by an *ikki* very different from one controlled by a *daimyō*. The *daimyō* sought to become absolute masters of the land and the people within their territories, aiming to reduce all samurai to vassalage and all farmers to tax-paying workers, so the relationship was

hierarchical and feudal. An *ikki* was a voluntary confederacy organized ideally on egalitarian lines.

The mutual need for survival in the face of threats from *daimyō* and their rapacious armies was usually sufficient to bind the members of an *ikki* together. In other places some extra factors strengthened the bonds such as affiliation to a particular sect of Buddhism. Pierre Souyri, who has studied the contemporary political situation in Iga, believes that the existence of the unique ninja tradition (which he accepts uncritically) was the “extra glue” in the local *ikki* that held their confederacy together. The Iga *jizamurai* were certainly loyal *ikki* members, and their joint efforts managed to suppress the bandits that had been active in this wild mountainous terrain. It was also in the form of an *ikki* that they defied Oda Nobunaga and his son over the course of the two campaigns that ultimately led to Iga’s downfall in 1581 (Yokoyama, 2006).

Souyri regards Iga as politically unique, but a comparison with other areas demonstrates that Iga was no different from any other province where *daimyō* rule was not the dominant force and the combined strength of the *kunishū* allowed its barons to preserve the province for themselves in spite of inroads made by more powerful neighbors. Southern Japan provides two more examples. Higo province (modern Kumamoto prefecture) was for decades a battlefield for the three great powers of Kyushu: the Shimazu, the Ōtomo, and the Ryūzōji, whom the local barons fought for and against in a confusing series of voluntary and forced alliances (Araki, 1987; Ōyama, 2003). Like Iga, Southern Japan provided mountains as places of refuge. The phrase “a domain so completely surrounded by a broad river and complicated mountain systems must have been singularly impregnable against invasion,” refers not to the comparison popularly made between Iga and Switzerland (Souyri, 2010, p. 121) but the situation of the barons who held sway in the province of Satsuma (modern Kagoshima prefecture) (Asakawa, 1929, p. 25).

The Iga-shū were therefore an independent warrior band who were fighting outside their own province. This would appear to strengthen the identification of them as mercenaries, but that is neither likely nor in any way necessary. The *Tamon-In nikki* does not tell us who the assailant was, but other sources reveal that it was Tsutsui Junshō (1523-1550) who was involved in a typical local power struggle (Sugawara, 1985, p. 102). Kasagi was quite close to Iga; by modern roads it is a mere 20 kilometers from the present-day city of Iga-Ueno to Mount Kasagi. Adding to this the fact that in 1541 boundaries were defined not by province but by what could be defended, such an involvement by neighbors in a dispute is by no means uncommon, particularly when the warring neighbors are rival *daimyō*. Just like the barons of Higo the Iga *ikki* would fight for or against a particular *daimyō* when it was in their interests to do so, and the Tsutsui of Yamato were no strangers to Iga province. In later years Tsutsui Junkei (Junshō’s son, 1549-1584) would play a role in the final invasion of Iga and Junkei’s son Tadatsugu would become Iga’s *daimyō* in 1585 (Lamers, 2000, p. 204). There is therefore no need to assume that in 1541 the Iga-shū were acting as politically disinterested mercenaries seeking only financial gain from a willing employer. It was very much in their interests to be involved with a powerful neighbor. Even if a purely mercenary role has to be ruled out the *Tamon-In nikki* still refers specifically to particular skills in secret warfare being displayed by men from Iga, and so does *Nochi Kagami*, which describes how in 1487 the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshihisa led a campaign against Rokkaku Takayori. Yoshihisa gave battle at a village called Magari where someone from Iga earned renown by operating in a *shinobi* manner. This, says the author of *Nochi Kagami*, “is the

origin of the fame of the men of Iga” (Sugiyama, 1974, p. 205). Unfortunately *Nochi Kagami* was compiled by the Confucian scholar Narushima Kadō (1802-53) and published in the year of his death, so it is far too late to have avoided being influenced by the ninja myth. There is no reason to assume that the story is made up, so in this brief reference to someone from Iga exercising the skills of undercover warfare we may well have the earliest inkling of the expertise which the Iga-Kōka ninja tradition would appropriate and exploit. It also means that the *Tamon-In nikki* story is the only authentic contemporary account of Iga-Kōka secret warfare that exists, a revelation that may surprise the reader.

