Seppuku: Motivations for Ritualist Suicide

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As you kneel on a mat, you gain your composure. Your second readies their sword. Picking up a short dagger, you take your last breath as you plunge the knife into your stomach and rip across from left to right. As the knife slides across your belly, your second takes a swing, and their sword severs your head. You have just committed a form of ritualistic suicide from Japan called *seppuku*. As defined by Nancy K. Stalker, seppuku is "ritualistic suicide through disembowelment."[1] This definition is generic as there are many ways to commit seppuku. Although suicide is taboo in Western societies, the vocabulary used to refer to seppuku can be taboo in Japan. There is another term for this act called *hara-kiri*. Directly translated as "cut stomach," hara-kiri is rarely used in Japan as it is viewed as vulgar.[2] The term hara-kiri is primarily used to address Western audiences, as shown by Robert Christopher's usage of the term. He states, "I have used [hara-kiri] because it is familiar to Americans."[3] Furthermore, Andrew C. Rankin claims that hara-kiri is so exotic to Japanese people today that the word is viewed as an import from the Western world.[4] Acknowledging how modern Japanese people do not appreciate the term hara-kiri, this paper opts for the socially acceptable and polite term—seppuku.

Ritualistic suicide can be found in all corners of Japanese history. Although it is assumed to have been imported to Japan, seppuku is a tradition that is distinctly Japanese. First recorded around the late Heian period, scholars assume that the practice was of a practical nature. Being captured in war was not only highly frowned upon, but it also meant almost certain torture or death. G. Cameron Hust claims that people began by throwing themselves off a horse headfirst with a sword in their mouth. Later, disembowelment became preferred as it became associated with the honor of baring their entrails and allowing those to see how pure they were.[5] It appeared again at the fall of the Kamakura Bakufu, where Regent Hojo Takatoki and two hundred of his vassals killed themselves.[6] The practice only grew with the rise of the samurai class during the Sengoku period, and it peaked in popularity during the Tokugawa Bakufu, where the practice was issued as a form of capital punishment.

The Meiji Restoration brought dramatic changes to Japan in an effort to westernize the nation. Point four of the Charter Oath eliminates "evil customs of the past" to appease the Western

[1] Nancy K. Stalker, *Japan: History and Culture from Classical to Cool* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 132.

[2] Andrew Rankin, *Seppuku: A History of Samurai Suicide* (New York: Kodansha International, 2011), 24.

[3] Robert C. Christopher, *The Japanese Mind: The Goliath Explained* (New York: Leiden Press, 1983), 74.

[4] Rankin, *Seppuku*, 26.

[5] G. Cameron Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality [sic]: The Bushido Ideal," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 4 (October 1990): 511–27 at 520.

[6] Stalker, *Japan*, 85.

World.[7] Subsequently, seppuku was removed as a form of capital punishment and was outlawed. Just because it became illegal, however, does not mean it disappeared. While national feelings around the practice dramatically changed during the 20th century, the last person to commit seppuku was Mishima Yukio in 1970.[8] Present in Japanese history for centuries, seppuku is a window into the implications of Bushido ideals and the codification of ritual into law. While historians can agree on the definition and general history of seppuku, there is a schism rooted in the foundational motivations behind an individual or group of individuals taking their own lives. A self-motivated perspective of seppuku bases itself on the idealized practices of Bushido—the way of the warrior—in which self-disembowelment is an honorable thing that is necessary. On the contrary, some historians push back on the self-motivated perspective by emphasizing how the Tokugawa Bakufu used seppuku as a penalty in which samurai were ordered to commit suicide. While understanding the nature of an individual's decision to commit seppuku is relevant, the motivation to commit seppuku is insignificant at the macro level as both sides have placed prestige on suicide. The two perspectives give greater context for understanding how the Japanese used propaganda during WWII to idealize samurai, and both are responsible for normalizing suicide in modern Japan.

