

10. How suicide has been conceived in Japan and in the Western World: Hara-kiri, Martyrdom and Group Suicide

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This research compares traditional and contemporary cultural attitudes on suicide in Japan and in the Western world through the key terms of Hara-kiri in Japan, Martyrdom in Western Christianity and group suicide both in Japan and the Western world. Each key term on suicide reflects Japanese and/or Western cultural backgrounds. After each term of suicide is discussed, the similarities and the differences between Japanese and Western cultures are analyzed. This comparative research on suicide will reveal some difference of cultural values on death and life.

Seppuku (*Hara-kiri*): 切腹(腹切)

“Hara-kiri” is known by non-Japanese as a fearful and incomprehensible suicide specific to Japan (Okuma, 1973). Seppuku, also called hara-kiri, is a traditional form of suicide in Japan. Seppuku is written in Kanji as 切腹 (*seppuku*), and hara-kiri is written in Kanji as 腹切 (hara-kiri) in Japanese. Seppuku is a compound Kanji of 切 (*setsu* which means ‘to cut’), and 腹 (*fuku* which means ‘an abdomen’). Hara-kiri is also a compound word, but the order of Kanji is reverse, and reflects the Japanese syntax of “*hara* (an abdomen = object) + *wo* (a case particle marking the object) + *kiru* (to cut = verb)”; 腹 (*hara* which means an abdomen) and 切 (kiri which means to cut). Though the two Kanji, 腹 (*fuku/hara*) and 切 (*setsu/kiri*), both in seppuku and hara-kiri have different readings, seppuku as well as hara-kiri literally mean “to cut abdomen.” The meaning of hara-kiri is “an act of killing oneself by cutting open one’s stomach with a sword, performed especially by the samurai in Japan in the past, to avoid losing honour” as given in an English-English dictionary (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*, 2005: keyword of “hara-kiri”). In a Japanese-Japanese dictionary (*Daijirin*, 2006: keyword of “切腹”), seppuku is defined with the historical description. This Japanese definition of seppuku is translated as “1. to die from cutting one’s abdomen by oneself. Seppuku was regarded as a samurai’s self-determination after the Heian Era through medieval and modern times. 2. one of the capital punishments for executing samurai in the Edo period to protect his honor. He went through only a motion of disembowelment, but an assistant beheaded him.”

The first Japanese seppuku is said to have occurred in 989CE. Seppuku came to be popular among the samurai warriors who valued courage and mental power. By doing disembowelment which causes severe pain compared to the other ways of suicide, a samurai could demonstrate his own strong mental power. Suicide by using a sword, which only samurai warriors were allowed to carry, satisfied the samurai warrior’s spirit. In order to represent a samurai’s courage, some samurai warriors even threw their inner organs out of their own bodies after cutting themselves (Okuma, 1973: 7-28).

From the Kamakura period (1192-1333), seppuku was established as a method of suicide. Seppuku is described as a method to expiate guilt, to apologize for mistakes, to avoid stigma, to atone for friends, and to prove their own honesty. Seppuku was, therefore, regarded as an accomplished suicide suitable for imperturbable samurai warriors. In the Edo period (1603-1867), seppuku was established as a form of capital punishment though seppuku was committed voluntarily before then (Yamamoto, 2003: 18-38).

Seppuku as capital punishment was abolished in 1873 after the end of the Edo period when the samurai were displaced from the top of the class hierarchy. However, Yamamoto (2003) insists that the idea of seppuku has been kept in the current Japanese business culture. Fuse (1985) focuses on this type of suicide to take responsibility for social, political, or corporate blunders in modern days. Because legal responsibility and moral responsibility are closely related in Japanese culture, suicide continues as a means for individuals to make atonement for legal stigma. This kind of suicide is also committed to protect the group to which the individuals belong. On the other hand, moral and legal responsibilities are divided in the North American culture. Therefore, the cultural expectation is only on the legal responsibility in case of social blunders (Fuse, 1985).

On May 28th, 2007, the suicide of Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka during the Diet session surprised the Japanese people. A corruption case involving him was being conducted, and his lack of accountability about the corruption drew severe criticism before his suicide. The reason for his suicide is still unknown, but it appeared to the Japanese people that the minister committed suicide to take responsibility for the corruption case. Truth of the corruption has never come to light due to his suicide.

Suicide after a social scandal is called 引責自殺 (*inseki-jisatsu* = suicide to take responsibility for a scandal) in Japan, but the 引責自殺 (*inseki-jisatsu*) occurs regardless of whether the person is guilty or guiltless. 引責自殺 (*inseki-jisatsu*) is caused by a sense of disgrace. Those who commit 引責自殺 (*inseki-jisatsu*) think that a scandal related to them adversely affect a community which they belong to, and that the scandal disgraces their names regardless of the truth of the scandal. It sometimes occurs that followers who hold the key information of a scandal which their bosses have caused commit suicide in order to conceal the truth and to guard the bosses and the communities. 引責自殺 (*inseki-jisatsu*) occurs in Japan because the Japanese people tend to possess strong sense of belonging to their community, and they cannot imagine losing the community which forms their identity. After the 引責自殺 (*inseki-jisatsu*), people usually do not blame the people who have committed suicide to conceal the truth because blaming the dead is thought to be disrespectful in Japan (Takahashi, 2003).