In the *Tamon-In nikki* account the contingent from Kōka are regarded as forming part of the overall Iga-shū, and this reflects the close relationship that existed between the two places at that time. Kōka’s political situation was also similar to Iga’s. Twenty-one *yamashiro* (hilltop castle) sites have been identified in Kōka together with many more small lookout posts, evidence of extensive but small scale military activity where the various families were joined together in a classic *ikki* model that some writers have dubbed “republicanism” (*kyōwasei*) (Yūki, 1988, p.117). The leading Kōka barons were so strong that one of their number Wata Koremasa (1536–83) gave refuge there to the fugitive (and future shogun) Ashikaga Yoshiaki after the suicide of his brother Yoshiteru in 1565 (Yūki, 1988, p. 119; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, p. 117).

The Kasagi raid took place in 1541, and much was to change over the next half century. Like every other Japanese province Iga and Ōmi (of which Kōka was a small part) would experience an unstoppable transition as the movement towards re-unification took place from about 1560 onwards. The process was begun under Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), completed under Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), and consolidated under Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616). It was largely a military operation that would be enforced by land surveys, the transfer of landowners and forcible disarmament. The final result would be a shift from the rule by independent barons and small provincial *daimyō* to a national hegemony where the only *daimyō* left were the appointees of the national ruler.

Throughout the time of Oda Nobunaga’s rise to power Ōmi was a battlefield, and there are references to men from Iga and Kōka assisting local *daimyō* Rokkaku Jōtei in the *Shinchō-Kō ki*. This is a chronicle of Oda Nobunaga’s exploits written by one of his generals who was an eyewitness to many of the incidents he described. None, however, involves secret warfare. In 1570 there is armed confrontation with Nobunaga in southern Ōmi, and the *Shinchō-Kō ki* records that his men “killed 780 accomplished samurai from Iga and Kōka” (Kuwata, 1965, p. 105; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, p. 145). Three years later Ashikaga Yoshiaki, who by now has become Shogun and has turned against Nobunaga, has men from Iga and Kōka fighting for him at Ōtsu (Kuwata, 1965, p. 136; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, p. 183). Later in that same year of 1573, “skilled archers from Iga and Kōka” are found assisting the Ikkō-ikki of nearby Nagashima. The Nagashima army was an *ikki* whose members and bound together by their allegiance to the Jōdo Shin sect of Buddhism (Kuwata, 1965, p. 151; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, p. 201). Ōmi Province was finally pacified when Nobunaga accepted the surrender of Rokkaku Jōtei. Nobunaga then stamped his authority on the province by choosing Azuchi, on the shore of Lake Biwa and in the middle of the province, as the site for his headquarters. Territories were redistributed, and in the patchwork of landholdings that emerged the old Kōka republicanism disappeared.

Just across the border in Iga, however, the situation was somewhat different. The strength of the Iga *ikki* and the surrounding mountains allowed the men of Iga to maintain their

independence for several more years, and in 1579 they beat off Nobunaga's son Oda Nobukatsu (1558-1630) when he was sent to punish them. It is very noticeable that they received no help from Kōka at this time. The old cross-border alliance had passed into history, and when Nobunaga's army returned with an overwhelming force in 1581 and crushed Iga the Kōka-shū were to be found fighting on his side (Kuwata, 1965, p. 332; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, p. 410). By New Year's Day 1582 the Kōka-shū were so closely associated with Nobunaga that they are mentioned in the same sentence as his elite horse guards when "the major and minor lords from the neighboring provinces as well as the fraternal branches and their retinues" came to visit Nobunaga in his magnificent castle of Azuchi (Kuwata, 1965, p. 343; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, pp. 421-422).

The belief that the Iga ninja tradition not only survived but even prospered after the cataclysm of 1581 is one of its strangest features of the modern ninja cult (Souyri, 2010, p. 122). From this time on, the popular yet paradoxical argument goes, the ninja of Iga, who were desperate for employment, marketed their unique *ninjutsu* skills and began to sell their services as mercenaries more widely than ever before. Others emigrated to distant provinces and set up schools of *ninjutsu*. There are however no authentic references to men from Iga fighting in an independent capacity after 1581 to add to the sole reference before that time. It is not much on which to erect so great an edifice of commercialized tradition, and while it must of course be accepted that the invasion undoubtedly destroyed any written records that may have existed, the important point is that there are no authentic records *after* it. Oral tradition can be very powerful but I would argue for three reasons that the condition of Iga Province after 1581 would have made it impossible for independent mercenary warfare to flourish.

