



Japanese and European Feudalism

(How similar were they?)



What is feudalism? It is a system of government in which local lords governed their own lands but owed military service and other forms of support to the ruler of the country. These landowning lords would then hire soldiers to defend their land. This led to some lords becoming as powerful, or even more powerful, than the king or emperor.

Government Structure

Feudal Japanese and European societies were built on a system of hereditary classes. The nobles were at the top, followed by warriors, with tenant farmers, or [serfs](#), below. Large landowners had many peasants working for them. Farming was the main economic activity on both European and Japanese estates.

Although Japan and Europe did not have any direct contact with one another during the medieval and early modern periods, they independently developed very similar socio-political systems. Often, these systems are labeled as feudal. There was very little **social mobility**; the children of farmers became farmers, while the children of lords became lords and ladies.



In order for feudalism to exist, there needs to be a weak central government. If a ruler is extremely powerful, they would never allow local lords to gain enough power to challenge their authority. This lack of power from the ruler allowed both the European and Japanese feudal systems to develop. In Europe, these landowners were called lords, or [vassals](#). In Japan, they were called [daimyo](#) (DY•mee•OH). Feudal lords in Europe built **stone castles** to protect themselves and their vassals in case of attack. Japanese daimyo also built castles, although Japan's castles were made of wood rather than stone.



Peasants farmers were tied to the land and worked for protection plus a portion of the harvest, rather than for money. Warriors dominated the society and were bound by codes of obedience and ethics. Although the rulers were weak, they weren't totally without power. While the lords of smaller units of land controlled the warriors and peasants, they owed (at least theoretically) obedience to a distant and relatively weak duke, king or emperor.

Warriors (Samurai/Knights)

In both feudal Japan and Europe, constant warfare made warriors the most important class. Called "knights" in Europe and "samurai" in Japan, the warriors served local lords. In both cases, the warriors were bound by a code of ethics. Knights were supposed to adhere to the concept of [chivalry](#), while samurai were bound by the rules of [bushido](#), or "the way of the warrior."

Armor

Both knights and samurai rode horses into battle, used swords and wore armor. European armor was usually all metal, made of chain mail or plate metal. Japanese armor included lacquered leather or metal plates and silk

or metal bindings. European knights were almost immobilized by their armor, needing help up on their horses, from where they would simply try to knock their opponents off their saddles. Samurai, in contrast, went with lightweight armor that allowed them quickness and maneuverability, at the cost of providing much less protection.

Education

Samurai were expected to be well-educated, and would study topics such as literature and history. They were also skilled in mathematics. At a time when very few Europeans could read, the level of samurai literacy was extremely high. Bushido dictated that a samurai strives to better himself in a multitude of ways, including those unrelated to combat. This is why the samurai class participated in a number of cultural and artistic activities such as creating rock gardens, ink paintings, flower arranging, and **calligraphy**.



Samurai also wrote poetry. One famous samurai poet was Matsuo Basho, who invented a new form of short poetry that was later called [haiku](#) (high-KOO). A haiku has three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, making 17 syllables in all. Knights, on the other hand, did not value education. Knights were usually illiterate, and would likely have scorned such past-times in favor of hunting or jousting.

Religion

Both knights and samurai were expected to be deeply religious. However, the two groups of warriors practiced different religions. Knights were Christians. Christianity is based on the life and teachings of Jesus. Samurai practiced ancient **Shintoism**, which was a religion based on nature spirits, as well as a form of Buddhism known as Zen. Zen emphasized meditation, devotion to duty, and the belief people can seek enlightenment through the precise performance of everyday tasks.



Facing Death

Finally, knights and samurai had very different approaches to death. Knights were bound by Catholic Christian law against suicide, and tried to avoid death. Samurai, on the other hand, had no religious reason to avoid death. This ritual suicide is known as seppuku (or "hari-kiri"). There were many reasons for seppuku, including preserving personal honor and avoiding capture in battle. Samurai might also perform seppuku to pay for a crime, a shameful deed, or an insult to a person of higher rank. Some samurai even killed themselves when their lord died or as a form of protest against an injustice.

Role of Women

The role of women in feudal Europe was limited.

Medieval women, for example, often had no say in whom they married. The woman's father and future husband often made this decision. In addition, women were expected to stay at home. They were trained in household chores, such as sewing, spinning, weaving, and farming. European women were considered fragile flowers who had to be protected by chivalrous knights.



Women in feudal Japanese society enjoyed more equal status with men. They were expected to be strong like the men, and to face death without flinching. In samurai families, women were allowed to inherit part of the family's estate. Women could also join Buddhist convents. In addition, they were expected to live up to the values of honor and courage. Often women were trained in the martial arts. In fact, some women became samurai and fought alongside their husbands. Gradually, however, the role of women became more restricted.

Legacy of Feudalism

Both feudal Europe and Japan left legacies. Aspects of the feudal culture can be seen today in Japan and Europe. For example, Japanese weddings are usually based on a Shinto ceremony. The Shinto religion was widely practiced in Medieval Japan. Haiku continues to be a popular form of poetry in Japan. Also, many Japanese today have a strong sense of duty and loyalty to the family. These attitudes are the legacy of the old code of bushido.

The ideals of loyalty and honor also remain strong in Europe -- especially within the military. Another legacy of the European Middle Ages is surnames, or family names. Many European family names have medieval origins. For example, during the Middle Ages, a person took a family name from his or her job. Family names such as Baker, Carpenter, Cook, and Taylor (tailor) are still common today.

Other Differences

Japanese feudalism was based on the ideas of Confucius (551-479 BCE). He stressed morality and **filial piety**, or respect for elders and other superiors. In Japan, this functioned as the moral duty of daimyo and samurai to protect the peasants and villagers in their region, and the duty of the peasants and villagers to honor the warriors and pay taxes to them in return. In Europe, the relationship between a lord and his vassals was seen as contractual; lords offered payment and protection, in return for which vassals offered complete loyalty.

A key distinguishing factor between the two is land-ownership. European knights gained land from their lords as payment for their military service; they thus had direct control of the serfs who worked that land. In contrast, Japanese samurai may not own any land. Instead, the daimyo might use a portion of their



income from taxing the peasants to pay the samurai a salary, usually paid in *rice*.

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