



## Review Article

# THE ORIGINS OF JAPANESE HARAKIRI

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## ABSTRACT

Harakiri was a ritual practise by the samurai class. To die one day is a natural phenomenon but dying with dignity was very important and death was an important occasion to make self-honour. It was popular in the history of Japan, samurai committed hara-kiri at the death of his master, husband, defeat in the war, not getting one's love etc. Saigo Takamori who led rebellion against the government committed hara-kiri when got defeated in the war. In the 1970 harakiri was committed by Yukio Mishima one of most famous writer in Japan, with perfect techniques and blow which had surprised the world.

**KEYWORDS:** hara-kiri, samurai, Yukio, honour, meiji, tokugawa

## INTRODUCTION

The old Japanese religion of loyalty which found its supreme manifestation in terrible customs Junshi, hara-kiri and kataki-uchi, double or love suicide (shinju) and family suicide ikkanshinju. It identifies various forms of self-killing using different terms. The generic terms for suicide is jesatsu, hara-kiri is privilege reserved for the samurai class. Kataki-uchi is the ancient Japanese customs, is the originally religious significance. It was essentially an act of propitiation, the placing of the enemy's head upon the tomb of the person avenged. Tokkotai or the kamikaze pilots and torpedo bombers, these individual had sacrificed themselves for their country rather than having committed suicide during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. A distinctive feature of Japanese society is its apparent eagerness to embrace various forms of voluntary death or suicide as legitimate. These forms include the samurai ritualistic disembowelment (seppuku or hara-kiri), remonstrance suicide (kanshi) in protest against a corrupt superior and suicide out of devotion to a lord or superior (junshi) and lover suicide of not getting each other (shinju), all of

which are surrounded by a heroic, romantic, aesthetic and moral aura.

## ORIGIN OF HARAKIRI: SAMURAI

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century military class established the hara-kiri as a custom and privilege. The military custom permits Samurai to perform hara-kiri instead of subjecting him to the shame of execution, appears to have been generally established. Afterward it became the organized duty of a samurai to kill self at the word of command. All Samurai were subject to this disciplinary law even lords of provinces and in Samurai families, children of both the sexes were trained how to perform suicide. Women did not perform hara-kiri but jigai that is to pierce the throat with a dagger so as to sever the arteries by a single thrust and cut movement sometimes performed merely as a sacrifice of loyalty to the spirit of the husband after his untimely death. Among Samurai women taught to consider their husbands as their lord, so the duty of suicide as a moral protest. To killed oneself at command a duty which no loyal samurai would have dreamed of calling in question.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the practice of voluntary junshi (following of one's lord in death) which was continued at

the death of a daimyo it was then common for fifteen or twenty of his retainers to disembowel themselves. Iyeyasu the great shogunate determined to put an end to this custom of suicide which is considered in the 76<sup>th</sup> article of his celebrated legacy. He command ended the practice of Junshi among his own vassals but it continued or revived again after his death. In 1664 shogunate issued an edict proclaiming that the family of any person performing junshi should be punished. One Uyemon no Hyoge who disembowelled himself at the death of his lord, so Okudaira Tadamasu the government promptly confiscated the land of the family, executed two of his son and sent the rest of his household into exile. So, now instead of performing hara-kiri the retainer shaved his head at the death of his lord and became a Buddhist monk.

Hara-kiri in Japan is popular culture is filled with image of valiant Japanese warriors killing themselves in the heat of the battle or of disciplined Samurai meticulously disembowelling themselves to salvage their honour after committing a grave offence. In Japan it is seen as both horrifying and awe inspiring but it is rarely viewed critically and academically. The event of the Meiji period and their event on traditional Japanese honour ideology and the roots of ritual suicide (Hara-kiri or Seppuku) were within this ideology. This Period which began in 1868 was a seminal moment in Japanese history. This period did mark a radical change in the organization of Japanese society from a traditionally culturally insular society to a more modernized and more westernized society. The hara-kiri honour is originated from the honour ideology examined by Eiko Ikegami's work. The taming of the Samurai Honorific Individualism and the making of modern Japan, She delineates the causes and effects of the Japanese cultural emphasis on honour from the origins of honour ideology in the early 11th century, up until the remaining influences of honour ideology in modern Japanese society. She highlights the importance of honour, and the rise of honour ideology began with the Samurai class. The Samurai class were the most important and powerful political actors in Japanese society, the effect of their focus on honour ideology had broad effects on Japanese culture as a whole. And it has insured that their conception of honour would become an ideology that was reversed and practical by the masses. Honour was applied and seen through both individual actions and beliefs and also through the behaviour of Japan as a collective. The closest term in Japanese would be meiyō or the formal term for honour.