The first reason is simply that when the *kunishū* of Iga were wiped out the province passed rapidly under *daimyō* control. Three out of the four districts of Iga were assigned to the victorious Oda Nobukatsu and the remaining one to Nobunaga's brother Oda Nobukane (1548-1614) (Kuwata, 1965, p. 334). Nobukatsu survived his father's murder in 1582 and went on to serve Toyotomi Hideyoshi, from whom he received Owari and Ise provinces in addition to Iga. He then made the fateful decision to fight against Hideyoshi at the battle of Nagakute in 1584, so in 1585 Hideyoshi deprived Nobukatsu of his lands as a punishment and transferred the Tsutsui family from Yamato to Iga. In Lamers' (2000) words, "they were unknown and unloved" in Iga, but that statement is only half true (p. 204). As the Tsutsui had taken part in the destruction of Iga in 1581 they were far from being unknown to their new subjects, although they are highly likely to have been unloved.

Finally, in 1608 under Tokugawa Ieyasu's resettlement scheme, Tōdō Takatora (1556-1630) was moved from Imabari to the fief of Anotsu which included both Ise and Iga provinces. From 1581 onwards, therefore, Iga province was a *daimyō* domain, so that any subsequent accounts of men from Iga in action, secretly or not, must be interpreted as indicating their inclusion in a *daimyō*'s army because no other form of army could possibly exist.

The second reason for the non-existence of ninja in post-1581 Iga is its well-recorded state of lawlessness. Banditry, once repressed by the Iga *ikki*, now flourished anew as is implied by the circumstances surrounding the well-known episode whereby Tokugawa Ieyasu chose Iga as the route for his escape when Oda Nobunaga was murdered in 1582.

The usurper Akechi Mitsuhide had moved rapidly to eliminate Nobunaga's family and close allies, killing Nobunaga's heir and almost trapping Ieyasu in Sakai with a small defensive retinue. Ieyasu, however, made his way safely back to Mikawa Province by

taking a devious route through Iga on the advice of his loyal retainer Hattori Hanzō, a man born in Mikawa from an Iga family. Ieyasu had provided refuge in Mikawa for those fleeing from Nobunaga's assault in 1581 so he was highly regarded in Iga, but far from confirming the popular interpretation of an orderly province ruled by a network of ninja families this celebrated episode shows only chaos in a place infested by bandits. (Kuwata & Utagawa, 1976, p.191).

The third consideration is that Iga must have suffered as much as any other province from Hideyoshi's Katanagari (Sword Hunt). This was the operation by which Hideyoshi's agents forcibly confiscated all weapons from anyone except a *daimyō*'s samurai, most of whom were now completely separated from the land, based in castles and in a state of vassalage to Hideyoshi's most loyal generals. The operation began in 1585 not far from Iga and finished nationwide in 1587 with even the inhabitants of the "holy mountain" of Kōya-san being ordered to disarm (Fujiki, 2005, p. 59). The Sword Hunt was so thorough that it would be incredible to think that the men of Iga, a province already devastated by war, could have retained any weaponry, let alone had the means to use them other than in the service of their newly imposed rulers.

The independent Iga-shū who fought at Kasagi in 1541 had therefore ceased to exist, yet they were to live on in romanticized accounts as part of the growing ninja myth. One contributor to it is the *Taikō ki*, an elaborate fictionalized version of the life of Toyotomi Hideyoshi that was published in 1625. The relevant section concerns the invasion of Korea in 1592 and the successful capture of the castle of Chungju, the final obstacle on the road to Seoul. The Japanese commander Konishi Yukinaga divided his contingent of "100 Iga *shinobi no mono*" into two and sent half of them to attack the rear of the castle, where they set fire to the town outside (Yoshida, 1979, pp. 107-108). This is most unlikely to have happened, partly for the reasons stated above but also because the Korean invasion was very much a Kyushu-led affair. The account itself is also at variance with more reliable descriptions of the fall of Chungju, which capitulated after its commander had made the disastrous decision to take the garrison out of the castle and face the Japanese army in a pitched battle with a river at his rear (Park, 1978, p. 104). Instead this passage may be taken as evidence of how firmly the Iga ninja myth had taken root within forty years of the destruction of the province.

