



Character Themes: Samurai and Yakuza

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Developing your character into someone who has a rich story can be a fun and rewarding process. You likely have an idea of what race and what class you want to play, but you might have only a general idea of what your character's life was like before you start playing the character at the gaming table. A theme can help you flesh out your character and provide some interesting options for developing his or her background.

This article details two character themes, the samurai and the yakuza.

SAMURAI

Samurai are the elite warriors of the nations of Kozakura and Wa, trained since childhood in the arts of battle. Sworn in service to the powerful nobles who govern the empire, they are expected to live and die according to their master's command. Cultured and refined, samurai dedicate themselves utterly to the tenets of bushido—the warrior's code that teaches that one's life is not one's own, and that nothing is more important than honor, obedience, and courage.

Samurai are born into their class, enjoying social privileges second only to the ruling nobility. Many come from families that own land themselves, and thus grow up accustomed to a life of wealth and entitlement. The samurai's lofty place in society

CHARACTER THEMES

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity. Each theme can encompass several unique stories within the same concept.

For example, if you're a human monk who chooses the samurai theme, you might be a contemplative individual born into the warrior class even though you feel more at home chanting prayers at your lord's temple. Perhaps you loathe the horrors of battle, and you follow the teachings of the Way of Enlightenment so that you can overcome enemies without fighting them. Though you would prefer to leave your sword forever sheathed in its ancestral scabbard, you know that you must obey your master's command to fight if that order is given.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore," *Dragon* 399.

sometimes leads individuals down a path of arrogance or brutality, since a samurai is above the law when dealing with those of lower station; however, true followers of bushido emphasize traits such as benevolence and politeness, as well as courage.

A samurai's training begins at a young age, when he is introduced to the rigorous demands of bushido. Young samurai are exposed to extreme heat, cold, and pain, enduring all with emotionless poise. They are steeled against the fear of death by being sent on

BUSHI OF KOZAKURA AND WA

Though samurai are the most renowned practitioners of bushido, they are not the only ones. Collectively, the title of bushi could apply to any martial character that lives by a code that follows some or all of the ethics of bushido. Samurai represent the social pinnacle of the bushi caste; thus, a samurai can always be referred to as a bushi, but a bushi need not be a samurai. Other bushi might put their warrior skills to use as foot soldiers, guards, mercenaries, or even outlaw thugs or bandit lords.

Your character might be a fighting adventurer who aspires to the code of bushido, yet has sworn no loyalty to a master. In this case, you can use some of the flavor in the samurai theme and apply it toward your character, but select a theme that will more closely match the character's profession. Such a character could go on to great renown, but will always be looked down upon by those bushi who believe that there is more honor to be found in the service of a noble lord.

errands through graveyards or near hangman's gallows at night. Each samurai-in-training is taught to read and write, contemplating classics of literature, religion, and art with which to refine his mind and spirit. Finally, all are taught the martial arts for which these warriors are most well known.

Samurai heroes are expected to fight and die at their lord's command, and their adventures reflect that. Samurai will undertake any quest their master assigns them, whether waging open war or avenging an insult to their lord's honor; a samurai obeys without hesitation. A samurai who proves worthy of reward will be honored with lands and wealth, and, perhaps most important, the lord's approval. This honor, and the perpetual striving toward one's perfection of bushido, is all-important for a samurai, who will go to any length to maintain and uphold it. Should a samurai bring shame to himself or his master, he is allowed to take his own life in an act of ritualistic suicide, allowing him to die with his honor intact. For a samurai, death is preferable to dishonor.

Creating a Samurai

Samurai are overwhelmingly drawn to classes that emphasize weapon prowess. The fighter class has the physical fortitude and skill at arms that are the hallmarks of the samurai; however, cultural and environmental aspects of the setting are sometimes best addressed by the talents of other classes. For instance, in realms that wage perpetual war, samurai often become warlords, while those realms on the frontier find the resourcefulness of the ranger to be an important trait for samurai. Exceptionally cultured or mystical lands welcome samurai of arcane or divine classes as well, so long as the individual is able to wield a sword bravely when the time comes. No matter your class or race, as a samurai you are held to the strictest of behavioral standards.

SAMURAI AS RONIN

A ronin is a samurai who, because of death or dishonor, no longer serves a lord. Many samurai begin lives as ronin when their master is disgraced or killed, after which his retainers are cast adrift on the waves of the empire to live hand to mouth.

