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The Truth Behind Samurai Values

When people discuss samurai values they often mention “bushido,” although, it was a word that samurai never actually used. Samurai did have their own set of codes that ideal samurai would follow. However, not every samurai followed every code. Therefore, the question arises, what did actual samurai value in their daily life and what did they expect from other samurai? The only real way to understand what samurai expected from each other is to look at writings done by samurai. Two such writings are “Lord Sōun’s Twenty- One Articles” written by Hōjō Sōun and “My Father” written by Arai Hakuseki.

In “Lord Sōun’s Twenty- One Articles,” Hojo Sōun, a samurai who eventually rose to become a lord, lists out what he believes are of the utmost importance to samurai. From the items that are shown we can determine that being a samurai often entailed taking even the most mundane tasks of your daily life very seriously. These also show us that, not only did samurai have to maintain strict order in their lives, but also had to ensure that their outer appearances were well kept. It is mentioned that you should rise early and go to sleep early, to ensure that those around you follow your way of life allowing you to keep everything running smoothly. There should also be a routine you do every single morning to ensure you keep up a clean appearance and that you should pray every day. The items maintain that samurai should do everything they can for themselves and that they should be capable of many different kinds of duties. It continues to mention that even though there are servants that can do some daily tasks

for you and can check on the property, you should do these tasks anyway to ensure they are done properly and so you also are able to do those tasks. One of the items that is stated is, “Never say a single word of falsehood.” Sōun claims that this will cause other samurai to stop believing or trusting you. This shows how important honest is to a samurai. All these rules are what Sōun claims will allow samurai to become true and well developed in their line of work. He believed that being well kept, both physically and in daily duties, being honest, and self-sufficient were of the utmost importance to being a samurai.

Likewise, in Arai Hakuseki’s “My Father,” we see that similar values were continued to be held almost 200 hundred years later. Hakuseki discusses that his father rose early every morning, well before even their servants, and washed himself, checked on the property, and prayed. He kept up a strict daily schedule even as he aged and was no longer an acting samurai. His father also made a habit of doing everything that he could for himself instead of relying on his servants. This shows his desire to keep himself self-sufficient and maintain the qualities that are valued by samurai even in a time when he no longer is fighting. Hakuseki also relays that his father, “Every night, after sunset until daybreak, I myself made an inspection tour” (Pg 277). This shows that his father wanted to overlook all the issues taking place and be directly involved in their solutions. His father could easily have other people take care of the problem, but he insists upon doing it himself, even if that means he gets no sleep. Hakuseki’s father follows all the rules that Sōun had previously set up for samurai to follow. These stories provide ample examples of what samurai values looked like and what an ideal samurai lived like.

In Kurosawa’s film “Sanjuro,” we are introduced to both samurai who follow the rules set forth by the previous stories, but also introduce a ronin that follows none of the rules set forth by the stories. The group of nine samurai who Sanjuro decides to help are all the ideal samurai.

They have a strict daily schedule and follow all of the social values that are expected. They do many things on their own, they are honest, loyal, keep themselves clean, and require themselves to live strictly as expected. Therefore, when the character Sanjuro is introduced, they do not trust him as a samurai. Sanjuro does not follow any of the expected social ideals; he is dirty, lazy, and lies often to gain the upper hand in any situation he is in. As the movie progresses though, it is revealed that Sanjuro is a much better samurai than the other nine. He is much more capable with a sword and has exemplary military strategies. While the other nine samurai follow all the ideal samurai values, Sanjuro is shown as a much better samurai. Samurai values were consistent and those who did not follow those values were seen as unreliable. However, in this particular movie Kurosawa shows that just because a samurai does not follow the ideals he is still a good samurai.

Samurai had a set of codes that they believed produced the best samurai. Samurai valued a strict way of living. They expected each other to keep their appearances neat and presentable, to show that they care not only about their own appearance but also that they are representing their lord. Honesty also shows that people can rely and work with a samurai on an issue on a lord's land. All samurai values are focused on being reliable, hardworking, and well versed in doing any task required on a lord's land. However, all samurai did not follow the rules and there was no written out set of rules that were required of samurai.