After 1581, therefore, none of the reliable accounts of secret operations in Japan makes any reference to them being carried out by warriors from the very place that posterity would regard as their heartland. In other words, Nobunaga's invasion of Iga did not mean the start of the Iga ninja tradition. It meant the end of it, and in fact Iga was so thoroughly pacified that neither samurai nor ninja from Iga province played any part in the great Sekigahara campaign of 1600. Their *daimyō* Tsutsui Sadatsugu simply locked himself in Iga-Ueno Castle and sat out the war, and his failure to provide active support to the victor Tokugawa Ieyasu resulted in the confiscation of his lands in 1608.

The Ninja of Kōka

Within twenty years of Sekigahara the Iga-Kōka ninja myth had begun, culminating in the highly flexible concept of the superhero ninja of modern times who can fly through the air or disappear at will. That image is of course the product of fantasy, but the evidence

strongly suggests that during the first half of the seventeenth century a less fantastic manipulation of the facts also took place, and because Iga had been so thoroughly crushed much of it involved Iga's neighbor Kōka. The first reference to Kōka in this context is *Mikawa Gofudo ki*, a detailed account of the exploits of Ieyasu that was written in 1610 and edited in 1837 (Kuwata & Utagawa, 1976). The reported incident happened in 1562 when Imagawa Ujizane took members of Ieyasu's family hostage in Sumpu Castle. Ieyasu's plan was to effect the rapid capture of the Imagawa's own Kaminogō Castle and take hostages who could then be exchanged for his own family:

The *monogashira* Mitsuhashi Sanzaemon said, 'As this castle is built upon a formidable precipice we will be condemning many of our allies to suffer great losses. Fortunately there are among the honourable *hatamoto* some men associated with the Kōka-shū of Ōmi Province. Engage the men of Kōka through their kinsmen and they can enter the castle secretly'. Tadatsugu agreed and beginning with Tomo Tarōza'emon Sukeie from Kōka eighty men trained as *shinobi* were engaged and ordered to hide in various places, and on the 15th day of the 3rd month they entered the castle in secret, and were soon setting fire to the towers inside the castle. The attackers deliberately did not converse as they ran around killing and the garrison thought they were traitors. (Kuwata & Utagawa 1976, p. 144).

Thanks to the men from Kōka, Ieyasu acquired the hostages he needed in the form of the two sons of the castle keeper Udono Nagamochi, who was killed in the fighting. Following a deal with Imagawa Ujizane the castle was handed back and the sons appointed to its command, but the pair began an unwise policy of supporting the raids into Mikawa Province by the Ikkō-ikki. Ieyasu again entered the field against Kaminogō and once more the Kōka-shū took part in the attack. We are not told specifically that they entered secretly, but they "took advantage of an unguarded position and created a disturbance inside the castle" (Kuwata & Utagawa 1976, p. 262).

The Kōka-shū therefore carried out two successful raids, but the claim in *Mikawa Gofudo ki* that they were "trained as *shinobi*" may simply be an interpretation placed upon their successful service by an author who has already been influenced by the ninja myth (Kuwata & Utagawa 1976, p. 262). Once again the use of mercenaries must also be ruled out because a relationship typical of the times is suggested by the editors' footnote that explains that the Kōka men were *jizamurai* (Kuwata & Utagawa 1976, p. 245). The members of the Kōka-shū were therefore in a similar position to that of many other small landowners who enjoyed a relationship with a *daimyō* that was much looser than that which would later be imposed upon them.

Kōka played a role in the Sekigahara campaign in 1600, when the leading Tokugawa retainer in Ōmi Province was Yamaoka Dōami Kagetomo (1540-1603), who had rendered great service to the Tokugawa at the time of Nobunaga's death in 1582. Dōami destroyed the strategic Seta bridge and thereby delayed the usurper's march on Azuchi, and when Ieyasu was trapped in Sakai Dōami and his brother helped him escape (Kuwata & Utagawa, 1976, p. 191). He had men of Kōka serving under him at his castle of Nagashima in 1600, but the political situation was a complicated one because the Kōka area was the fief of Minakuchi, and Minakuchi Okayama Castle was owned by Natsuka Masaie (1562-1600) of the anti-Tokugawa faction, who also led Kōka men into battle. The result was that two

important sieges of the Sekigahara campaign saw men from Kōka serving on opposing sides.