Viewed as outcasts by all but the lowliest of social castes, many ronin make their way in the world by selling their skills. A group of honorable ronin might become bodyguards for traveling merchants, or heroically defend a vulnerable village from bandits. Such bandits might be ronin themselves, having become ruthless in order to survive in a world that doesn't accept them. Thus, ronin walk the path between two rivers, becoming saints or blackhearts as the currents dictate.

If you decide to play a ronin character, you can still take the samurai theme, since the training and discipline of the samurai is something that all ronin gained and held during their years of service. Your life will take a very different turn, however, since you do not serve a master. You are liberated from the obligation of service, but at the same time viewed with disdain by those who consider themselves "real" bushi. As a ronin, you alone can decide whether you will continue to live your life by the codes of honor that meant everything to you when you served your lord.

Starting Feature

Honor, loyalty, and courage are an all-consuming obsession to the samurai, whose cultural purpose is to serve as a warrior. All choices concerning that service are placed in the master's hands, and a samurai who is given a command is expected to obey it without pause. A core ethic of bushido is that one should never deliberate when action is called for, and nothing exemplifies this outlook more than the frightening intensity with which you initiate combat. In the battle is when your weapon prowess makes itself known; when coordination, speed, and strength combine to execute a strike of great destructive potential. You might favor a quick-draw style of attack, wherein you draw your weapon and cut in a simultaneous movement. Or, you might prefer to adopt specialized postures that let you quickly close the distance to your foe.

Benefit: You gain the *iai*jutsu power.

iai

Samurai Utility

While others contemplate, you act, loyal and resolute even in the face of death.

Encounter ♦ Martial

Free Action

Personal

Trigger: You roll initiative.

Effect: You can draw a weapon and shift up to a number of squares equal to half your speed. If you end this move adjacent to an enemy, you gain a +2 power bonus to the next attack roll you make against that enemy before the end of your next turn.

If your initiative is higher than every enemy's initiative, any melee weapon attack you make during your first turn of the encounter can score a critical hit on a roll of 18-20.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

As a samurai, you are expected to conduct yourself with the utmost poise, dignity, and politeness. Doing so reflects your personal honor, as well as the disciplined social order of Kozakura. Thus, you are respectful to your superiors, and those of lower station can sense the unwavering intensity that you project.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Diplomacy checks and Intimidate checks.

Level 10 Feature

Through a lifetime of practice, you have achieved an uncanny coordination of mind, body, and spirit, making your weapon artistry among the finest in the world. Whether your attack is embellished by a perfection of form or the application of ancient techniques, one strike often spells doom for your opponent.

Benefit: Choose a weapon group when you gain this feature. When you make a weapon attack with a weapon from that group and score a critical hit, the attack deals 1d6 extra damage to the target. This increases to 2d6 extra damage at level 21.

Optional Powers

Many samurai strive to improve their moral character by studying the mysteries of religion and philosophy. By gleaned truths from these ascetic codes, a samurai learns diligence, honesty, and veracity. If you pursue such enlightened studies, you might find yourself abandoning the trappings of temporal or scriptural mandates, refining your spirit in an unending quest for self-perfection.

Level 2 Utility Power

From an early age you have been groomed to withstand physical and emotional duress with stoic resolve, giving you a sense of confidence that is beyond reproach. No challenge is too daunting for you, and your devotion to bushido gives you the determination to withstand any foe.

Honorable Resolve

Samurai Utility 2

In the service of your master you know no fear, no weakness, and no surrender.

Daily ♦ Martial

Immediate Reaction Personal

Trigger: You are bloodied by an attack or damaged by an attack while bloodied.

Effect: You can use your second wind. Until the end of the encounter, you gain a +5 power bonus to saving throws against charm and fear effects, and enemy attacks never treat you as being bloodied.

Level 6 Utility Power

The singularity of your commitment to bushido can make you a terrifying opponent to confront. The confidence in your posture, the swiftness with which you strike, and the intensity of your presence are threats to your foes. With nothing more than a look, you can stop a charging enemy in its tracks, or command fleeing opponents to face you honorably.

Dauntless Gaze

Samurai Utility 6

You level an unwavering glare, projecting your focus with such intensity that your opponent is shaken to the core.

