

Nationalist Suicidology in Japan 1865-2000

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Samurai *seppuku*, *kamikaze* attacks, and more recently, the tragically mythical Aokigahara “suicide forest,” have long been aspects of Western understandings of the history and identity of Japan. Many within and without Japan have been led to view the country as a “suicide nation,” both because of Japanese historical peculiarities related to suicide and the highly mediatized elevated rates of suicide in late 20th and early 21st century Japan. Most of these impressions provide no substance and often contribute to simplified language on a complex issue which plagues many nations. However, there is something to say about some patterns in manifestations of suicide within Japanese nationalism, either embedded in popular culture or consecrated in administrative policies. In this essay, I wish to explore to what extent suicide is or has been an aspect of Japanese nationalism from the late 1800’s to the present day. I will look into the late 19th and early 20th century reinterpretation of the *bushido* code and samurai values, loyalty and militarism in the war-afflicted 20th century, as well as the reframing of suicidology in post-occupation Japan and how it has evolved in the 21st century. I hope to demonstrate that self-sacrifice and self-killing is embedded in some aspects of Japanese nationalism which had both patriotic and military purposes during the wars of 1850-1945, yet remained a part of popular psyche and culture in the years following as well.

Japan’s construction of nationalism, like most nations’, stems from a rich history of which some aspects naturally retain their quality through time in popular culture and conscience, and others are attached to bureaucratic and administrative policies and management. The mythical character of the samurai and their strict moral codes entered Japanese nationalism through both means. Their legendary character has often been represented in a variety of contexts, some more and some less accurate, both in the popular psyche and culture (even at the international level) and for patriotic means. Because of this twofold attachment to the Japanese identity, **suicide** can be said to stand in its own corner of Japanese nationalism. One aspect of samurai

behavior and values that is often highlighted, for better or for worse, is their profound loyalty to their master and commitment to their honor, to the point of suicide should these things be put in jeopardy.

Samurai morality and moral philosophy literature, especially those originating from the Edo or Tokugawa period (1600-1868), tend to place loyalty and honor at the center of the warrior's values. However, there is debate as to whether this single coherent entity of literature can be called *bushido*, in which samurai warriors, loyal *in extremis* to their master, are willing to die by suicide through *seppuku* (ritual self-disembowelment) in case of defeat, dishonor, or failure. Some authors are very willing to identify a clear warrior class ideal established following the Gempei War (1180-1185), where death by *seppuku* to demonstrate loyalty has been "glorified and romanticized ever since," even going as far as to say that it "may help account for the Japanese fascination with the subject of suicide," thus attributing accuracy to this image of the samurai.¹ Others, however, caution against this simplistic and fabricated image of the samurai. Historian G.C Hurst argues that our understanding of the samurai is exhorted as a representation of what *it is* when it is really what *it ought to be*.² This idea is built in the common conscience when it was in fact not as widespread and coherent as one is led to believe. The term *bushido* really only appeared in the Edo period, and although *seppuku* has a long history, it was not a widespread custom, rather limited to situations where the warrior faced certain death at their enemy's hand.³

However, although there are possibly anachronistic reinterpretations or romanticizations of the "dying-to-die" samurai warrior archetype, some factual events have a hold on

understandings

¹ Edwin O. Reischauer. *Japan: The Story of a Nation*. Knopf Publishing, 1991.

² G. Cameron Hurst III. "Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushido Ideal" in *Philosophy East and West*, , *Understanding Japanese Values*, University of Hawai'i Press Vol. 40, No. 4, Oct., 1990, 516

³ *Ibid*, 520

Japanese identity. Take, for example, the 47 *Ronin* incident which ended in the suicide by *seppuku* of 46 warriors at a temple which today attracts considerable traffic from both Japanese people and foreigners.⁴ This romanticization and commodification of these events occurs because it is both sensational and evokes sentiments of devotion, loyalty, and intense personal honor, all of which are values that contribute to the making of a strong, united nation. It is not difficult to see, then, why the samurai-loyalty-suicide combination fits well into Japanese nationalist tendencies as a historical harvest which can produce a strong sense of allegiance to the nation.