The first perspective on the motivations of seppuku is presented by Inazō Nitobe (1862-1933). His account of the motivations of seppuku is detailed in his book, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1st edition, 1900). Born into Meiji Japan, Nitobe was a scholar of Western cultures. He studied in Hokkaido and America, became a Christian and championed the Western world in Japan.[9] In his efforts to help the West understand Japanese culture, morals, and religion, Nitobe wanted to write a book about what Japanese morals are rooted in—bushido. Nitobe states, "In my attempts to give satisfactory replies to M. de Laveleye and my wife, I found that without understanding feudalism and Bushido, the moral ideas of present Japan are sealed volumes."[10] Nitobe is attempting to appease Western questions about Japan's moral code while having a detached understanding of Japan's life. Due to Nitobe's disconnect from Japanese society, Hurst describes him as "in almost every way imaginable, Nitobe was the least qualified Japanese of his age to have been informing anyone of Japan's history and culture."[11] Critically, Hurst acknowledges the negative aspects of the main champion of bushido to illustrate Nitobe's motivation for writing the piece. Reaching his target, Nitobe's book was very popular in the West, resulting in it being translated into many languages, reprinted many times, and having ten

[7] Stalker, *Japan*, 217.

[8] Stalker, *Japan*, 283.

[9] Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality," 512.

[10] Inazō Nitobe, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, 10th ed. (New York: Kodansha USA, 2012), 19-20.

[11] Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality," 511.

editions.[12] This idealized form of bushido had major ramifications on the Japanese government's decisions during WWII.

Bushido is commonly translated as "the way of the warrior." It is a moral code that was utilized to stress societal values of loyalty, fidelity, filial piety, and most importantly, an acceptance of death. Nitobe compares bushido to the likes of European chivalry by detailing how they are both rooted in feudalism and dependent on the belief in a higher being.[13] Within Japan, these knightly principles are characterized in the *Hagakure*. The *Hagakure* is recognized as a foundational text for bushido. It begins, "I have found the way of the samurai is death."[14] Beginning the foundation of a belief system by exclaiming that its most rudimentary tenet is an acceptance of death reduces the fear that death holds on society. As outlined in the *Hagakure*, the presence and acceptance of death led these samurai to be able to face death head-on and not flinch when they are challenged by it.[15] Accepting the teaching of bushido results in death being glorified and found honorable.

Understanding seppuku through the lens of bushido is key to grasping the cultural significance the practice held for the samurai of the time. The premise is outlined by Nitobe: "I will open the seat of my soul and show you how it fares with it. See for yourself whether it is polluted or clean."[16] Seppuku maintained honor in the face of defeat. Even if a samurai lost, those who defeated him could judge his purity by his commitment to his cause. Nitobe explains, "The high estimate placed upon honor was ample excuse with many for taking one's own life."[17] Most of bushido's principles point to honor. For a samurai, it is honorable to serve their master. It's honorable to die for their master, and in doing so, it is honorable to commit seppuku.

Committing seppuku is an honor that enlightened the samurai class. But when can a social norm be considered self-motivation? Addressing this very question, Nitobe uses the example of literary minds versus the samurai. To summarize, those who study literary works are obsessed with modifying their lives to the principles that society deems valuable. On the other side, those who enact the teachings become one with the lesson.[18] Nitobe argues that at some point in enacting the teachings of bushido, they are no longer a societal pressure; instead, they become personal decisions that people make. Furthermore, the *Hagakure* details, "There is no need to think of loyalty and filial piety. In bushido, there is nothing but *shinigurui* (throwing themselves into it as if there were no turning back). Loyalty and filial piety are already fully present on their own accord

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[12] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 13.

[13] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 38.

[14] Tsunetomo Yamamoto, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International; New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 1.

[15] Yamamoto, *Hagakure*, 2.

[16] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 106.

[17] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 106.