Martyrdom in Western Christianity

“Martyr” is defined as a “person who has given or exposed his life in testimony to the truth or relevance of the Christian faith” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967: 312) and “martyrdom is the condition of being a martyr” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967: 314). According to *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967: 314), three conditions are required for martyrdom:

- (1) that physical life has been laid down and real death undergone;
- (2) that death has been inflicted in hatred of Christian life and truth; and
- (3) that death has been voluntarily accepted in defense of these.

Bowersock (2002) reported that some early Christians desired to die by martyrdom, which was a “manifestation of Christianity in the pagan Roman world” (Bowersock, 2002: 66), and they looked happy on the way to martyrdom. *Shin Catholic Daijiten III* (1996) reported that for two and a half centuries until 313 when the Roman Empire recognized Christianity officially, Christianity was suppressed and persecuted. Earnest Christians were martyred testifying their

faith in Christ. Martyrdom was sometimes treated as religious fanaticism, attracted pagans, and increased the number of Christians.

However, the scenes of martyrdom gave an impression of suicide as Bowersock (2002) reported. “Their enthusiasm for death comes very close to a desire to commit suicide – a suicide to be arranged by an external agent but with the clear complicity of the victim” (Bowersock, 2002: 61), and Christian theologians in the pre-Augustinian period raised questions about it. Plato and his later followers in the Roman period were opposed to any self-destruction, and their assertion was accepted by many Christian writers. Clement of Alexandria in the third century addressed martyrdom as suicide in terms of murder of oneself, and as a means to confess Christians’ faith in God was not necessarily established through their own deaths. St. Augustine (354 - 430) clearly upheld injunctions against suicide including martyrdom. Early Christianity historically allowed self-destruction as a form of martyrdom, but the custom of martyrdom did not last after St. Augustine (Bowersock, 2002).

Even in modern times, Christianity including both Roman Catholic and Protestant do not have a positive image about suicide, and this attitude is a result of their traditional religious heritage in the Western world (Fuse, 1985).

Before St. Augustine, Christianity was not very critical of suicide. For Christians, the fundamental religious belief is that human life has been given by God and only God can control life and death. In spite of the mainstream rejecting suicide, some people were attracted by martyrdom to become a saint. St. Augustine (354 - 430) is the first person to clarify suicide as a mortal sin based on an interpretation of the Holy Bible though there is no specific statement to forbid suicide in it (Maris et al., 2000).

In the Arles Council in 452, it was declared that suicide was a criminal act, and was forbidden. In the Middle Ages, canon law as well as civil law rigorously treated suicide as a criminal act, and this attitude to treat suicide as a mortal sin in public continued until the 19th century (Yamana, 1970).

In modern times, because the issue of suicide shifted from philosophical approaches to psychological, sociological and medical approaches, suicide is no longer regarded “as a heroic act of free will or as a mortal sin, but as an disease” (Maris et al., 2002: 120). However, even in the modern USA, suicide is often considered to be a stigma. For example, in Fine (1999), one chapter named “The Stigma” collected the survivors’ personal stories associated with the stigma of suicide related to their loved ones. Some survivors try to conceal the suicide of their loved ones, and there are survivors who even insist that it was not a suicide, but something else.

Group suicide in the Western World and in Japan

“Shinju,” (double suicide) as well as hara-kiri, are known as methods of suicide particular to Japan (Yamana, 1970: 63). The notion of suicide corresponding to “double suicide” or “group suicide” exists in English and Japanese culture, but the concept of “shinju” is different depending on its background. Japanese “shinju” is written in Kanji as “心中” (*shinju*), which literally means “heart-inside,” and in the 17th century, it was made to show “how faithful they are to each other” and that they have “no double-heart” (Yamana, 1970: 63-64). An effort to stay together in another world is made by means of double suicide even in modern times.

Fuse (1985) said that group suicide is categorized into two types, forced double suicide and agreed double suicide. In North America, for example, there are some murder-suicides where persons commit suicide after killing their loved ones. On the other hand, “agreed family suicide” or “agreed mother-child suicide” are more common in Japan.

Takahashi (2003) reported that the ratio of “murder-suicides” is not largely different, but the social attitude toward the “murder-suicide,” especially toward the “agreed mother-child suicide,” differs in Japan and the Western countries. Takahashi (2003) used the case of a mother-child suicide in Los Angeles as an example. A Japanese mother attempted to drown herself and her two children in the sea in 1985. The mother survived, but her two children died. This mother was prosecuted for murder, and the mother was regarded as an egoistic mother who killed her children without necessity in the USA. However, Japanese society was sympathetic to the mother. The mother and her children were treated as an expression of *altruism*, and it was thought that the children could not live happily without a mother even if they were not killed. Mothers who killed their children, and then attempted suicide are usually not punished severely in Japan while in the USA those mothers are severely punished for the murder of their children.

