

Suicide and Culture in Japan: A Study of Seppuku as an Institutionalized Form of Suicide

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Summary. *Seppuku* (i. e., ritual suicide by disembowelment, vulgarized in the West as *hara-kiri*) has been a popular theme in Japan's literature and theatre for years. It has been a time-honoured traditional form of suicide among the samurai class in Japan for centuries. There has been a discernible propensity in the West to understand suicide behaviour in terms of psychological and psychiatric theories. A study of *seppuku* casts some serious doubt on the validity and appropriateness of such "psychologism" as applied to non-Western cultures such as Japan. *Seppuku* in Japan has been nurtured in Japan's socio-cultural tradition as one of the socially and culturally prescribed and positively sanctioned role-behaviour in hierarchical organizations as well as in highly formal and tightly-knit human groups and classes. *Seppuku* may have become extremely rare in contemporary Japan but the type of suicide related to one's role-performance still seems to continue even in the twentieth century. Hence a study of *seppuku* enables us to understand better the unique cultural tradition and "aesthetics of death" in an otherwise highly technological and robust industrial society. Ultimately, *seppuku* is one of the keys to appreciate the deep relationship between suicide and culture in Japan.

Introduction

Seppuku as a stylized and ritualized form of suicide by disembowelment has been a uniquely Japanese form of suicide for centuries. For the Japanese it has been a badge of courage as well as an honour reserved only for the samurai, Japan's traditional military aristocracy. It has also continued to be a source of popular adoration and an inspiration for

plays, novels, and movies; for the non-Japanese, however, it has often been an object of profound enigma as well as stunned horror.

It is still fresh in our memory that as recently as World War II countless numbers of Japanese military officers committed *seppuku* in Pacific islands before the eyes of stunned American fighting men. Immediately after the end of the war in 1945, moreover, the serene outer ground of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo was dyed with blood by some Japanese men and women, both military and civilian, who calmly committed *seppuku* in tens and hundreds as an "apology" to the Emperor for having lost the war. More recently, Yukio Mishima, one of the most talented novelists in postwar Japan, shocked the world by slitting his belly in 1970.

A study of *seppuku* is important for two major reasons. Firstly, it is a highly institutionalized form of suicide developed in feudal Japan as an expression of the philosophy of life and death especially among the samurai and the officer corps in armed forces. Long-standing popular admiration for this form of suicide attests the wide diffusion of such martial philosophy far beyond the military class. Hence an understanding of *seppuku* and its philosophy is a clue to understand Japan's moral values on life and death widely held by the Japanese. Secondly, there has been a discernible tendency in the West to understand suicide behaviour primarily in terms of psychological and psychiatric theories. Implicit in such approach has been a tendency to regard suicide as a form of emotional disturbance or mental illness. Study of *seppuku* may question the cross-cultural validity of such an approach, for *seppuku* has been nurtured in Japan's cultural tradition as a socially and culturally prescribed role-behaviour. As such it has been a legitimate form of behaviour fully reinforced by cultural tradition and folklores. A study of *seppuku*,

therefore, is an important key to understanding the intricate relationship between suicide and culture in Japan. Despite its world fame, little work has been done to date on seppuku. The present paper examines the following: historical origins, types, forms and methods, and some implications of seppuku in terms of the Japanese psyche and the religious-moral philosophy of death in Japan.

Historical Origin

The first recorded incident of seppuku allegedly took place in Harima, near the Lake Biwa area. According to the *Chronicle of the Geography and Climate of Harima* (i. e., *Harima Fudoki*) written in 716 A. D., a young goddess committed suicide in Harima by slitting her belly immediately after a marital dispute with her god-husband [1].

The second incident is recorded in *A Story of Ancient Matters (Zoku-Kojidan)*, Volume II, written in 1219 A. D. Yasusuke Fujiwara, a well-heeled scion of a distinguished aristocratic family, turned to the profession of thievery and attained notoriety as a “cat burglar”. He committed seppuku in 989 A. D. when he was cornered by the police. Escape being totally impossible, he retired into his own room, took a small sword and disemboweled himself [2].