This is especially true when we consider the way these values of death for loyalty and honor were reinterpreted by wartime bureaucracies in the 20th century. Although the archetypal samurai as described above is not the dying-and-killing honor-and-loyalty machine popular culture would like many of us to believe, this mythical figure and the values associated with it offered practical advantages for a nation looking for war victory. Even though the warrior class disappeared with the Meiji restoration, the concept of bushido was reinvented both in popular literature and military bureaucracy. As the country was undergoing its Meiji restoration modernization campaign, the 1899 publication of *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* by Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933) and the revival of bushido literature such as the 1716 *Hagakure (In the Shadow of Leaves)* and *Yamaga Gorui* reinvigorated Japan with a resurrection of warrior values which would prove useful to a government wanting to send citizens to fight in wars. Extreme nationalists had also begun refashioning bushido through these Edo-era and current publications.⁵ The rhetoric evolved through the Meiji government who, for example, refashioned the term “gunshin” (war deities), from meaning ‘deities who guarded warriors’ to ‘deified soldiers’ as a “strategy to encourage soldiers to plunge to death as an honorable act and for the

⁴ Ibid, 521

⁵ Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: the militarization of aesthetics in Japanese history*. University of Chicago Press, 2002, 117

people not to object to their sacrifice.” Another example is the term “gyokusai” (shattering crystal), which the Japanese military government adopted to “encourage mass suicide when faced with a hopeless situation.”⁶ This term was especially used following the Battle of Okinawa (1945), where the Imperial army “forced and steered” civilians to commit mass suicide.⁷

Moral ideals of samurai origin, such as the safeguarding of personal honor and suicide in the face of certain death also followed through the 20th century. Incidents of Japanese POW suicides in internment camps are exceptionally high: in 1938, the Imperial Japanese Army had the highest suicide rate among all the military organizations in the world.⁸ This statistic refers to *unauthorized* suicides of soldiers, which indicates that several more committed suicide as an authorized or sanctioned action. Some of these events are well documented and available in public archives.⁹

However, although some prisoners were said to have followed the “path of suicidal nationalism” by performing self-immolation in India’s Bikaner internment camp, many of the Japanese POWs at Bikaner had started “questioning the rationale behind bushido and its relevance in modern times.” Many of these suicides in internment camps were not a form of nationalist bushido, but rather a protest against the humiliating treatment they were receiving.¹⁰ The militarization and patriotism that permeated Japan from the late 1800’s to 1945 was marked with extreme duty to the emperor and to the nation, and these themes of sacrifice, honor, loyalty

⁶ Ibid, 118

⁷ The Japan Times “Military ‘forced’ Okinawa mass suicides” Kyodo News, November 28th, 2007. Accessed <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2007/11/28/national/military-forced-okinawa-mass-suicides/>

⁸ Janice Matsumura and Diana Wright. “Japanese Military Suicides During the Asia-Pacific War: Studies of the unauthorized self-killings of soldiers.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 25, No. 2, June 22nd, 2015.

⁹ See, for example: Japan Center for Asian Historical Records, National Archives of Japan. “24. Incident of mass suicide at internment camp in New Caledonia.” Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁰ T.R Sareen. “The Twilight of Suicidal Nationalism” in *Japanese Prisoners of War in India, 1942-46*. Brill Publishing, 2006, p. 173

and allegiance were central to the policies and directives given by the military government and popular propaganda, but this is not to say that all suicide was out of allegiance and loyalty, as indicated in the Bikaner example.

It would seem, however, that no one was spared from militarism seeping into their daily lives, and with it the notion of self-sacrifice. In his 1962 piece *From The Youth Who Came Late*, a novel reminiscent of wartime Japan, Oe Kenzaburo, the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize for Literature winner, describes such a scene: “Each pupil was asked by the teacher, ‘What would you do if the emperor asked you to die?’; each would answer ‘I would cut open my belly and die, sir.’”¹¹ An 1887 kindergarten song called *Kazo’ e uta* (Counting Song) uses cherry blossom imagery to symbolize the aestheticism of dying for the emperor in the lyrics, “Mountain cherry blossoms, even when they fall, it is for His Majesty.”¹² These direct references to self-sacrifice and the practice of *seppuku* ingrained as a natural inclination, even in childhood, are evidence of the way loyalty and self-sacrifice to the nation through suicide became distinct Japanese nationalist characteristics in a heavily militarized Japan. These ideals and the intense adhesion of the Japanese population to them (or at least as displayed for the world to see) worked to create an aura of mysticism around suicide in Japan, granting it ‘unique’ characteristics where it is at once supermodern, traditional, rationalized, and ritualized.¹³ Western countries trying to understand how a “smaller” or “weaker” country such as Japan managed to defeat China and Russia and become an imperial power of their own sought out works of literature such as *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (mentioned above) to better understand Japan as a nation.¹⁴

¹¹ Oe Kenzaburo. *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*. Grove Press, New York, 1985, 6

¹² Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms*, 178

¹³ Brian J. McVeigh. *Nationalisms of Japan: Managing and Mystifying Identity*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 2006.

¹⁴ Edwin O. Reischauer. *Japan: The Story of a Nation*.