Ueda et al. (2005) reported that several cases of “ネット自殺” (*net jisatsu* = Internet suicide) which is also called “ネット心中” (*net shinju* = Internet group suicide) had an impact on Japanese society in 2003. By utilizing the “suicide bulletin board” on which the solicitors actively gathered people who had vague suicidal thoughts, suicidal strangers came to know each other, and they committed group suicide together. From November 2000 to February 2005, 40 cases of “Internet group suicide” were reported in the newspapers.

According to a journalist, Shibui (2004) *net shinju* / Internet group suicide is characterized by the fact that participants do not interact with personal feelings with each other, the encounter is a coincidence, the purpose of the encounter is group suicide, and psychological connections are not found among group members. The postings on suicide bulletin boards usually do not contain personal stories, such as why they would like to commit suicide, or what their problems are. For members of Internet group suicide, suicidal people who appear in the Internet function as a “tool” to assist each other in suicide. Suicidal people use other suicidal people as a means to help them commit suicide, and the suicidal people function as a “suicide machine” for each other. When the members have a deeper understanding of each other’s personal stories, when their philosophy of suicide differs, or when they wonder if they would like to commit suicide during exchanging information, *net shinju* / Internet group suicide is unfulfilled.

The problem of “ネット心中” *net shinju* / Internet group suicide is not the suicide bulletin boards because it is possible for suicidal people to exchange their feelings, and to communicate supportively on Internet. A key to prevent Internet group suicide is to use the suicide bulletin boards to support suicidal people, and to care for the suicidal people individually in a way that suits their different personal backgrounds (Shibui, 2004).

Takahashi (1998) reported on mass suicides committed by religious groups in modern times. One of the well known mass suicides related to cult religions is the case of People’s Temple which occurred in Guyana in South America in 1978. The whole religious community of the People’s Temple, which was established by Jim Jones in 1956, emigrated to South America to avoid conflict with neighbors in the USA, and to establish their ideal world. In an isolated community, the People’s Temple members were convinced that a variety of sources were persecuting them.

After attacking a group from the USA which investigated inhuman treatment in People's Temple, Jim Jones, the leader, directed the community members to commit mass suicide because he despaired about the future of his cult community. The mass suicide resulted in the deaths of 913 members, though some were murdered by the other members.

Takahashi (1998) also discussed the mass suicide of Heaven's Gate that occurred in California in 1997. Heaven's Gate was led by Marshall H. Applewhite who believed in UFOs. When the comet Hale-Bopp approached the earth, the leader convinced 38 followers to commit suicide with him to board a spaceship behind the comet, which they believed to exist, to go to the Kingdom of God.

Takahashi (1998) proposed three features of mass suicide related to religious beliefs. 1. A leader of a religious group regards him/her as a savior, and the activities of the religious group are often based on the savior's conviction. 2. The religious community is isolated from the external societies, and the leader and the followers are connected closely. 3. The delusional conviction of the leader binds the followers closely.

Some viewpoints from Fuse (1985)

Fuse (1985) raised several points regarding cultural differences between Western and Japanese culture in terms of suicide. In Europe, self-destruction is caused by feelings such as isolation and alienation based on an excess of individualism. In North America, a conflict is caused between the individual's desire and satisfaction based on non-integrated social traditions and regulations in the environment of a racial melting pot. Suicide in Japan is related to collective awareness by the pressure of the society, or by despair at being ostracized from the society because the Japanese people possess a strong sense of identity in their community. This Japanese identity entails a strong sense of cooperative behavior. Japanese suicide is also characterized by suicide to take responsibility for a failing in a group which the persons belong to.

According to Fuse (1985), Western people and Japanese people possess different concepts of their public and private consciousness. The Japanese people do not distinguish between their public responsibility and their private responsibility, so the suicides compensate for the honor of the group which they belong to with their deaths. For Japanese, the public face is deeply connected to the individual personality, and the destruction of the public face can be a reason to commit suicide. In the West, public responsibility is clearly distinguished from the private individuality, and the disruption of the private individuality in the private relationship can be a reason to commit suicide.

Fuse (1985) mentioned that, in Japan, in the case of "mother-child" suicide, or suicide of aged people, they commit suicide so as not to cause inconvenience to anyone. The Japanese people do not have the custom to take care of outside parties for prolonged periods. Therefore, accepting long-term support can be a reason to commit suicide because the suicides hope to stop causing inconvenience to the third parties. The Western way of thinking is dualistic such as a demarcation of good and evil. Based on dualistic thought, people are judged whether to be good or evil. This rigid adjudication culture can drive people into suicide in the Western countries.

Conclusions

Concerning Hara-kiri and group suicide in Japan, the Japanese people are very sensitive about their relationships or how they belong to their own community. Because the community forms their identity, the loss of community or saving community from destruction can be a reason for suicide in the Japanese culture. In the Western culture, though the martyrdom and group suicide, suicide is thought to be sinful, suicide often occurs. Basically, individual conflict can be the cause of suicide in the Western world.

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