Following the decadence and gradual breakdown of aristocratic rule, the samurai as the military aristocracy emerged during the early part of the tenth century in response to the increasing decline of the police and military system in the country. The functions of local administration, land management and policing were combined as some minor local officials and members of influential provincial families took up arms. By the 11th century the samurai had begun to emerge as a separate and functional group, and by the 12th century they were the dominant group in the country.

Following the ascendancy of the samurai, incidents of seppuku multiplied rapidly, especially among the defeated samurai as a means of showing their valour and preserving their honour by escaping from the indignity of being captured by the enemy. One of the famous incidents of the samurai seppuku involved a member of the Minamoto (or Genji) Clan, Minamoto Tametomo, who was exiled to an offshore island following defeat in the Hogen Incident in 1159. Later on, however, the Imperial Court in Kyoto and the rival Heike Clan (or Taira) sent 300 warriors to capture him. Having been a fabled archer, he was reported to have sunk some enemy ships with his arrows. But he and his few men were no match against 300 men. So he retreated into his private

room, stood up and disemboweled himself, threw his intestines at the enemy and then expired at the age of 28 in 1170. To be explained later, this is the first recorded incident of *tachibara*, or seppuku committed in a standing position [3]. Also recorded is an incident of Tametomo’s infant brother who was captured and beheaded by the Heike Clan in 1156. Upon hearing the news, one of the men of the infant lord rushed to the scene and committed seppuku with his infant lord’s corpse in his hand. This is probably the first recorded case of *oibara*, or a type of seppuku committed after the death of one’s lord.

By the end of the 12th century, the reins of power had fallen completely into the hands of the samurai. Minamoto Yoritomo, the head of the Minamoto Clan, established the first *Shogunate* government (military government) at Kamakura near Tokyo, thereby marking the beginning of the 675-year-long military and feudal age in Japan. One of the tragic sagas of this period involved a younger brother of Yoritomo. The latter became intensely jealous and suspicious of his immensely popular younger brother Yoshitsune, who had become a folk hero of the time. Consumed with hatred, Yoritomo chased his younger brother away from the capital, drove him into hiding, sent troops to hunt him down and finally cornered him. Thereupon Yoshitsune committed seppuku with a sense of mortified chagrin. This latter seppuku, committed under forced conditions, came to be known as *munenbara* [4].

Incidents of seppuku reached epidemic proportions during the Mongol invasion in the 13th century: many samurai committed seppuku in order to show their valour in face of the enemy and to escape from capture by the enemy. From the 13th century on, seppuku took firm roots among the members of the samurai class. Influenced by the philosophy of Zen and Confucianism, the samurai began to develop the warrior code of ethics called *Bushido*. To be explained later, *Bushido* became a powerful source of the “aesthetics of death” among the samurai.

The task of unifying the country was accomplished by Iyeyasu Tokugawa, who established the Tokugawa shogunate at Edo (present-day Tokyo) in 1603. The Tokugawa period (1603–1867) ushered in an unprecedented period of national unity, uninterrupted peace and remarkable socio-economic development until the eve of the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

It is during this Tokugawa period that the detailed ceremonial forms and rituals of seppuku were perfected. Institutionalization and ritualization as well as standardization of seppuku was followed by another basic change in the objective of seppuku: it had become a type of punishment for the samurai

class. Because the samurai were seldom put to death by court, they were instead given the “privilege” of taking their own life for their crimes rather than undergoing the indignity of being put to death by others. Such penalty of ordered or forced seppuku under the criminal code came to be called “ish” or “conferred death” [5].