Encounter ♦ Fear, Martial

Immediate Interrupt Close burst 3

Requirement: You must have training in Intimidate.

Trigger: An enemy within 3 squares of you moves willingly.

Target: The triggering enemy

Effect: The target is marked by you and grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

Level 10 Utility Power

The most skilled samurai are often those who find serenity in meditation. A calm spirit allows you to separate yourself from pain, so while you are in a state of contemplation even fire becomes cool and refreshing. However, the rigors of your profession limit the amount of time you can spend in quietude. For you, meditation instead works best when you have a sword in your hand.

Riddle of Steel

Samurai Utility 10

In your hands, weapon and warrior are united in spirit, as your mind empties of the battlefield's distractions.

Encounter ♦ Martial

Minor Action Personal

Requirement: You must be holding a melee weapon.

Effect: You can make a saving throw. Also, until the end of your next turn, you gain a power bonus to Fortitude, Reflex, and Will equal to the highest enhancement bonus of a melee weapon you are holding.

YAKUZA

Outcasts, renegades, folk heroes, and criminals—the yakuza are many things to different people, but without exception they are the rejects of a society that values conformity. There is a saying in Kozakura: “The nail that sticks up must be hammered down.” The yakuza proudly view themselves as these nails, but refuse to be treated as such.

Although the true nature of the yakuza is hard to identify, most will agree that collectively they are scoundrels who live by their own rules and code of honor. Banding together in clannish groups, yakuza gain security and power by exploiting society through robbery or extortion. Most are viewed as criminals, but not necessarily with distaste; the unusual behavior of the yakuza makes them both loved and despised in the cities in which they operate.

Yakuza often work as street peddlers, smugglers, thugs, gamblers, or racketeers. They associate with each other through bonds of loyalty to their clan, which might include hundreds of members. Yakuza clans are highly organized using a hierarchical structure with the boss taking on the role of father and his subordinates the obedient children. Loyalty and honor are paramount to yakuza, though they eschew the ethics of bushido in favor of more pragmatic concerns.

In the view of most merchants and the officials of cities, yakuza are law-breaking thugs and criminals. The yakuza cultivate their image as iconoclasts, and purposefully commit robberies and vandalism to ruffle the feathers of authority. A yakuza clan often becomes the recognized face of crime within a city, wallowing in a self-made underworld; however, yakuza also realize that their livelihood depends on existing in the shadows of civilization, and they are not unnecessarily destructive of people or property in their criminal enterprises.

YAKUZA CUSTOMS

Though yakuza clans have distinct personalities and goals, many share common customs born from their rebellious and ruthless nature. The first is the yakuza’s love for tattoos—an art form considered scandalous by many Kozakurans. Most yakuza sport full-body tattoos that they conceal beneath their clothing, revealing the imagery only when in the presence of other yakuza or when doing so enhances one’s intimidating presence. The other custom is a form of penance for disobeying the boss of the clan. A yakuza being punished must sever a joint from his or her little finger with each transgression. When you create a character using this theme, consider the personal meaning of the tattoos you conceal beneath your clothing, as well as what your mutilated hand represents in terms of lessons you have learned.

Some yakuza go so far as to actively attend to the needs of their communities, using resources to help those that the ruling classes have ignored. Many peasants view the yakuza as heroes standing up for the underdog against a society that treads on them. A yakuza clan might defend peasants from bandits or the brutality of an arrogant samurai. Some clans donate wealth to improving the infrastructure of their city. Yakuza have even acted as spies or assassins during times of war to protect their cities from the ravages of loot-hungry attackers. In some cases, these actions are viewed with a standoffish respect by authorities, who allow the yakuza to operate with impunity as long as their criminal activities don’t get out of hand.



Creating a Yakuza

As outcasts in the society of Kozakura, most yakuza find themselves becoming rogues or assassins in order to survive in the underbelly of civilization. These characters quickly develop the skills and the mind-set that allow them to thrive in this cut-throat environment. Fighters also find a welcome place among yakuza, adopting roles as bodyguards or enforcers who do their bosses' dirty work. Yakuza clans are very inclusive, inclined to welcome anyone cast off from society who can be useful to their organization. As a result, unlikely characters such as clerics, druids, and wizards sometimes find a place within a yakuza clan's ranks. These characters often become vital assets to a clan, their talents giving it an edge over rivals.