The two places were Takatori and Fushimi. Takatori came under attack from Matsukura Shigemasa, who used troops from the anti-Tokugawa Minakuchi fief in his operation. The Kōka-shū were sent to infiltrate the castle but were all wiped out except for one man who was captured alive. His nose and ears were sliced off and his fingers and toes severed. He was then sent back to the besiegers as an example of the treatment they might expect (Kuwata & Utagawa, 1976, p. 197).

By contrast, the other castle at Fushimi had men from Kōka actively engaged in its defense on the Tokugawa side in one of the most decisive actions of the Sekigahara campaign. The castle was under the overall control of Torii Mototada and among the garrison were over 100 samurai from Kōka under Yamaoka Kagemitsu, the younger brother of Dōami, who were stationed in the castle bailey known as the Nagoya-maru. No impression was made upon the fiercely defended fortress, so Natsuka Masaie seized hostages from the defenders' families in Kōka in the absence of their menfolk. An arrow letter was loosed into the castle, informing the men that if they cooperated by setting fire to Fushimi they would be richly rewarded. If they refused their wives and children would be crucified. In order to save them the wretched men agreed, set fire to a tower, and took down a section of the wall (Kuwata & Utagawa, 1976, p. 187). The enemy broke in and after much desperate fighting Fushimi fell with a huge loss of life including all of the Kōka contingent who had still remained loyal. They had however inflicted considerable losses upon their enemies and also bought precious time that Ieyasu was able to exploit at Sekigahara. Yamaoka Dōami then took his revenge by besieging Natsuka Masaie in Minakuchi Castle. Having fled there from Sekigahara without firing a shot Masaie knew his cause was hopeless and committed suicide. After the battle eighteen men from Kōka who had been involved in the forced treachery and had then been captured alive were crucified on Ieyasu's orders (Kuwata & Utagawa, 1976, p. 160).

The sieges of Takatori and Fushimi present an interesting picture. First, there are men from Kōka fighting on both sides and it is tempting to see this as evidence for mercenary warfare, but this can be ruled out for the same reasons that were earlier applied to Iga: the imposition of *daimyō* control and the effects of the Sword Hunt. Second, the picture presented by their activities is a mixed one because at Takatori we see the classic ninja skills of castle entry being carried out unsuccessfully, while at Fushimi the only secret operation that is performed comes about because loyal samurai are forced to turn traitor. The long service rendered to the Tokugawa by Yamaoka Dōami and the death of 100 men from Kōka outweighed the act of treachery by some of their number, so the descendants of those who died at Fushimi were taken into Ieyasu's service and Dōami was placed in charge of them. He was granted 9,000 *koku*, 4,000 of which were for his Kōka estates, and the next we hear of the Kōka men is that they are acting as guards at Edo castle in a unit consisting of ten mounted samurai and 100 foot soldiers. These same guards served at the siege of Osaka in 1614-1615, but in the capacity of a troop of musketeers, not *shinobi*.

Their appointment to Edo was a reward for good service, although it is conventionally explained as a conscious act whereby Tokugawa Ieyasu took the supposedly powerful and independent military cult of the Kōka ninja under his own wing. He then gained exclusive use of them and thus effectively neutralized any capability a possible rival might have to recruit ninja. I now believe that the situation was quite different and their appointment as

guards at Edo shows how firmly the Kōka-shū had been integrated into Tokugawa military society rather than ever having being separated from it. This aspect of the ninja myth therefore derives from their close relationship with the ruling Tokugawa family and not from any notional independence of action.

Elite Warriors or a Warrior Elite?

The claim to exclusiveness by Iga and Kōka in relation to secret warfare is further undermined by the fact that similar exploits are to be found throughout Japan, for whom the second criterion states that such practitioners were not ordinary samurai but a skilled elite. In the historical accounts those who carry them out may be described as *kanchō* (spies) or *teisatsu* (scouts), or the emphasis may simply be on the tasks they are performing using the word *shinobi* as in *shinobi itte* (entered in secret). One surprising example of the latter involves no less a person than Toyotomi Hideyoshi. In 1579, when the future ruler of Japan was still only one of Oda Nobunaga's generals, the *Shinchō-Kō ki* records how, "in the middle of the night, Hashiba Chikuzen no Kami Hideyoshi stole into (*shinobi itte*) the fort of Kaizōji in Harima Province and seized it" (Kuwata, 1965, p. 249; Elisonas & Lamers, 2011, p. 314).