Prolonged peace in Tokugawa Japan witnessed an increase in a form of seppuku called *junshi* or “suicide to follow one’s lord to the grave”. In peacetime the samurai were deprived of occasions to show their valour and loyalty to their lords, so they felt the acute need of showing their sense of loyalty at the time of the death of their lords. Afraid of losing some capable men in this fashion, the Shogunate strictly forbade this form of suicide to no avail: throughout the Tokugawa period, hundreds and thousands of men followed their lords to the grave. Every feudal province took enormous pride in the number of such *junshi* as a badge of distinction and loyalty [6].

Probably the best known *junshi* in Tokugawa Japan was the group seppuku of the famous 47 *ronin* (masterless samurai). In 1701, Lord Asano, the feudal *daimyo* (feudal estate lord) of Banshu and Akaho Castle, injured Kono Kiranosuke inside the Chiyoda Castle in Edo on March 14th. That was the day when the Imperial Court in Kyoto sent a special envoy to Edo and the Shogunate. The Shogun Tsunayoshi was to receive the envoy and hand over his reply to the Imperial Court. The afore-mentioned incident, moments before the arrival of the envoy, was a serious felony offence. Consequently, Lord Asano was ordered to commit seppuku, his feudal domain confiscated, his men dismissed and his family line discontinued. Thereupon, 47 of his loyal retainers pledged revenge. Thus, on December 14th, 1702, in the small hours of the night, they revenged the death of their lord by beheading the villain, Kiranosuke. The incident created a sensation, eliciting popular support to and sympathy for the 47 *ronin* as the living symbol of the samurai loyalty. After prolonged debate, however, the Shogunate ordered the *ronin* to commit seppuku as penalty for their “crime” of private revenge. On February 4th, 1703, therefore, all of them, from a boy of 17 to the old men in their late 60s, committed seppuku in dignity. The story of these loyal ronin has been told and retold ever since, providing a rich source of material for the theatre, novels and movies [7].

Finally, towards the end of the Tokugawa period, an incident happened in Japan that made *hara-kiri* a household word all over the world. In February, 1868, some French sailors had a skirmish with 20 samurai from the Tosa province in Sakai near pres-

ent-day Osaka, resulting in the injury of 13 Frenchmen. Thereupon the French Government demanded punishment for the samurai involved in the incident. Since 13 Frenchmen were injured, France demanded punishment for 13 samurai. Immediately, 13 samurai volunteers came forward to meet the French demand. Then they went about slitting their bellies one by one, serenely and calmly, much to the utter consternation and disgust of the French representatives at the seppuku ceremony. By the time the fourth samurai proceeded with his belly-slitting, the Frenchmen turned pale and vomited. They begged to take leave and left the scene immediately and for good. At once, the seppuku ceremony was stopped. After this incident, the word *hara-kiri* (belly-slitting) became familiar among non-Japanese [8].

With the resignation of the last Shogun began the colourful Meiji period (1868–1912) that transformed Japan into a modern nation. In the whirlwind of massive changes in this period, some debates took place calling for abolition of seppuku as a “practice unheard of in the civilized West” [9]. Thus, in 1874, seppuku was officially removed from the list of death penalties.

Such official ban notwithstanding, seppuku as a voluntary form of suicide continued to be practiced in Japan, especially among military officers and some super-patriotic men before and even after 1945. Granted that it has become extremely rare in postwar Japan, it remains as a “romantic” tradition deep in the Japanese psyche as evidenced in the gory seppuku of the late Yukio Mishima.

Typology of Seppuku

Seppuku can first be divided into two large categories in terms of the freedom of choice i. e., whether or not it was committed voluntarily. Voluntary seppuku is called *jijin* (self-destruction with one’s own sword), and the other, *tsumebara* (forced seppuku) [9].

1. *Jijin* (Voluntary Seppuku)

In the first category of *Jijin*, there are six basic types. The sixth type, as will be explained shortly, has three sub-types, and one of such three sub-types (i. e., *oibara*, see Table 1) has three further sub-categories.

1. *Jiketsu*: it literally means “self-determination”, referring to a voluntary way of suicide. It was a common type of seppuku among the samurai following defeat in battle, especially before the Tokugawa period.