Starting Feature

As a yakuza, you don't win battles by going toe-to-toe with enemies: You win by manipulating them into fighting you on your terms. A skilled yakuza will utilize deception, unfair positioning, coordination with allies, and every other dirty trick in the book to bring down foes. Though you are likely a skilled combatant, you know that the best weapon you have is the fear that your reputation is capable of creating in foes. Rumors of underworld assassinations, corruption, blackmail, and a penchant for violence surround you. Whether the rumors are true or not is irrelevant. What matters is that a menacing look from you stays the hands of enemies as efficiently as a mandate from the emperor.

Benefit: You gain the *ruthless demonstration* power.

Ruthless Demonstration

Yakuza Utility

The sight of blood and your threatening presence fill your opponents with dread, making them think twice before attacking you.

Encounter ♦ Fear, Martial

Free Action

Personal

Trigger: You bloody an enemy adjacent to you or reduce an enemy adjacent to you to 0 hit points or fewer.

Effect: Enemies that can see you take a -2 penalty to attack rolls against you until you are hit by an attack or until the end of the encounter. Also, if you bloodied the triggering enemy, you can immediately make an Intimidate check against it to force it to surrender.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Yakuza know when the time is right to strike, and they are relentless in pursuit of an opponent. Because of your predator's instinct, your blade bites deepest when your enemy shows weakness.

Benefit: When you hit an enemy granting combat advantage to you, your opportunity attacks gain a bonus to attack rolls and damage rolls against that enemy until the start of your next turn. The bonus equals your Charisma modifier.

Level 10 Feature

Some yakuza make their living by deception and fraud, others through strong-arm tactics such as extortion. Regardless of how you conduct your illicit affairs, your wits have been sharpened by the harshness of civilization's underworld. You know the shadowy paths necessary to stay alive on the dangerous streets, and you are an expert at manipulation.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Bluff checks or Intimidate checks (choose the skill when you gain this feature). Also, you gain a +2 power bonus to Streetwise checks.

Optional Powers

Living the life of a yakuza means forever dwelling as a misfit in an ordered society. As such, you survive by your cunning and through exploiting others whenever possible. You can't rely on help from a civilization that sneers at you, so you make your own luck by being opportunistic or cagey. You have no compunctions when it comes to taking what you want, and you are willing to use your talents to exploit others. Yet you are not without a sense of personal honor, something your enemies find out the hard way if they insult you.

Level 2 Utility Power

Though society considers them rejects, yakuza revel in their image as outcasts. Freed from the strict social demands of Kozakura's customs, you play life by your own rules, evening the odds of fate with your cunning or your audacity.

Life's Losing Hand Yakuza Utility 2

Though fate has dealt you the hand of a misfit, you take loss and turn it into success.

Encounter ♦ Martial

No Action Personal

Trigger: You roll a natural 1, 2, or 3 on an attack roll or a skill check.

Effect: You can reroll the attack roll or skill check, with a power bonus equal to your Charisma modifier. You must keep the second result, even if it is lower.

Level 6 Utility Power

When you single out a foe for special attention by using this power, you show it the foolishness of its ways if the creature dares to confront you.

You Can't Hide Yakuza Utility 6

No matter if your enemy tries to get away or stands and fights, it learns that either decision was a bad one.

Encounter ♦ Martial

Minor Action Melee 1

Target: One enemy

Effect: If the target ends its next turn in a square that is not adjacent to you, you can shift up to your speed to a square adjacent to it as a free action. If the target attacks you during its next turn, you gain a +5 power bonus to damage rolls against the target until the end of your next turn.

Level 10 Utility Power

Yakuza consider each other to be family, and an insult to one is an insult to all. If an enemy raises arms against you or one of your companions, you coordinate a retaliation that puts fear into the heart of even the most hardened warriors.

Underworld Vendetta Yakuza Utility 10

Your opponent's insult will not go unpunished, as the overwhelming intensity of your counterattack promises certain death.

Daily ♦ Fear, Martial

Immediate Reaction Close burst 5

Trigger: You or an ally is bloodied by an attack made by an enemy within 5 squares of you.

Target: The triggering enemy in the burst

Effect: Until the end of the encounter, the target grants combat advantage, and whenever you hit the target with an attack, it takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of its next turn.

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