Both the Hōjō of Odawara and their rivals the Satake would send foot soldiers to spy on the enemy lines. They are referred to sometimes as *shinobi* but also as *kusa* (grass) because of their technique of hiding in the long grass for hours on end, often returning the following day to report. The *Hōjō Godai ki* contains an account of how *kusa* used in this way by the Satake tried to intercept the Hōjō's mounted scouts as they returned from a reconnaissance mission (Hagiwara, 1966, pp. 395-397). The Hōjō also used men known as *rappa*, a compound that blends the characters for war or disorder with that for a wave as in the word *tsunami*, and it must have felt like a "wave of disorder" in 1580 when they entered secretly (*shinobi no iri*) night after night into Takeda Katsuyori's lines to cut through the tethers of horses and generally cause havoc. The *rappa* originated from local mountain bandits or pirates but were fully integrated into the army of Hōjō Ujinao because we are told that there were 200 of them who operated in four squads and that they received *fuchi* (stipends) (Hagiwara, 1966, pp. 397-398).

The *Ōu Eikei Gunki* of 1698, which covers the civil wars in Tōhoku, contains a story of a man who is genuinely skilled in *shinobi* activities and appears in one of the best accounts of such operations. The incident occurred during the siege of the castle of Hataya in 1600, where he performed a clever piece of psychological warfare:

There was someone inside Hataya castle with renowned *shinobi* skills (*shinobi no jōzu*), and that night he entered the enemy camp secretly (*shinobi iri*). He took a *ban sashimono* (company flag) from Naoe Kanetsugu and a *fukinuki* (streamer) from the barracks of Kurogane Magoza'emon, returned and hung them from a high point on the front gate of the castle. (Imamura, 2005, p. 815)

The word *shinobi* appears twice in the above account to describe the man's skills and his activity, but he has no connection with Iga or Kōka, nor is there any suggestion that he belonged to a specialized elite. He was just "someone" who had these skills.

Higo province provides a further illustration. It was cited earlier in this article as a place that was similar to Iga in many ways because its independently-minded barons formed *shū* to fight for neighboring *daimyō* when it suited them. Their independence came to an end in 1587 at the hands of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in much the same way as Iga had been pacified by Nobunaga. During their final acts of rebellion we come across several incidents which, if they had been performed by men from Iga, would have been credited to ninja. Supply columns were harassed and castles were attacked (Araki, 1987, p. 191), culminating in a siege of the rebel stronghold of Tanaka Castle (Araki, 1987, pp. 92-93; Ōyama, 2003, pp. 124-126). As the siege of the tiny castle wore on Hideyoshi's frustrated commander used an arrow to convey a message to Hebaru Chikayuki, the one member of the castle command whom he believed to be susceptible to negotiation. The ploy succeeded, and Chikayuki persuaded a retainer called Usono Kurandō to kill the castle commander Wani Chikazane, against whom Kurandō bore a grudge (Kumamoto City, 2000, p. 431). The *Wani Gundan* reads:

Kurandō agreed and in the middle of the night of the 6th day of the 12th month he entered secretly (*shinobi no itte*) into Chikazane's private quarters and killed him, cutting off his head he escaped into the enemy lines. Chikayuki sent a signal by means of a beacon and the attack was launched. At the same time Hebaru Chikayuki set fire to the inner bailey and because of a strong wind the castle was engulfed in flames. (Kumamoto City, 2000, p. 65)

Unrest spread to the Amakusa Islands two years later and in October 1589 Konishi Yukinaga dispatched 3,000 troops against the Christian rebel baron Juan Shiki Rinsen (Tsuruta 1981, pp. 49-50). The force advanced without hindrance as far as the island of Shimojima, unaware that they were being led into a trap. There Rinsen caught them in a surprise attack and massacred them (Araki, 1987, p. 138). Yukinaga then led a much larger army against them, so Rinsen sent a secret envoy to Yukinaga's ally Ōyano Tanemoto to discuss peace terms. The man is referred to using the two character compound *shinobi mono* or *ninja*, which obviously indicates no more than that he was on a covert mission because his intention was to discuss peace (Tsuruta, 1981, pp. 50 & 58). So here we have a series of military actions involving subterfuge, secret entry, assassination, ambush, and covert operations without a mercenary from Iga or Kōka in sight, and it would also appear that the Higo Rebellion provides instances of fighting men who are not ninja and ninja who are not fighting men!

