

## Brief History of Ninja

Okay so I'm going to talk about Naruto and real Ninjas. But before we do that I have to pin down what exactly I'm looking at. The "Ninja" in Japan is a very ambiguous warrior because they have had so many different names through history. Widely known terms such as Shinobi or Ninja are used more commonly today but the Japanese assassins have been called names such as Kusa (The Grasses), Nokizaru (Roof-Monkeys), Kamari (Those Who Hide), and more! For this analysis we will be focusing on the most prominent proponents of the "Ninja" which are the Iga and Koga clans from Japan's Warring States Period. These two clans were used as the main inspiration for the creating the pop cultural sensation of the ninja. Therefore every time I use the word "Ninja" I'm referring to either the Iga or Koga ninja.



## Naruto Organization:

Okay it's probably no surprise to you guys that ninja in Naruto are divided between Genin, Chuunin, and Jounin. The inspiration for that system comes straight from the Iga and Koga organizational style. Now there's a few distinct differences between the Naruto system and the one of old. Remember in Naruto when the Hokage was explaining the different mission levels to Naruto? Genin were assigned to very low level tasks. The Iga and Koga Genin performed assassinations and castle assaults along with the chuunin and jounin. Jounin in Naruto perform a leadership role and that's no different than the one given to the ninja of old.

## Naruto Weapons/Skills:

Now let's talk about Naruto weapons/skills. Naruto is certainly one of the most recognizable forms of the "Ninja" in popular culture exaggerating real historical skills and weapons.

The **Kunai** in Naruto has an almost identical look to its historical ancestor and has differences mainly in its usage. Naruto depicts kunai mostly as throwing weapons and also as hand to hand combat weapons. How is this different than a real Ninja? The Ninja used these mostly as tools. Ninja missions would last multiple days so surviving off the land was a very important skill. The kunai was used to cut, scrape and dig in outdoor survival and could be thrown if need be.



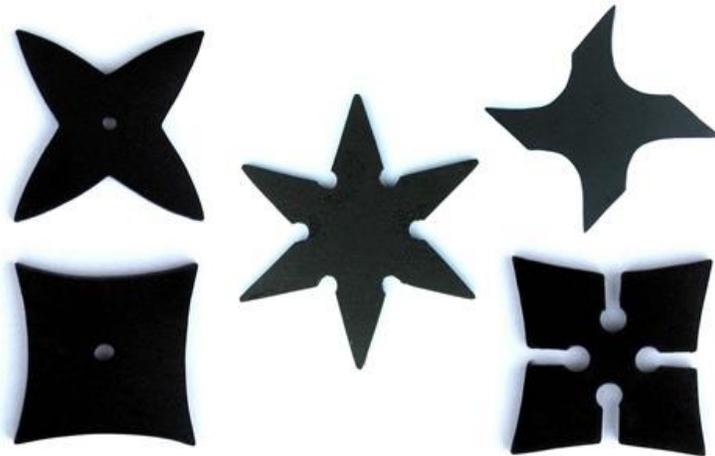
What about how Naruto characters can pull a Jesus and walk on water? Meet the **Mizu-Gumo**. Legend has it that Ninja used these to cross water by attaching these to their feet. However, the history regarding their specific usage is unclear. Mizugumo, like the one depicted here, is made out of wood but the Ninja might have also used inflated animal skins and used to float across bodies of water. Floating across water might not be the most majestic way to get across water but it's certainly realistic. Remember, Ninja were above all else practical.



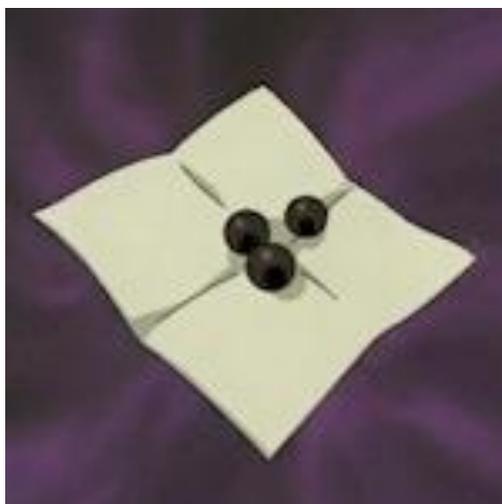
You know how Naruto characters use smoke to conceal themselves and others? Ya real Ninja did that too. Specifically, it was called **Noroshi-no-jutsu**, Concealment via smoke. Naruto and movies have often used the smoke bomb as a rapid exploding weapon to escape sudden situations. In reality? The limited explosives technology of the era made this kind of rapid exploding smoke bomb impossible. More likely, smoke pots were ignited and let alone to fill the space with smoke with the use of simple firecrackers to divert enemy attention.



Let's take a look at the **Shuriken**. There are a few exceptions but the most common shuriken looks like this in Naruto. How does this differ from the historical ninja? Well first of all, Ninja didn't use the huge shuriken like they use in Naruto. It simply isn't practical for assassins. Ninja were innovators. There was no organization that regulated one style of shuriken. They tried many different styles of Shuriken to find the most effective form.