Table 1. Typology of seppuku in Japan

	Type	Motives	Body position	Mode of disembowelment
Jijin (voluntary self-destruction by disembowelment)	1. Jiketsu	defeat in battle	1. Tachibara (seppuku committed while standing up)	1. Ichimonji, single-line belly slitting sideways
	2. Inseki	assuming responsibility for mistakes to save one's own group		
	3. Sacrifice	to protest against misconduct of one's lord	2. Suwaribara (seppuku committed while sitting)	2. Nimonji, double-line belly slitting sideways
	4. Kanshi	to prove one's innocence		
	5. Memboku			
	6. Junshi			
	a) Sakibara	to precede one's lord or someone else in death		
	b) Atobara	to follow someone else shortly after or later		
	c) Oibara	to follow someone else immediately after		
	i) Gibara	committed because of giri (indebtedness to one's lord)		
ii) Ronbara	to save one's face	3. Sanmonji, three-line belly slitting sideways		
iii) Shobara	for the future benefits of one's posterity			
Tsumebara (forced seppuku for punishment)	1. Munenbara	mortified suicide for unfulfilled objectives		4. Jumonji, belly slitting sideways and vertically
	2. Funbara	assuming responsibility legally and morally for someone else		
	3. Keishi	legal punishment for crime		

2. *Inseki*: it refers to a type of seppuku committed to assume moral and legal responsibility for one's mistakes, blunders and wrong doings as well as misconducts of one's subordinates.

3. *Sacrifice*: during periods of incessant feudal wars, some defeated generals or warlords offered to commit seppuku in front of the victors with a proviso that their family and their men be spared. Hence it is called sacrifice seppuku.

4. *Kanshi*: this is a type of seppuku committed as a remonstrance or protest against the wrong and immoral conduct of one's lord. When a feudal lord or one's superior continued his wrongful behaviour, his old chief retainer often committed this type of seppuku in order to force the lord to rectify his misconduct.

5. *Memboku*: it simply means "saving one's face". This type of seppuku is committed in order to prove one's innocence and to save one's honour, especially when a samurai was wrongly and unfairly accused of a crime or misconduct of which he was innocent.

6. *Junshi*: it is a type of suicide committed to follow one's lord to the grave, quite common during the Tokugawa period. In peacetime the samurai were deprived of military opportunities to demonstrate their valour and loyalty to the lords in battle. Despite strict and frequent prohibitions by the Shogunate, *junshi* was widely practiced by the samurai. *Junshi* can further be divided into three sub-types in terms of "timing" of seppuku: (a) *sakibara*, (belly-slitting in advance) is a seppuku committed *before* the death of one's lord but in anticipation of the lord's impending death, (b) *atobara* (delayed seppuku), is a type of *junshi* committed, not immediately after the death of

one's lord but after some lapse of time, and (c) *oibara* (follow-up seppuku), is the type of seppuku committed by a samurai *immediately after* the death of his lord. This last category, *oibara*, has three further sub-types in terms of different motives: (i) *gibara*, or a type of *oibara* committed in sympathy with or for a sense of deep indebtedness to, one's lord; (ii) *ronbara*, committed by a samurai to preserve his "face" by imitating his peers who are committing seppuku to follow the lord to the grave; (iii) *shobara*, a type of seppuku calculated to bring future benefits to one's family by showing his "loyalty" through the suicide act.

II. Tsumebara (Forced, Penal Seppuku)

Such involuntary seppuku was used as a punishment for legal and moral offenses committed by the members of the samurai class. In a caste-oriented society such as Tokugawa Japan, seppuku was granted as the last privilege to members of the samurai class, preserving their honour. There are three types in this category.

1. *Munenbara*: it is a type of seppuku meted out to someone for a trumped-up charge or one-sided penalty and justice. The person who is forced to commit this type of seppuku dies with a profound sense of mortification and remorse. The forced seppuku of the afore-mentioned Lord Asano (of the 47 loyal *ronin*) is a case in point.