The samurai who was supreme in the social hierarchy also too was the honour ideology for them. It was the central element of the Samurai identity. For the Samurai honour was what placed them above the other classes. While almost every element of samurai culture can be seen through the lens of honour ideology which also give the concept of honourable death. Death was seen as an important occasion for making a point of honour, a man control dignity and concern for posthumous reputation all fused together in the moment of death. It is seen as the most important force in the life of a Samurai more important than life itself. As they were top of the social classes in Japan devotion to honour ideology was seen as the supreme goal of mainstream Japanese culture in the Tokugawa period.

Honour ideology can be divided into two major periods of time. First, in the Tokugawa Japan the origins of true, practically applied honour ideology. During this period of time, it was put into daily practice both in battle and in daily life. Second, in the Meiji period the idealized honour ideology through colourful prints and the Samurai codes of Taira shizusuke and Yamamoto Tsunetomo. She draw heavily on both the background of the Meiji period shift towards westernization and the essence of Japanese honour ideology to examine ritual suicide as a lens through which to view dramatic cultural change. After the Meiji period reforms the Samurai found themselves removed from the top of the class system, deprived of government salaries and stripped of their sword bearing privileges. In 1877, Samurai Saigō Takamori led the rebellion of angry Samurai against the government. The rebellion was not successful and ended with myriad instances of ritual suicide, including that of him. The Satsuma rebellion suicides was widespread and precipitated by defeat later seen as indicative of honour ideology's final moment as a predominant force in military culture. The suicides of the Satsuma rebellion were unique in that they were a direct response to defeat in battle and the defeat of traditional Japanese culture. There was war between Meiji government and the Satsuma Rebellion as the war was in winning situation by Meiji, many rebels soldier chose to commit ritual suicide rather than be captured and imprisoned or dishonoured. Indeed Saigō himself chose voluntary death over dishonour.

It makes the link between its ritual suicides and honour ideology. It was seen as a midway point between the honour ideologies based Tokugawa period and the waning influence of honour ideology after the Meiji period. While there were later examples of Japanese soldiers going on suicidal missions most famously at Pearl Harbour despite surrendering. They were known as Gyokusai 'crush like jewels'. Ikegami broke down honour ideology into several pieces. First, it was derived from Samurai culture and passed down through lower ranks of society due to the influence of the Samurai class before the Meiji period. Second, it was both individual and collective. Third, it can be seen as a culture of shame where important decisions were made based on the desire to avoid being shamed as a first considerations.

The origin of honour ideology in Japan is inextricably linked with the samurai and ritual suicide in Japan. The origins of honour ideology with direct correlation to ritual suicide can be seen in Japan as early as the 12th century with the suicide of Minamoto Yorimasa. During one of the first battles of the Gempei, he was injured and concerned by advancing Taira Samurai. At the age of seventy four he chose not to be captured or to allow his head to be taken by the oncoming Taira samurai which would be a serious dishonour. Then Yorimasa thrust his sword into his belly and committed suicide. His suicide can be seen as marking the beginning of ritual suicide as a cultural institution and it is important to consider that honour ideology extended further into Japanese culture than simply a response to dishonour in death. Indeed, the existence of ritual suicide itself suggest a cultural tradition of honour, which can be seen in the testament to assign privileged and reward for those who were loyal and honourable accordingly to the honour ideology based customs of the time. His testament

demonstrates the power of Japanese honour ideology in two ways.

- i. It demonstrated the high premium that Japanese culture placed on the ideal of loyalty and dedication in battle. Death in battle which often took place as ritual suicide was seen as something honourable and indeed something to be rewarded rather than as a sign of failure.
- ii. the testament demonstrated the deep and pervasive roots through which honour ideology spreads through the Japanese family heritage. Honour was not viewed as an individual trait but rather as part of a broader cultural tradition.

