



# Yabusame Horseback Archery and Samurai Etiquette in Kamakura

The city of Kamakura in Kanagawa Prefecture is the place where Japan's first samurai government was founded at the end of the 12th century by Minamoto no Yoritomo<sup>1</sup> (1147-1199). At the city's Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, a Yabusame (horseback archery) ritual is performed every autumn as part of a festival that dates back to Hachimangu's founding by the new Kamakura shogunate.

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An archer prepares to release one of his three arrows  
Photo: Courtesy of Ogasawararyu

**A**N archer dressed in Kamakura samurai hunting robes gallops down the approximately 254-meter-long "track" while shooting arrows from his horse at three targets. The sound of horses running, the archer shouting "*in-yo*," the thud of arrows piercing the target, and the cheers of the onlookers echo down the track at Tsurugaoka Hachimangu.

Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, located in Kamakura City, is dedicated to the guardian deity of the Kamakura samurai, and on the last day of the Annual Festival (*Reitai-sai*) held every September, this Yabusame Horseback Archery Ritual (*Yabusame shinji*) is held on a horseback archery range set up in the shrine's grounds. *Yabusame* is a martial art in which an archer

rests his weight on iron stirrups placed on a horse and rides at speed, balancing only with the lower body while using both hands to shoot at a target with a bow and arrow. Originally, yabusame horseback archery was practiced as a form of recreation at the imperial court, but with the rise of the samurai, it developed into a religious ritual. The Yabusame Horseback Archery Ritual was a sacred event in which archers shot targets with a bow and arrow from a running horse as a way to pray for good martial fortune during the coming year. They would also bring home targets and arrows sanctified before the deities as protection, praying for a good grain harvest and peace in the world. The Yabusame ritual that is performed at the Annual Festival of Tsurugaoka Hachimangu is said to have originated

in 1187 when Minamoto no Yoritomo, the founder of the Kamakura shogunate, dedicated it after a *hojoe*.<sup>ii</sup>


Today, the people who perform the divine affairs at the shrine are the disciples of the Ogasawara school, descended from influential samurai.

“The Ogasawara school of archery and equestrian etiquette combines etiquette,<sup>iii</sup> archery on foot, and horseback archery. Both archers shooting from the ground and those shooting on horseback make movements that accord with the etiquette that is the basis of the yabusame posture. Before anything else, you must learn the etiquette of the samurai properly.”

These are the words of Ogasawara Kiyotada, 31st head of the Ogasawara school.

“The posture that a samurai adopts as his ideal is efficient, rational, and also beautiful. To learn it, core and lower body strength are indispensable. Those who have just started to practice basic movements such as walking, standing, and sitting may be totally exhausted and not be able to get up the next morning due to muscle pain. In fact, it is said that it takes ten years to learn how to walk according to etiquette.”

The Ogasawara school was founded by Ogasawara Nagakiyo (1162-1242) when he was invited by Minamoto no Yoritomo to be an instructor of archery and horse-riding. Subsequently, successive Ogasawara heads also served the shoguns of the Muromachi shogunate (1336-1573) and the Edo shogunate (1603-1867), passing on their skills and spirit only to one of their own children by way of *isshisoden*.<sup>iv</sup> It can be said that yabusame is the culmination of the diligent study of the disciples of the Ogasawara school. Archers constantly devote themselves to not only etiquette but also basic training such as archery training and horseback training to strengthen the core by sitting on a wooden horse as preparation for the actual yabusame events. A horseback archer needs to perform three movements at the same time: riding a horse, pulling a bow, and making a shout, which requires a strong physique, controlled power, and great concentration.

It could be said that the advanced archery and riding techniques as well as the bravery of the Japanese samurai of the past have been transmitted for more than 800 years to the present day through the Yabusame Horseback Archery Ritual in Kamakura. 



Tsurugaoka Hachimangu  
Photo: Courtesy of Tsurugaoka Hachimangu



An archer in action during the Yabusame Horseback Archery Ritual at Tsurugaoka Hachimangu in Kamakura  
Photo: Courtesy of Ogasawararyu



Ogasawara Kiyotada (right), 31st head of the Ogasawara school, and his son, Kiyomoto (left), practicing archery at the Meiji Jingu shrine in Tokyo  
Photo: Courtesy of Ogasawararyu

i A Japanese warlord. He held real political power and established the Kamakura shogunate, the first samurai government in Japan.

ii A religious ritual that warns against the taking of lives. During the ritual, birds and beasts are released into the natural world.

iii Etiquette (*reiho*) is a style of conduct and demeanor that accords with courtesy. The Ogasawara school of etiquette is said to reflect an “aesthetic” that is at once practical, active, rational, and ethnic. It is a samurai’s etiquette cultivated among upper class samurai who incorporated the culture of the court officials.

iv To convey the secrets or mysteries of one’s learning and crafts only to one of one’s own children, keeping them secret from others.