2. *Funbara*: it is a seppuku in which a samurai dies with total unrepentance and hateful spite.

3. *Keishi*: it is a straight penalty for criminal offences for the samurai. Later on in the Tokugawa period,

this type of legal penalty had become so perfunctory that it was hardly distinguishable from simple beheading.

Methods and Ritual of Seppuku

Of all types of suicide, seppuku is considered to be the most painful. Since the lower abdomen has heavy muscle linings and fats, even the sharpest blade would not be able to pierce it easily. It is said that the deepest thrust of the sharpest blade could not be more than 7 cm deep. A samurai committing seppuku is expected to stab the left side of his abdomen first and then slit it open sideways. In the process he will also cut and slit the internal organs, causing excruciating pain. It usually takes hours before one dies successfully, thereby prolonging the excruciating pain and requiring a superhuman courage and perseverance. It is understandable, then, that this form of suicide had become a way of dying and a badge of courage for a proud warrior class such as the samurai in Japan.

I. Method of Disembowelment

1. *Ichimonji-bara*: In this method of belly slitting, one holds the sword in his right hand, thrusts the blade into the left side of the abdomen a few inches below the rib cage and then cuts the belly sideways all the way to the right. This single-line (or *ichimonji* in Japanese) slitting of the belly was the most common method of seppuku among the samurai.

2. *Jumonji-bara*: In addition to the afore-mentioned single-line belly slitting, one now adds another slitting vertically, bringing the blade from the upper centre of the rib cages straight down to below the navel, thereby forming a cross (i. e., *jumonji*).

3. *Nimonji-bara* and *Sanmonji-bara*: these are variations of the *ichimonji-bara*. *Nimonji-bara* refers to double-line seppuku, and *sanmonji-bara* to triple-line disembowelment. That is to say, following the *ichimonji-bara*, you now slit the belly once more parallel to the first one. If you do it three times, it is the *sanmonji-bara*.

4. *Tachibara*: it literally means “standing seppuku”, referring to the position of the person committing disembowelment. Hence, *tachibara* is the seppuku committed in the standing position.

5. *Suwaribara*: This is the seppuku committed in the sitting position.

II. Ritual of Seppuku

One of the most important institutions of seppuku is the second, a skilled swordsman who beheads the

man committing seppuku in order to quicken the death and thereby to spare him any further unnecessary pain and ugly sights. The selection of the second was arranged in accordance with the rank of the samurai committing seppuku. It was customary for a samurai, therefore, to choose and designate as second someone renowned for his swordsmanship.

It was common at the seppuku ceremony that a samurai about to commit seppuku and the second exchange a few words before the act of disembowelment and let each other know their respective status, names and the second's school of martial arts in which he had been trained. By the middle of the Tokugawa period it had become quite common for the second to behead the man the moment he started stabbing his abdomen in order to spare him any prolonged and unnecessary pain. Sometimes a white fan was used as a “symbol” in lieu of a sword for seppuku, and the moment a samurai picked up the fan, the second instantly beheaded the man with a masterly stroke, maximizing speed and minimizing pain.

Psychology and Philosophy of Seppuku

I. Psychology of Seppuku

Durkheim developed a classification of suicide into three basic types: egoistic, altruistic and anomic suicide. His description of “altruistic suicide” perhaps best characterizes seppuku. According to his theory, altruistic type of suicide is a supreme act of responsibility and of belonging. Seppuku is a good example of individual behaviour being subordinate to the needs of social cohesion, because it is an act of self-destruction in which the individual's purpose or meaning is defined so strongly in terms larger than himself that he readily sacrifices his life in the name of his social role. The idea of killing oneself as a means of helping one's group or one's loved ones to reach a desired goal is a favoured romantic theme in Japanese culture; thus, seppuku is positively related to the cultural emphasis on role dedication and role-performance.