The samurai taira Shigesuke and Yamamoto tsunetoro give great insight into the idealization of honour ideology. Taira was never involved in battle and he was a scholar. With no wars occurring at the time, it was used as a way of paying homage to the past and keeping end cultural traditions alive. He was very clear on his point death in the end goal of life especially in the precarious life of a warrior and so a focus on dying an honourable death should be a key for the life of any hands of the enemy or hara-kiri. Life may be transient especially for a warrior but honour in death lasts forever. He clearly addresses what a warrior can do to create an honourable death, especially after the death of one's master. In this way, the Samurai does the greatest service to his lord. In the 1710, Yamamoto authored Hagakure which presents a much less direct and step by step view of honour ideology; it presents series of stories, each relating a key moral of the idealized samurai. It is told with the express intention of crafting a powerful moral. Both the Bushido Shoshinshu and hagakure text book articulate the idea of honourable death as it related to honour ideology and both do so in idealized ways.

### **HARAKIRI IN MEIJI PERIOD**

During the Meiji period General Nogi serves as the ultimate examples of honour ideology. He committed suicide ritual suicide in traditional form for the death of his master (the emperor) and killed himself in the most traditional way using the correct knife and style and attiring self in traditional Japanese garments. He was a prominent Japanese general who led the government forces against the Samurai in the Satsuma rebellion. He drew a sword and cut his stomach open from the left to right and cut himself from the bottom up and then impaled himself. He had committed Junshi the traditional Japanese practice of following ones master into death. For him master was Emperor Mutsuhito who funeral on that very day signalled an end to the Meiji era and an end to traditional Japan. The story of Nogi's suicide as it pertains to honour ideology can be studied by his suicide letter that he is putting an end to his life on account of that disgrace following emperor died and lost the Regimental Flag. This account demonstrates the connections that he felt with his master Emperor Mutsuhito. He was practicing samurai influenced honour ideology meant first and foremost being loyal to your master before being loyal to your ideology.

Shibeya shigekado a true follower of honour ideology would take into account what their impact would be if they dual and often times chose life over death even after

dishonour because services to their master was the greater and more honourable goal than personal honour. As such Nogi's was forced to commit suicide because of honour ideology as it related to societal honour. As reported by the New York Times immediately after his death, his act of Junshi was regarded as a splendid illustration of patriotism and devotion to duty. It was not replaced by a new form of ideology nor was it erased completely. As more and more ideologies and modern complication arose this kind of honour began to wear thin and lost it's practically.

As Japan moved past the Meiji period, honour ideology has become so impractical in application that it began to fade from the public consciousness and established itself as a fetishized remnant of traditional Japan. The popular reaction to Nogi's suicide which was closed explored in Natsume Soseki's novel kokoro. It can be read in terms of plot and circumstance, it was written in 1914 two years after his suicide. He wrote a novel of a Sensei whose character is a complex conglomeration of the old and the new. His view of the world as a child was one of trust, he was raised by honourable and traditional and wealthy parents who died at a young age. He went to University and left his inheritance to the care of his uncle. Instead of safeguard the money honestly his uncle cheated him out of his inheritance. Sensei's sense of traditional honour is seen as clashing strongly with the realities of modern Japan or perhaps simply the dark side of human nature. His response to his Uncles cheating brings up an important question- where is the practically of honour ideology. Most integral to an understanding of sensei and kokoro is an understanding of sensei's obsessive relationship with his friend. Where there was love triangle rife with honour ideology where his friend committed suicide. The motivation of his friend dead demonstrate a hierarchy of honour ideology while he could not live with opening himself to a modern understanding of love, he could not live with such a violent inner conflict as such the only option he saw, was to take his own life.

There is a famous drama of love suicide shinju name chikamatsu, double suicide is often portrayed as the tragic outcome of the conflict between the hero's social duty ( giri ) or network of responsibilities and obligations to his wife, family and class and his all too human passion ( ninjo ) for his lover. Shinju is based on a pact between lovers trapped in a mob of such intense turmoil they have no recourse the ultimate destructive act happens. Chikamatsu's numerous Shinju plays were generally based on actual incidents and they so captivated the popular imagination that were banned. Love suicide plays a unique role of protest in the context of Tokugawa caste and authoritarianism it also highlights the importance of millenarism in other periods in the history of Japanese religiosity in opposing an oppressive social order. It also expressed a desperate protest and ultimate escape from the rigid social constraints demanded by the bakufu. It tried to suppress suicide with new regulations insisted on the label aita-jini and prohibited the burial of the corpses of lovers which are shown in kabuki theatre where play are mostly based on the lovers suicide.