[18] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 42-43.

in the state of *shinigurui*."[19] Thus, the *Hagakure* argues that the principles that samurai believe are so ingrained in them that they act before thinking. Nitobe and the *Hagakure* stress that bushido is a moral code, not just a societal value.

As Japan progressed into a modern country during the Meiji period, Saigo Takamori (1828-1877) was disillusioned with the new government that he helped create. Leading the failed Satsuma Rebellion, Saigo tried to avenge the rights and privileges that the samurai class had lost to the newly Westernized government. Credited with being the last samurai, Saigo died in the rebellion, and with him died the samurai class and ways of life. His death was so symbolic that legends arose to fill in his missing heroism. Mark Ravina postulates that, although it was unlikely that Saigo committed seppuku, the legends that arose around it have muddled the true accounts of his death.[20] Ravina utilizes the accounts of autopsies and witnesses to the death to rationalize that because he suffered from a shattered femur, hydrocele, and advanced heart disease, he would be unable to perform the ritual properly. Furthermore, Saigo was reported not to have suffered any abdominal wounds, but he was beheaded.[21] Ravina's understanding of Saigo's death poses the question: Why would it be portrayed as seppuku?

It ultimately comes down to Saigo being the last samurai. The end of the samurai class and their way of life cannot end in a dishonorable way. To preserve Saigo's honor and the honor of the class, his death needed to be portrayed as seppuku, and it is even recorded in many encyclopedias as fact. These biographies were accounted for during the rise of Japanese nationalism in the early 20th century. They stressed values like loyalty, calmness, and honor.[22] To preserve the end of an era and capture its values, Saigo Takamori's death needed to be one of honor, even if he did not actually commit seppuku. By preserving his image, the nationalist movement captured his honor and gave him a legendary death.

Contrary to the self-motivated position, seppuku was used as capital punishment. Not just limited to the Tokugawa period, but during this time, seppuku became enshrined in law as a means of capital punishment. If one is ordered to do something by an authority figure, is that self-motivated by internal values? No. This perspective is primarily focused on those who are ordered to commit seppuku and the complexities that are found within that.

To observe the commitment people had to seppuku, historians look at the instruments used to puncture their abdomen. Though traditionally performed with a dagger or short blade, the stomach cut would fade from practice throughout its usage as legal punishment. Replacing the blade, the samurai began using a paper fan. To some, this fan was treated symbolically as a blade, but to the traditional samurai, it was an appropriation of seppuku. A first-hand account from Yamaoka Shunmei was published in 1772, and it states:

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[19] Yamamoto, *Hagakure*, 2.

[20] Mark J. Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori: Samurai, 'Seppuku', and the Politics of Legend," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 3 (August 2010): 691-721 at 692.

[21] Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori," 700.

[22] Ravina, "The Apocryphal Suicide of Saigō Takamori," 701.

> In the old days, suicide by stomach-cutting was a spectacular technique, one that warriors considered and studied carefully to familiarize themselves with its nuances…Today there are so many rules for cutting the stomach. An assistant is always present, and sometimes the dagger plays no part whatsoever, a paper fan being placed upon the tray instead; as soon as the man picks up this fan, off comes his head from behind. Since the stomach is not cut, how on earth can we call this 'seppuku'? It is no different from an ordinary beheading.[23]

This account details how the traditional perspective on seppuku required cutting the stomach instead of a symbolic cut. Not only did it require cutting their stomach, but it glorified it by highlighting how spectacular it was and how dignified and refined the people who committed it were. It was something for those who studied it and had full intentions of actually cutting themselves. The rise of paper fan seppukus was shamed and characterized by people unwilling or unable to cut themselves. Occurring 181 years before Yamaoka's condemnation of fan-based seppukus was the death of Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591). Figure 1 illustrates Rikyū's death poem and portrait during his seppuku.[24] The image depicts Rikyū with a fan in his hands. Toyotomi Hideyoshi ordered Rikyū to commit seppuku since Rikyū challenged his cultural prestige as one of the greatest tea masters of the age. Rikyū did not feel he was capable of stabbing himself, so he used a fan.[25] He was not committing seppuku willingly; his hand was forced, so he chose the least painful method, the fan. Rikyū is an example of how paper fan seppuku was used when being ordered to commit suicide. The unwillingness to stab oneself is demonstrated throughout the Tokugawa period, in which seppuku was legalized as a punishment and fan-based seppuku became increasingly popular.

