

The True Meaning of *Warrior*

The definition, “one who is engaged in or experienced in battle,” given by fourth edition of The American Heritage Dictionary, might seem like an adequate description of the term *warrior*. However, the true meaning of the expression is more abstract. Words that describe a warrior might include: brave, selfless, heroic, but many people possess these qualities. Embodiment of a true warrior entails much more. Throughout history, societies have held different opinions about what makes a person a warrior. To some, a warrior is the heroic knight from eleventh-century England, decked out in his shining mail; while to others, it is the magnificent samurai from feudal Japan, clad in bamboo armor and holding a large curved sword, or the dark-skinned African hunter from modern Kenya, carrying a heavy spear. Examining the term from these different cultural viewpoints gives a better understanding of the true significance of a warrior.

Perhaps some of the most well known warriors in history are the knights of the Middle Ages. Most people have some knowledge of these men, though much of the information about them has become myth in its word-of-mouth journey through the ages. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, “The word *knight* derives from Old English *cniht*, meaning page or servant.” As stated by Melissa Snell, in an article written for the Medieval History newsletter, “A knight is essentially a mounted warrior in the service of his liege-lord.” Throughout the Middle Ages, a knight was seen as a hero, serving his country as a protector of faith and nation. Knights devoted their entire lives to upholding their code of generosity, courtesy, compassion, and loyalty, and it is no wonder that a society deemed such men warriors. It must be remembered, however, that most knights were mercenaries, and their seemingly selfless feats of courage were often performed for personal monetary gain.

The seventeenth century Japanese also had a clearly defined class of warriors. The *shogun* was the ruler of Japan during this period. Below him, were the *daimio* lords and their soldiers, the *samurai*. Similar to *knight*, the word *samurai* originally meant servant. Samurai embodied their name to the fullest, willingly sacrificing their lives for a

common cause. From the stories told about the fearless samurai, it would seem that they, even more than the knights, were true warriors. According to the Japan-Guide website, "Samurai were supposed to lead their lives according to the ethic code of *bushido* ("the way of the warrior"). Strongly Confucian in nature, bushido stressed concepts such as loyalty to one's master, self discipline and respectful, ethical behavior." Samurai were exceedingly proud and would often challenge each other to duels if they felt insulted or threatened. These duels were to the death, so a samurai always had to be in top fighting condition to have a chance at survival. After a defeat, a samurai committed suicide rather than suffer the disgrace of dying at the hands of the enemy. Each samurai had his own private affiliation with one of the daimio lords of the time. The daimio paid the samurai to cause a disturbance in a rival lord's dominion. In this way, the samurai were similar to the knights. They were professional combatants, hired by the rich to fight battles.

Progressing in the quest to define warrior, our final stop is on the dusty savannah of south-central Kenya, in East Africa. This is the home of the Maasai, a pastoral society originally from northern Africa. Maasai society is organized into groups according to age and gender. The members of the warrior class are the best known worldwide. Around the age of sixteen, a Maasai boy passes an initiation ceremony. After that, his status in the society is that of a warrior. A Maasai warrior protects his tribe's welfare, along with other young men of his age group. As reported by Jeremy Youngman in his website The Maasai, "An age-related group of warriors live together for eight to twelve years or more, learning and developing their survival skills and performing other warrior duties." The specific duties of the warriors include guarding the livestock against wildlife and other tribes, and going on raids to steal cows from other tribes. According to Hans Johnson's website on Maasai culture, "it is believed that the rain god Enkai gave the Maasai exclusive rights over all the earth's cattle. Therefore, a cattle raid is not seen as stealing, but taking what rightfully belongs to the Maasai."

Several common ideas are mixed in these diverse descriptions of warriors. First, in all of the examples above, the warriors are men. The fact that males are considered to be the protectors of a society can be associated with any known culture in history.

Other similarities between these different warriors are that all of them are expected to be courageous, noble, and self-sacrificing. There are three interesting differences between modern Maasai culture and the European and Japanese cultures of several centuries ago. First is the fact that all Maasai men are expected to serve their society as a warrior, whereas European and Japanese men could only become warriors if they had significant ancestral backgrounds. Secondly, it appears that while Maasai warriors fight for the benefit of their community, the warriors of the other cultures fought primarily for monetary gain, with little or no selfless action. Finally, whereas knights and samurai were expected to serve their countries as fighters for as long as they lived, Maasai men serve a relatively short term as warriors.

Do these common warrior characteristics exist in modern American society? At first it might seem that they do not, when compared with the other definitions provided, but upon closer examination it is apparent that our society actually abounds with warriors, both male and female. Most obvious, are the members of our Armed Forces. Like the knights and the samurai, these men and women undergo serious training in martial strategy and learn the most modern and effective combat techniques. Similar to the Maasai warriors, many of these individuals withdraw from the service by the time they are thirty – those that stay are often promoted to higher ranks and do not actually engage in the fighting. Other warriors in our society include the men and women in the police force. The training required to become a police officer is similar to that needed to join the military. Unlike soldiers and police officers, firefighters do not fight other humans. Instead, they oppose natural disasters. This is perhaps one of the most dangerous jobs in our society, and firefighters must truly possess the warrior qualities of bravery and selflessness. Today's athletes may often be described as warriors, but they seem a less appropriate example of the embodiment of a true warrior. Though they appear to unselfishly display strength and determination, the best athletes are motivated by the large sums of money they earn. Finally, there are people in everyday life who may not be recognized as warriors, but who possess the admired qualities of a warrior.

It appears that different cultures have had varied opinions of what a warrior is; however, a similar definition of the term *warrior* has been shared by all cultures throughout history. There are many traits supposedly possessed by warriors, and it is by displaying these traits that a person embodies a true warrior.