The theme continued through the Second World War with, unsurprisingly, *tokkotai* or kamikaze attacks. Previously, mostly Western literature on the subject often identified *tokkotai* pilots as imperial fanatics, excited to die for their nation, as perhaps militarist discourse suggested. However, the collections of letters from the individuals who carried out *tokkotai* suicide attacks showed that they were not, in fact, fanatics. They were highly intelligent university students, many of them radical liberals who, in the words of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, “came to reproduce Japan’s military ideology *in action*, but not *in thought*.”¹⁵ Their goal may have been for Japanese victory and for the end of the war, but their sacrifice was not to an emperor or an empire; rather, they hoped for the “defeat of the old Japan” and a reinfusion of new life to rebuild Japan.¹⁶ Their recruitment as *tokkotai* pilots was explicit: “after a lecture on the virtue of patriotism and on the need to sacrifice oneself for the emperor and Japan, they were told to step forward if they were willing to volunteer.”¹⁷ The policy and military government’s intentions were clear in their aestheticized enthusiasm for self-sacrifice (read here, suicide), however the sentiments of those *tokkotai* pilots were inspired more by the protection and love of their families and friends and their love of their country for what it could be than grandiose imperial passions.¹⁸ The diaries of these pilots offered a new dimension to the concept of suicide as an element of Japanese nationalism, not just as an ideological moral construct for empirical purposes, but as an (albeit coerced) personal expression of love and hope as well.

The concept of suicide as a nationalist element is especially vivid when looking at Japanese military history; government-sanctioned (or strongly encouraged) self-sacrifice is a trend that is observed throughout the late 19th to 20th centuries. A dimension not yet observed

¹⁵ Italics are the authors’. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. “Betrayal by idealism and aesthetics. Special Attack Force (kamikaze) pilots and their intellectual trajectories (Part 1).” *Anthropology Today*, Vol 20, No 2, April 2004, 4

¹⁶ Ibid, 4

¹⁷ Ibid, 5

¹⁸ Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.

raises the question: where does suicide fit in popular nationalism, if at all?

A peculiar dichotomy is observed when it comes to suicide among the general population of Japan throughout the aforementioned time period. The Westernization of the country, starting in the late 19th century with the re-opening of the country to international contact and relations, brought with it aspects of western psychiatry and psychology. In 1898, Kure Shuzo wrote the first Japanese “textbook of psychiatry,” the *Seishinbyōgakushūyō*. He established suicide as a dangerous and antisocial behavior, and claimed that sanity was a, “fundamental condition for a strong nation.”¹⁹ Although Kure was speaking of suicide as a single personal behavioral occurrence, there is still something to be said about popular understandings of suicide on a national scale and whether this did, or not, fit into larger notions of bushido or military loyalty and self-sacrifice ideals. This notion of suicide in general as a disease tore literary critics, politicians and medical professionals alike; many intellectuals associated suicide with the “debilitating phenomenon caused by modernity and Western individualism.”²⁰ The rise of psychiatric discourse was, however, coming into being at the same time as suicide was being celebrated by a “totalitarian regime” as an “expression of Japanese-ness.”²¹ The act of suicide became divided in two types: the first one honorable, voluntary suicide, such as Buddhist martyrdom, *seppuku* (linked to the warrior values of bushido) and *shinju* (a suicide pact between lovers), which did not require medical investigation.²² The second one, not justified, was perceived as “dishonest, irrational, and insincere,” which required investigation.²³ The line between the two, however, was not always clear. The romanticization of some non-military

¹⁹ Francesca Di Marco. “Act or Disease? The Making of Modern Suicide in Early Twentieth-Century Japan.” *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol 39 No 2, Summer 2013, 332

²⁰ Ibid, 329

²¹ Ibid, 329

²² Amy Borovoy, Suicide in Twentieth-Century Japan by Francesca Di Marco (review) *Monumenta Nipponica*, Volume 73, Number 2, 2018, 299

²³ Tsubouchi Shōyō, “Jisatsu no zehi,” *Taiyō*, Vol. 9, No. 9 (1903), 56, 59, and 68.

suicides, such as that of Fujimura Misao, an 18-year old high school student who, in 1903, jumped from the top of Kegon Falls in Nikko after carving a poem with reference to *Hamlet* and Horace on a tree trunk, was portrayed in the media with respect and likened to *seppuku* because of its philosophical character.²⁴ The falls became a hotspot for copycat suicides. Although the media glorified it, it was medically framed as biologically abnormal. Nonetheless, it sparked an intense discussion on whether suicide was a form of self-assertion or defective biology. Some argued that it showed strength and rationality, but the medical community saw it as unhealthy.