The conclusion must therefore be that the practitioners of secret warfare in these historical accounts were warriors who operated within the usual command structure of a *daimyō*'s army. They were elite warriors but not a cult-like warrior elite from a distant province who served as mercenaries. The other popular notion that the secret warfare skills displayed in these provinces was provided by refugees from Iga may also be dismissed. Apart from instances where "Iga-shū or Kōka-mono" are used as a casual and inaccurate shorthand for *shinobi no mono* there is no suggestion of any connection.

The other important point that the above accounts have in common is that when the word *shinobi* is used it is intended as an adverb, not a noun. It indicates how something is carried out, not who does it, and the subsequent shift in meaning from adverb to noun represents an important element in the invented tradition of the ninja of Iga and Kōka. When a flag is stolen by someone at Hataya he is praised for what he does. When a flag is stolen by

someone from Iga he is praised for what he is: a ninja. The word *shinobi* also appears as often in these accounts as it does for Iga and Kōka, if not more. Just as these areas were no different politically from anywhere else run by *kunishū*, neither were they any different militarily from any other province, including those run by *daimyō*, in the frequency of their employment of secret warfare.

Yet this is not the whole story of the growth of the Iga-Kōka ninja myth and the development of the modern cult. There also appears to have been an appropriation of other people's actions, of which the most blatant example occurs during the final act of rebellion against the Tokugawa, where we find the last ever descriptions of secret operations. They took place during the largely Christian Shimabara Rebellion of 1637 to 1638, which finished with the siege of the castle of Hara (Fujita, 2012, pp. 48-51). The operation against Hara receives detailed coverage by Yamaguchi, who makes use of material put together many years later by Ukai Shōsan. He is said to be a descendant of Ukai Kanemon, one of ten men in a Kōka contingent of 100 taken to Hara by Matsudaira Nobutsuna (1596-1662) as reinforcements for the ineffective besiegers (Yamaguchi 1969, p. 59). Ukai Shōsan's work is presented in the form of a diary that relates how on the 6th day of the 1st month ninja from Kōka secretly survey the defenses of the castle "from the Arima lines to the second bailey" and the results are reported back to Edo (Yamaguchi 1969, pp. 59 & 255). On the 21st day of the same month a further raid is carried out, "They raided from the Kuroda lines near the Western beach and worked together to capture thirteen bags of provisions which were the enemy's only means of survival. That night they again infiltrated the enemy castle and acquired secret passwords." (Yamaguchi 1969, pp.60 & 255-256).

On the 27th day another raid is carried out from the Hosokawa lines which results in the capture of an enemy flag. Two named ninja are wounded and are out of action for forty days. By the 20th day of the 2nd month it is known that the garrison have been reduced to eating only seaweed and grass and a counter-attack by them is driven back. From the 27th day until the fall of the castle raids are launched, taking the third and second baileys. (Yamaguchi 1969, pp. 60 & 256).

Yamaguchi then goes back to describe an earlier raid. The approach of the ninja is covered by the Hosokawa troops firing a volley. This alerts the garrison who obligingly plunge the castle into darkness by extinguishing the lanterns. The ninja wait for some time and eventually enter, although one of the ninja falls into a pit and has to be rescued by his comrade. They are discovered when the pine torches are re-lit, so they take one of the flags bearing a Christian cross and make their escape. A hail of stones follows them as they withdraw (Yamaguchi 1969, pp. 62 & 258-259).