Seppuku as a form of altruistic suicide, then, may be caused by intense socialization into and dedication to, one's social role. It may be called “role narcissism” [10]. According to this explanation, suicide such as seppuku is a response to a continued need for social recognition resulting from a narcissistic preoccupation with the self in respect to status and role. Many Japanese tend to become over-involved with their social role, which has become cathected by them as the ultimate meaning for life. Such individuals are vulnerable to social disturbances or personal

mistakes or inadvertencies that may bring about a change in role definition. Shame and chagrin are so extreme among the Japanese, especially in a perceived threat to loss of social status, that the individual cannot contemplate life henceforth, and rather than face the necessity of continuing life in an altered or degraded social role, he chooses to end it all.

II. Philosophy of Life and Death in Seppuku

One of the most unusual aspects of suicide in Japan in general and of seppuku in particular has been the presence of a powerful psychic propensity for death, probably unparalleled in the annals of human history. Perusal of Japanese history reveals that the emergence and ascendancy of Buddhism and *Bushido* (the Warrior Code) had altered the Weltanschauung of the Japanese fundamentally – i. e., the Japanese philosophy of “life” began to be replaced by an affirmation of “death”. In short, the meaning of life was understood in terms of one’s ability to find the *right time and place to die*. As a matter of fact, a book generally considered to be a “bible” for the samurai clearly states that the “essence of Bushido is to die” [11].

Such strong death orientation is a radical departure from the previous concept of life in Japan. In Japan’s early mythology, the “after-life” was referred to as *yomi no kuni*, a dark defiled world. In sharp contrast to this “dark defiled world” was *takamagahara* or “heavenly high plateau” – i. e., an equivalent of Paradise in Christianity, and of Pure Land in the Jodo sect of Buddhism where ancient Japanese gods had allegedly resided. This *takamagahara* was considered to be coterminous with this world of humans, indicating a strong this-worldly orientation in the early Japanese thinking [12].

Buddhism, introduced to Japan in the 6th century, replaced life-affirming this-worldliness of pre-Buddhist Japan with a more pessimistic and other-worldly orientation. In its central core Buddhist teaching assumes that human life in this world is characterized by incessant suffering, transitoriness and illusion. Clinging to and craving for life and its amenities, therefore, is the essence of illusion and the main source of human tragedy and suffering. Thus, abnegation of life is a powerful theological theme in Buddhism. In early Buddhist scriptures human existence was interpreted in terms of death, and human life was perceived in terms of its ultimate termination in death. “The starting point of Buddhism is death. All doctrines in Buddhism are derived from this inevitable fact of death in human existence . . .” [12]. In short, Buddhism is a religion centred on death. This-worldliness of Shintoism and other-worldly orientation of Buddhism is still reflected in the common practice in contemporary Japan: the Japanese

get married in a Shinto shrine (i. e., life-affirmation) but get buried in a Buddhist temple (i. e., death orientation).

An important Buddhist philosophy to contribute to such view of life was Zen. From the Kamakura period (1185–1333) on, the samurai had come under the powerful influence of Zen Buddhism which preached the importance of transcending life and death. Zen was enthusiastically espoused by the samurai, who eventually developed the afore-mentioned samurai warrior code (*Bushido*) in which death was positively affirmed as a way of showing their valour and loyalty for eternity.

Thus, Buddhist thinking in general, and the powerful Zen philosophy and its attendant *Bushido* in particular, all contributed to the philosophy of death firmly espoused by Japan’s warrior class. That it did not die with the demise of Imperial Japan in 1945 and with the pervasive influence of mass democracy since 1945 is evident in the seppuku incident of Yukio Mishima. Mishima had dealt with such Buddhist themes as “rin-né” (or incessant rebirth) in his novels and plays. When he stormed into the army headquarters in Tokyo with a samurai sword, Mishima wore a headband with “shichi-sho hokoku” written on it (which means to serve the country and the emperor by being reborn seven times over). It seems to this writer that the psychology and philosophy of death (or aesthetics of death) will continue to live in the deep inner recess of the Japanese psyche for years to come, as exemplified in the Mishima incident itself. Such an assumption is at least partially vindicated when one knows that Mishima’s seppuku aroused a massive sympathy among the Japanese – young and old, men and women, educated and unsophisticated, liberal or conservative, rich or poor.