Figure 1. Artist Unknown. Portrait of Sen no Rikyū with his Death Poem. Early 17th Century. Color on Silk Scroll. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mary Cheney Cowles Collection, Accession Number 2020.396.20. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/845141 (accessed October 27, 2023).

The rise of seppuku in the Tokugawa period was important to proceduralize and regulate the samurai class. This second perspective is outlined by Eiko Ikegami in her book titled *The Taming of the Samurai*. Ikegami is a historian primarily focused on the various routes that Eastern nations take into modernity. Her book on the samurai was published in 1995 and received international praise, ultimately leading her book to be described as a classic in college classrooms for its

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[23] Rankin, *Seppuku*, 143.

[24] Artist Unknown, *Portrait of Sen no Rikyū with his Death Poem*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mary Cheney Cowles Collection, Accession Number 2020.396.20, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/845141 (accessed October 27, 2023).

[25] *Portrait of Sen no Rikyū*.

culminating coverage of the samurais' impact on Japanese history and development.[26] In her book, Ikegami shares her interpretation of the samurai's motivation to commit seppuku. Predominantly focusing on the Tokugawa period, her perspective captures the traditional bushido-inspired approach while also capturing the larger group of individuals who are ordered to commit seppuku as a means of capital punishment, like Sen no Rikyū from the earlier example.

Ikegami explains her interpretation by explaining how the Tokugawa Bakufu was trying to compartmentalize the samurai. Coined the "Bonsai Approach," she describes:

> The new patterns of proceduralization eventually reduced the samurai's honor culture by shrinking it to fit within the confines of a bureaucratic and procedural code…The samurai were also vulnerable to arbitration from above; after all, they were trapped in the economic toils of the Tokugawa system, separated from their original land tenure and forced to live in castle towns, like the bonsai in a pot.[27]

Ikegami demonstrates that during the premodern period, the Tokugawa government was systematizing the samurai to fit their practices into their new legal codes. In this process, the shogun tried to incorporate aspects of their honor culture into the system but had to limit it by ritualizing the practices. Described as a violent culture, the samurai way of life needed to change during the Tokugawa period because the government was maintaining legal stability and peace. To preserve the honor of the samurai, the Tokugawa reserved seppuku as the only form of capital punishment for the samurai class and *daimyo*.[28] This causes seppuku to gain a new meaning, being the way of a warrior to display their honor and now, a pawn in Tokugawa's penal code. Ikegami captures this idea in the statement, "The act of seppuku not only signified the honor of the accused individual but embodied the authority of the state as well."[29]

The codification into the penal code caused seppuku to be ritualized, and in doing so, the practice was made more palatable. The practice was transformed to have the *kaishaku* act quicker. The kaishaku is the second: the person who would stand behind the individual and decapitate him. Ikegami details how the incorporation of the second ultimately led the practice to become more of a decapitation than a self-disembowelment. Furthering her argument, she discusses that as Tokugawa society progressed, there were fewer self-inflicted wounds and an increase in the incorporation of wooden, symbolic daggers or fans. Self-inflicted wounds began to gain a negative connotation called "belly of mortification" and deemed outside of the code of etiquette of the Tokugawa. Because the practice was modified to the extent of removing the act of self-disembowelment, Ikegami claims, "The Tokugawa samurai ordered to end his life by seppuku was

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[26] Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 242; "Eiko Ikegami," Faculty Website at the New School for Social Research. https://www.newschool.edu/nssr/faculty/eiko-ikegami/ (accessed November 27, 2023).

