

The way of the ninja leads to Israel

By JON IMMANUEL

A series of violent videos has popularized ninjas as ruthless medieval assassins armed with an array of deadly, exotic weapons. But ninjutsu, as the martial art is called today, still has a following, and nowhere more than Israel. Gemini News Service talks to the grandmaster responsible for spreading ninja secrets to the world.

Dr. Masaaki Hatsumi is an osteopath — but he is as good at breaking bones as he is at mending them. For he is a master of ninjutsu, a medieval Japanese martial art which incorporates the use of weapons.

The man whose mantle Hatsumi inherited as grandmaster of the Togakure school was known as the Mongolian tiger because of his claw-like hands.

That in turn was a legacy from the time when ninja clans lived in the mountains of Japan, each family contributing its own weapons to the ninja arsenal. The Togakure, the only surviving clan, invented the hand claw for scaling buildings and trees, and ripping the enemy's face.

Ninjutsu was closed to Westerners until the Sixties when Dr. Hatsumi decided to open up its art — but not all its secrets — because of declining Japanese interest in the ways of the ninja.

At its core, ninjutsu is a form of guerilla warfare, which teaches fighters how to conceal themselves from their enemies, to strike without warning, and to adapt to the environment.

SAMURAI NOTION

Unlike the samurai notion that it was better to commit suicide than fail and survive a mission, the ninja never killed himself, seeing survival to fight another day as the ultimate goal.

The first Westerner to attend Hatsumi's Tokyo dojo, in 1967, was an Israeli, Doron Navon, who today is a 9th Dan, only one Dan below the level of Hatsumi himself.

Now there are proportionally more ninjas and trainees in Israel than anywhere in the world — 2,000 compared with 8,000 in the

US, which has a population 50 times larger.

Hatsumi says he finds his Israeli followers more serious than the Americans. Since ninjutsu is an art which adapts itself to the environment, says Navon, it is not surprising that "in Israel we do it a little tougher than in the US because of the necessities of the country."

ATTACKS

Navon himself teaches his knowledge of ninjutsu in the Israeli army, but is not permitted to say more on the matter.

The assassination in Tunis last year of Abu Jihad, the deputy of Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, might not have owed anything to ninja teachings, but it was characteristic of the ninja art and its attitude to life. A small number of disguised commandos appeared out of nowhere, took their target by surprise, spared his wife and child, and vanished.

Although the Israeli army is assumed to be the culprit, no-one knows for sure who killed Abu Jihad, the man responsible for planning Fatah terrorist attacks against Israel.

The fact that Jihad's wife and child were spared indicates a moral code of restraint. Hatsumi rejects the Hollywood image of the ninja as a diabolical killing machine. The ninja's elaborate technique of killing, he says, is designed to be surgical and to spare the innocent.

Hatsumi, now 58, is an accomplished artist and film actor who starred in a popular Japanese children's series about a good ninja family. It is not surprising that in an era when the Japanese have had to severely curtail their martial instincts, Hatsumi has looked for new adherents outside Japan and new ways to express his craft.

(Cont. on opp. page)



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Ed. Joseph Eynaud
xvi - 80 pp.
300mm x 210mm
ISBN 1-870579-03-8
Price: Lm2.50
Mireva Publications