The emergence of psychiatry at the same time as imperial military campaigns caused tension, as it was difficult to demonize suicide in a political climate that glamorized it as a military strategy. Some suicides were thus pathologized as “traditional virtues” following in the steps of Buddhist martyrdom or *seppuku* animated by *bushido*. Several high-ranking suicides grabbed media attention as they were not a military requirement. General Nogi Maresuke committed *seppuku* and his wife *jigai* (a samurai wife suicide ritual of cutting the jugular vein) during Emperor Meiji’s funeral cortege march in 1912. Lieutenant Aoshima Kenkichi and his wife did the same thing in 1936. Francesca Di Marco goes as far as claiming that the prevalence of double suicides invoked a long and unique tradition and constructed an image of suicide as a “noble expression of Japanese identity.” She argues that the sociologist Iguchi Takachika explained this as a Japanese tendency to self-sacrifice for the sake of duty and love.²⁵ A pattern can be seen between acknowledging the act of suicide for the sake of the nation as a good, traditional sacrifice inspired by loyalty and allegiance, but also other suicides that expressed similar values or were characterized by traditional values, especially ones associated with

²⁴ Francesca Di Marco. “Act or Disease?” 320

²⁵ Ibid. Iguchi Takachika worked as a journalist for *Asahi shinbun*, as consultant at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and as a professor at the Imperial University of Kyushu. Iguchi Takachika, *Jisatsu no shakaigakuteki na kenkyū* Seiwa Shoten, Tokyo, 1934.

Japanese identity or bushido, for example. So-called ‘bad’ suicides were pathologized in the field of psychiatry (which needed imperial government support to exist) as those that did not reflect any of those values.

This reconciliation would evolve at the end of the war, however. Military fatigue, peace activism, and anger towards the military government, as well as the eventual release of information on the coercion of soldiers and civilians towards suicide and unnecessarily high death tolls, contributed to the issue of suicide in Japan to steer away from traditional nationalism to mental health psychology. This also coincided with Japanese identity and can be best understood as, “a kind of hegemony that has achieved reproduction primarily by way of the aesthetic” and that these aesthetics can be understood as, “attempts to counter an alienation that capitalist development brought to 20th-century Japan.”²⁶ If this is true, then it is not difficult to see how suicide was both a military strategy enforced by the government through traditional values which seeped into popular culture and psyche and which struggled between traditional honor and medical pathology in a Western sense. It was, for better or for worse, a part of Japan’s understanding of itself. The question now is whether it is accurate or even relevant to look at suicide in the 21st-century as an aspect of Japanese nationalism. The scope of this present task is too narrow to delve deeply into what is, at its core, a profound social issue of personal and emotional impact, not only on the country as a whole, but also for individuals and families.

Japan’s suicide rates peaked in 1958 and have been decreasing steadily since then, except for spikes during the recession of 2009 and during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ The

²⁶ Michael Bourdagh. “Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan: Nationalism as Aesthetics (review)” *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Society for Japanese Studies. Volume 31, Number 1, Winter 2005

²⁷ Alex K.T Martin. “Suicides in Japan dropped for a decade. Then the pandemic hit.” *The Japan Times*, February 7th, 2021.

nation, which has long fought against its own mental health stigma, is slowly recovering from its associations with suicide throughout history and as part of its own identity. Coordinated campaigns of non-profit and public health efforts, including seminars provided to municipal leaders to deepen their understanding of the issues and non-profit organizations created by university students, just to name a few, have fought for the Japanese population's self-preservation.²⁸

Some pop culture associations remain strong, for example Aokigahara forest (Yamanashi prefecture) and its high rates of suicide by hanging following literary allusions to the forest as the perfect place to end one's life in works such as the controversial 1993 *Kanzen Jisatsu Manyuara* (*The Complete Manual of Suicide*) by Wataru Tsurumi. The practice of *seppuku* is also still referred to in many Japanese and Western popular media, seen in scenes from the manga/anime series *Naruto*, the 2022 video game *Elden Ring*, or an episode of the TV series *Law & Order: SVU*. This is not to say that suicide, traditional, ritual, or otherwise, is still an engrained aspect of Japanese nationalism. Making that claim, I believe, would be a disservice to the serious efforts made by the Japanese nation to care for the well-being of its citizens. It is difficult to dissociate an aspect of Japanese identity which has gripped literature, philosophy, governmental policy, and popular psyche both within and without Japan in the last centuries, yet the country is fighting arduously to protect its citizens' mental health. Only the future will tell what becomes of the concept of suicide in Japanese identity, but let's hope that should it disappear, it will also take with it the associated public health issues to make Japan, in the words of *tokkotai* pilots, a better place to live.

²⁸ Ibid

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