[27] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 242.

[28] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 253.

[29] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai,* 254.

not killing himself to keep his honorable name clear of the shame of suffering defeat in battle; it was not an enemy but most likely his master who was commanding his death."[30] She is claiming, like the case of Sen no Rikyū and Yamaoka Shunmei's commentary on fan-based seppuku, that those who use tools other than the traditional knife to self-inflict a wound are being ordered to commit suicide when they would rather live. Those of the higher classes did not have an option; they were required by law to maintain their honor through seppuku.

The bushido-inspired interpretation by Nitobe and the legal punishment perspective by Ikegami can be examined through *The Tale of the 47 Rōnin*. This text is one of the most popular stories from the Tokugawa period, as it quickly became a classic. It was developed into plays, dramas, and eventually films. One of the most notable adaptations of this story is from the Kabuki theaters, called *Chushingura (The Treasury of the Loyal Retainers)*.[31] The tale is one of loyalty, honor, and vengeance, culminating in 46 of the 47 Rōnin committing seppuku. Becoming a legend, the story captures the bushido principles of vengeance and honor, while the true story is one of hesitance and legal punishment. To quickly synopsize an undisputed version of the story, Stalker provides a summary in her book *Japan: History and Culture from Classic to Cool*. The premise is that while under Tokugawa rule, Lord Asano Naganori (1667-1701) was at the imperial palace in Edo for his *sankin-kōtai* (alternating attendance). While at the palace, he was receiving etiquette lessons from Kira Yoshinaka (1641-1703). During those lessons, Kira embarrassed Lord Asano, so Asano unsheathed his dagger and struck him. Unsheathing a dagger is not allowed inside the imperial palace, let alone attempted murder, so Lord Asano was ordered to commit seppuku by the end of the day. The Bakufu also confiscated his territory, leaving his samurai masterless. Forty-seven of the masterless samurai, called Rōnin, avenged Lord Asano almost a year later when they stormed Kira's residence and killed him. Officials debated on the proper course of action because the Rōnin had broken the law, but they did so in a righteous manner rooted in the bushido principles. They were ordered to commit seppuku as a result of their conduct and were buried with their lord in a temple. The Sengaku-ji temple is a common site for pilgrimages today.[32]

As a legend, *The Tale of the 47 Rōnin* is told in a way to fit the narrative of bushido. The story is used as an example of what being a samurai is: their commitment to their lord, bravery, charging into death with no remorse, culminating in honorable suicide. Juliet Piggott captures the distortions and mystifications in her book, *Japanese Mythology.* In the chapter titled "Heroes and Heroines," Piggott recounts the story of the 47 Rōnin, similar to the previous synopsis, but the mythos includes justification for Lord Asano to attack Kira by saying that Kira was being paid to embarrass and dishonor Lord Asano. After laying the justification for attacking Kira, Piggott writes, "To such behavior there could be only one answer, the preservation of honor by the death

[30] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 255-56.

[31] Stalker, *Japan*, 157.

[32] Stalker, *Japan*, 157-59.

of the shogun's official."[33] The legends around the story had to provide good justification for the actions to be carried out; the mythos provides a pure rationale. Bushido is the way of the warrior, so to be loyal retainers, the 47 Rōnin had to kill Kira. In their endeavors, principles of chivalry filled the gaps between the factual evidence. For example, Piggott writes, "Eventually [Kira] was found hiding ignominiously in a charcoal storehouse on the premises. Kuranosuke commanded him to commit [seppuku], but this he would not do. So Kuranosuke beheaded him…with the dagger his master had used when killing himself."[34] The only factual evidence after the beheading of Kira was that his head was cut off. There is no evidence that the Rōnin offered Kira seppuku, which he then turned down. Filling in the story with motivations like these provided moral righteousness to the Rōnin. They were acting in accordance with bushido, seeking revenge and receiving vengeance, as illustrated by the death of Kira with the sword that took their master's life. They stayed true to their moral guides and acted in the most noble way, which made them heroes. The mythos leads the 47 Rōnin to be sentenced to seppuku, which they accept willingly. Up to this point, the mythology that Piggott has outlined has filled in the gaps that factual evidence cannot answer, and it has provided a morally righteous motivation to carry out the actions that ensued. It sets the Rōnin on a pedestal in which they are heroes who came to the most honorable fate, seppuku, after avenging their master.