## YUKIO MISHIMA HARAKIRI

One of the Hara-kiri committed in 1970s was by Yukio Mishima which shocked the world because there has been no case of ritual hara-kiri in Japan since immediately after the war; most Japanese had assumed if they even thought about it, that the practice was extinct. He was a renounced writer who had been nominated three times for noble prize, most widely translated Japanese author and a versatile person. He was best known man in the country and the only writer in the Japanese history who expressed himself with equal ease in the four main prose forms; the novel, short story, the essay and the play. His nobles were tense with the idea of death and also he had deep interest in stories with any youth who was killed. He also imagined himself dying in battle there were shades of the fantasy which led him to his own death or being murdered. All his life he was worried about being poisoned because he was vulnerable and sensitive behind his Samurai mask. He was easily injured and easily influenced by others and although apparently unable to love, he demanded love from other people, yet when there was a response he steered away.

On the last day of his life he cast himself in the role of the strong samurai and he also has another side to his personality or he would not have written "Confession of a mask" a work which reveals weakness a morbid imagination and a decadent sense of beauty in which eroticism and blood are joined. Blood gave him thrill; this was one of the most important confessions and the core of his aesthetic. He romanticized death and blood in a foreign manner to the Japanese classical tradition. Blood was ultimate erotic; his imagination was aroused by images of blood and death. He also had a fantasy of cannibalism his most terrible dream was of the sacrifice of a boy. He sought to incarnate a similar vision and found himself on a path that could lead only to death: to save himself, he would have had to abandon his romantic notion of beauty.

Both Yukio Mishima and Morita his partner destroyed everything that might betray how they planned their demise. In the 1970s they had lived under the assumption that they have to die later in the year. They had pledged themselves to die; it was to be for emperor. Whatever the truth the outcome was crucial to the interpretation of his incident made in Japan for the motivation involved and universally portrayed the double suicide as a homosexual shinju or lovers' suicide. He was on the verge of his final decisions to commit hara-kiri. The timing was decided and the weapon used will be sword and dagger he was virtually certain that he would die by his own hand. They made complete eight rehearsal of their hara-kiri plan. Before he died he put a short note; 'human life is limited but I would like to live forever'. He chose to die on 25<sup>th</sup> November because it was the death anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hero Shoin Yoshida and also he submitted the last instalment of the fourth book, the sea of fertility, the final section of the Decay of the angel and the magazine Shincho. Their planned for suicide was so desperate that they had made an attacked on the Jieitai army camp name Chigaya. The way they commit hara-kiri was very brutal in a close room. He forced the dagger into his body with all his strength, he make a horizontal cut across his stomach. Morita gave blow with sword at his neck and head. And Yukio Mishima tried to do the same with little strength left. Both of them shouted in traditional salute; long live

the Emperor (Tenno Heika Banzai). They had died by hara-kiri and beheading.

## CONCLUSION

As time passed, changes can be seen in events involving ritual suicide; the Satsuma rebellion and general Nogi's suicide at the end of the Meiji period, which was for the dead of their emperor and letting the regimental flag down. The samurai class established the hara-kiri as a custom and privilege. With the rapid westernization, hara-kiri was suddenly forced to take a backseat to new conceptions of government and social order. Satsuma Rebellion did ritual suicide because they were defeated by the government and they fought to sustain their hierarchal position in the society which proved to be the last moment in which honour ideology played an essential role in warfare. Now Harakiri demonstrated a curious and gripping headline rather than a culturally acceptable and expected event but the event of Yukio Mishima gave us a new revived of harakiri. What had led the two men to commit hara-kiri? Perhaps the answer was never known. There was celebration of some important hara-kiri days which has been committed to show their loyalty to the lord but now faded with time. It is now seen as entertainment in the form of film, play and Kabuki. It has change a lot from the eleven century with different ways of ritual suicide however now taking own life is offence in Japan.

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