All this is very convincing, but the picture is not all that it seems, because Hosokawa Tadatoshi (1586-1641), the *daimyō* of Kumamoto, also used secret warfare at Hara, and the incidents described in the Hosokawa family records appear to be the same ones. In the Hosokawa account the raid of the 27th day of the 1st month is carried out not by a ninja from Kōka but by a retainer of the Hosokawa identified as a *kogashira* ("lieutenant") in the company of Hirano Jibuzaemon. He infiltrates (*shinobi iri*) the castle by night and steals a flag, for which exploit he is awarded five silver coins. The following night another individual who is a *shinobi no mono* in the company of Yoshida Suke'emon returns from a raid with rebel heads, but finding that he is being pursued by 14 or 15 men discards all but one of his trophies (Toda, 1988, p. 191). On the 13th day of the 2nd month two *shinobi*

no mono sneak into the castle in a very unusual manner because they have ropes attached to them so that if they are shot they can be pulled back, but they return successfully with information. The account then tells us that the Hosokawa had ten *shinobi no mono* within their ranks and that they were used night after night. One is named as the son of the *karō* (senior retainer) Sado; another is Uehara Heinosuke, who hears the striking of a bell as he enters the castle. Realizing that it means that the guard is being changed, he conceals himself (Toda, 1988, p. 199). It is also interesting to note how narrow is the definition of a *shinobi* skill in the Hosokawa archives. Digging a hole under the wall to provide entry to the castle (a technique used by the Hosokawa at Hara) is not a *shinobi* operation even though it provides exciting reading with the defenders thrusting spears down into the gap to flush out infiltrators. *Shinobi* is applied only to entering a castle in secret by climbing its walls, not tunneling/tunnelling beneath them (Toda, 1998, pp. 198-199).

The Hosokawa records present a dispassionate and disinterested account of secret warfare by skilled individuals that fits in very well with other accounts such as the flagstealer of Hataya, but the Kōka exploits are difficult to believe because they are based on the assumption that Matsudaira Nobutsuna called in at Minakuchi Castle in Kōka and recruited 100 battle-ready ninja. The Kōka-shū in Edo Castle were trained for wartime use as musketeers, not ninja, and it is difficult to envisage a large group of ninja being retained in peacetime at Minakuchi for possible use as a rapid deployment squad. Falling into a hole also indicates that they were not highly trained ninja. Instead Matsudaira Nobutsuna took troops from Kōka simply because it was a fief directly held by the Tokugawa family, and as gaining control of Hara Castle was the object of the entire operation some of the Kōka men may have volunteered for *shinobi* duties. A desire to emulate the deeds of their ancestors, a common obsession among samurai, would be a sufficient explanation for their enthusiasm. My conclusion is therefore that men from Kōka were involved in the siege of Hara but that Ukai Shōsan padded out their brave yet modest achievements by borrowing material from the archives of the Hosokawa family. So instead of independently confirming the authenticity of ninja the Ukai material is the best argument so far for the ninja cult being an invented tradition.

Conclusion

I therefore conclude that the authenticity of the Iga Kōka ninja tradition fails against all three of the suggested criteria in terms of the existence of secret warfare, the elite practitioners of it, and its narrow geographical location. Undercover operations were performed throughout Japanese history but were carried out by skilled warriors who did not belong to a hereditary tradition. Iga and Kōka did not have a monopoly, nor is there any evidence for a transmission from there to other provinces after 1581. In fact the opposite is true. If the presence of *shinobi* in an account indicates that secret warfare is taking place, then Iga and Kōka are remarkable not for how many references there are to them but for how few. The ninja of Iga and Kōka therefore present a classic example of an invented tradition in terms of Hobsbawm and Ranger's definition. There is a deliberate "attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" whereby ancient records have been re-interpreted and exaggerated to reinforce a highly localized understanding of a military phenomenon (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, p. 1). Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) also

identified the “use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes” (p. 4). This seems to be what has happened at Shimabara.

I do not however believe that the Iga-Kōka ninja myth or the modern cult that developed from it represent a total fabrication. All invented traditions have a basis in fact, no matter how tenuously the links may be made between the developed tradition and recorded history. In Iga and Kōka there must have been some genuine belief in a unique local expertise that was bolstered by folk memories and old soldiers’ tales, and the best that can be said for their plagiarism of other people’s exploits is that it supports one great ninja stereotype: they were very good at stealing things! Yet even if the Iga-Kōka ninja cult draws upon little more than the manipulation of folk memories and historical records, any tradition that takes shape in about 1620 and continues to the present day is worthy of more attention and respect as a cultural property than is commonly given to other aspects of the samurai tradition. As the Iga and Kōka ninja tradition is older than the 47 Rōnin and even predates *bushidō* it should not be dismissed but celebrated as Japan’s oldest martial invention and, through its modern cult-like manifestation, as Japan’s greatest martial fantasy.

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