How about chakra modifiers from Naruto like the **HyourouGan** (Soldier Provision Pills)? Did Ninja use something like that? Well Ninja weren't chakra or magic users so the chakra modifying aspect is certainly not in the historical ninja but the usage of provisional pills to help as feudal energy bars did exist. The Kikatsu-gan was a hunger and thirst quencher that was made from a mixture of dried carrots, buckwheat, wheat, yam, licorice and sticky rice that was ground into a powder and soaked in sake for three years. The remaining material, after evaporation, was rolled up into balls and used on missions. When on missions, three were consumed a day. Remember, Ninja had to travel light and the use of the small Kikatsu-gan made them effective tools on a longer mission.



The **Makibishi** from Naruto were simple iron spikes on the ground so it's not too crazy to believe they are real right? Yup real Ninja used the iron spikes as a trap or to deter people pursuers. But there's more to this than just the iron version. The predecessors of the more commonly known iron version came from nature. The dried seed pods of the water chestnut plant were shaped so that the seed pod would always have a sharp edge pointing up to harm any potential victim. This product of nature became the inspiration for the iron version that real ninja used and consequently the ones in Naruto.



#### Naruto Characters:

Let's take a look at some of the Naruto characters. So what's going on with the trio Jiraiya, Orochimaru and Tsunade? I'm not talking about Naruto, I'm talking about the misadventures of Jiraiya in the 1806 book "Jiraiya Setsuwa". This book written during the Edo Period in Japan would prove to be exceptionally popular spanning multiple works compiled together as the 児雷也豪傑物語 Jiraiya Goketsu Monogatari. In the 1806 story, Jiraiya is a noble thief who saves a toad from a snake and thus gains the toad Magic from it. Tsunade is the love interest of Jiraiya and has Slug Magic. Orochimaru is originally a student of Jiraiya but goes off on his own to become the villain, using snake magic to engage tsunade and jiraiya. Jiraiya was so inspirational it spanned multiple movies and animations. Naruto is

probably what the name Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru are most associated with though. Although diverging from the original work in many ways the inspiration is evident. The death of Jiraiya in episode 133 of Naruto Shippuden pays Homage to the original work as the episode is named 児雷也豪傑物語 Jiraiya Goketsu Monogatari.



How about looking at a Naruto clan? The Third Hokage belongs to the Sarutobi Clan? Sarutobi Sasuke isn't a real Ninja but a pop cultural sensation from 1912 portraying the ninja as hero. The story about Sarutobi Sasuke was so influential that the name "Sasuke" has been, and still is, the stereotypical name for a ninja. No surprise there for a main character in Naruto to be given that name right? Does Sarutobi Sasuke's influence stop there? Not really. The first Kanji in Sarutobi is "Saru" and the second is "tobi" meaning monkey and jump respectively. It's no surprise because Sarutobi Sasuke was raised by monkeys before being picked up by a ninjutsu master. He was known to be able to jump from tree to tree like a monkey. Sound similar to some of the long scenes in Naruto where they are traveling somewhere through a forest? That connection might be a bit too vague though lol. But another use of the monkey aspect is talking about the Hokage's personal summon Monkey King Enma. Enma is not inspired by Ninja but actually a caricature of the Monkey King Sun Wukong from Chinese fable. What's the ninja connection then? Sun Wukong is fabled to have immense powers, is it any surprise that the Hokage from the SARUtobi clan would wield him? I think not.



### Modern Concept of "Ninja":

How do you define "Ninja"? Of course it's those who practice Ninjutsu right? If you look at past, present and future depictions of "Ninjas" they always seem to depict the sword. Concept art of "Future Ninja" usually consists of an elaborate exoskeletal armor...with a blade on the back. Gray Fox from MGS is a good example of "future Ninja" in games. The sword is certainly associated with Honor and Status in Feudal and Tokugawa Japan...with Samurai...Ninja are not Samurai. Ninja put simply were assassins for hire. They would use guns, explosives and blades when needed. Swords were tools, they were undecorated weapons made for practicality. Samurai blades were the more decorated ones. Why use a sword when a handgun or sniper rifle is available for use? The Ninja in the style of the Feudal Japan doesn't exist anymore.



Let's just say for the hell of it that a ninja came to this era and adjusted to modern day assassinations. What would they wear? What would they use? They'd probably look very similar to someone you all know. Batman... I'm not kidding look at what he uses, how he moves. The flashiness of his weapons and moves is far and away outweighed by his stealth practicality. Batman is really only missing the killing part. Batman represents a truer modern day Ninja than probably any other representation. Ninja used the tools they had available to get the job done and the sword was needed and useful at the time. Times change and innovations with it changing how assassins can kill Relying on inspiration from what they looked like and how they moved in their heyday takes away from their real identity. They were innovators in a time that needed their skills. As the Warring States Period in Japan ended and the Edo period began their need and style became obsolete.

Naruto's attitude toward the "ninja" show something very distinct about the pop cultural view toward Ninja. Starting with Sarutobi Sasuke as the first pop culture "Hero Ninja" we can see the trend continue with Naruto's depiction of "Ninja". What will the Ninja become in the coming years? Who knows but I hope you learned a little bit about Naruto and real Ninja.

Thanks for reading through this all. If you liked this, read some of my other stuff. I'm also on YouTube.com as "[Anime Historian](#)." Comments, concerns, hate...it's all good. I love talking to you guys.

References:

<https://monkeymaninjapan.wordpress.com/tag/jiraiya/>

<http://www.leafninja.com/weapons.php>

<http://narutobase.net/forums/showthread.php?t=167427>

<http://naruto.wikia.com/wiki/Narutopedia>

[Ninja Attack! True Tales of Assassins, Samurai and Outlaws \(2012\)](#)