There are some other implications in Japanese philosophy of death, especially as revealed in seppuku among the samurai. In one sense, the philosophy of seppuku could be considered an affirmation of life. The Japanese would not see anything aesthetic in dying of the natural aging process which involves inevitably a loss of memory, advancing senility, infantilism, loss of motor coordination, pervasive body decay and debilitating disease, etc. In natural death caused by aging, therefore, death will come to the person unavoidably and externally; you are the *passive* and helpless victim of nature’s inevitability and fate. But the voluntary seppuku involved an elaborate and rational planning as well as a psychological preparedness in the form of willingness to die for a cause. In this process, the samurai is the *active agent for his life and death*: to wit, he holds total mastery on his life and death. In seppuku and other forms of suicide he is the *active agent* who will bring his own death with his own decision, unlike the natural death in which one is a powerless and helpless

victim of nature's whim. It is not God, Fate or the inevitability of aging – i. e., other agents than one's own self – that will bring death; it is rather the man himself who will hasten or bring about the termination of his own life with his own volition and choice. This is, to be sure, one of the most powerful ways of affirming one's own life. However, such an idea is no longer alien to the western world either. The recent debate in Europe and North America with regards to the "right to death" for the terminally ill is an eloquent evidence of a similar philosophy developing in the West as well.

There is finally one other point that has important implications far beyond the borders of Japan as revealed in this study of seppuku. That is to say, there has been a discernible tendency in the West to understand suicide behaviour in terms of psychiatric and psychopathological approaches in which suicide has been considered to be a result of emotional disturbance at best and of mental illness at worst. Yet in all studies done on suicides around the world, any definite and ascertainable correlation between mental illness and suicide has been less than 30% [14]. Moreover, the present study of seppuku as a highly ritualized and stylized form of suicide with a considerable amount of rational forethought and preparation, casts some serious doubt on the appropriateness and validity of the aforementioned Western assumptions on suicide with overtones of psychopathology. For seppuku in Japan has been nurtured in Japan's cultural tradition as well as by religio-moral value system as one of the socially prescribed role-performances strongly validated and reinforced by its culture. As far as seppuku is concerned, it seems imperative to understand it in the context of intimate relationship between cultural values and culturally approved behaviour. Viewed from such a vantage point of "culture and personality", then, seppuku may not be a case of "psychopathological" behaviour. Even the "role-narcissism" concept, discussed earlier, may not be appropriate: for, what is "role-narcissistic" to the westerner may be an exemplary virtue fully supported by cultural tradition and values. In a cross-cultural study of suicide one must take an extraordinary caution for not equating provincial Euro-American values and behaviour patterns with the universal human behaviour. For this reason alone, then, the study of seppuku is important for eventually generating a theory of suicide that will be cross-culturally valid in and applicable to, all cases.

In feudal Japan the Japanese developed a stylish culture in which an elaborate role-performance was closely linked to one's self-esteem, a sense of honour and *raison d'être* for existence. Defense of one's self-

esteem and one's honour, therefore, was the *sine qua non* priority and concern for the warrior class in Japan. Ritualized suicide such as seppuku was a culturally approved and reinforced means of safe-guarding self-esteem and honour. The present study indicates a further need for suicide and culture from the cross-cultural perspective, for man in culture comes to dedicate himself to some form of system of symbolic representations, whether embodied in a religion or an ideology of society or a philosophy of life. The present study of seppuku hopefully underlines the important relationship between suicide and culture and merits further scrutiny and understanding from suicidologists in the years to come.

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