Often left out of summaries and legends are the details that shed light on the reality of the 47 Rōnin. Provided by Ikegami, a detailed account of the testimonies and reports from the Tokugawa government and public opinion sheds a different light on the story. The first is the motivation of Lord Asano to attack Kira. Unlike the corruption story from the mythos, Ikegami records eyewitness testimony saying that Asano had a "personal grudge" that caused him to lose his temper. And ultimately, because Asano failed to kill Kira, the public frowned upon him as he showed *fukaku*, or the failure to follow through and the shameful incompetence of a warrior.[35] While the mythology praises Asano for resorting to the only acceptable action, the reality of the situation was that he got upset and hit Kira, failing to kill him, which ruined his public perception. Furthermore, the actions of the Rōnin are also called into question. The Rōnin waited almost a year after their master's death to enact revenge. Hurst writes, "…who in the *Hagakure* notes that they should have taken their revenge against Lord Kira immediately without any thought of the consequences; such was the essence of his shinigurui form of bushido."[36] The Rōnin's inaction for a year was not in accordance with the principles of bushido, according to the author of the *Hagakure*. The delayed reaction of the Rōnin allowed for contemplation of consequences and planning. Another example of delayed actions by the Rōnin was their seppuku. They did not commit seppuku immediately after killing Kira. The Rōnin were ordered to commit seppuku, and

[33] Juliet Piggott, *Japanese Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1969), 100.

[34] Piggott, *Japanese Mythology*, 101-02.

[35] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 224.

[36] Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality," 525.

they waited for their full two-month trial to play out before committing suicide. Hurst states, "But clearly, the authorities could not react with leniency without risking potential anarchy…Therefore, it was decided by the authorities that the [forty-seven Rōnin] should be condemned to death rather than pardoned."[37] This excerpt reveals that by awaiting the trial, there was a possibility of a pardon, but it was unlikely. Ultimately, the Rōnin were ordered to commit seppuku. Hurst comments, "[Seppuku] was far more likely to be imposed upon one rather than a willful act to demonstrate one's nobility, honor, or loyalty."[38] The juxtaposition of this point with the seppuku of the Rōnin sheds light on the reality of the Rōnin's situation and how they may have wanted to live. Baited to await the trial by the debate of a pardon, the Rōnin were ultimately forced to commit suicide.

Keeping in mind that a pardon was possible and that, under Tokugawa law, seppuku was imposed on individuals, the complexities of the details crack the mythology open. The story is not glossed over with assumptions, and the holes that exist are where the historical debate around motivations arises. The mythology provides a great story to inspire others to act in accordance with bushido, and as previously stated, *The Tale of the 47 Rōnin* quickly became part of popular culture in Japan and caused a resurgence of bushido ideals. The reality of the story pokes holes into its foundation, like with Lord Asano's motivations. By showing the faults in bushido principles, the heroism of the story is questionable.

As illustrated in *The Tale of the 47 Rōnin*, mythology can lead to false perceptions of events and misinformation. The tales of myths and legends of the honorable samurai may seem insignificant, but these stories were used to inspire the actions of the Japanese during WWII. The self-motivated perspective, driven by the bushido principles, was able to motivate, or coerce, Japanese people into programs like the Kamikaze program. Hurst writes, "Indeed, Nitobe's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* became not only an international bestseller, but it served as the cornerstone for the construction of the edifice of ultranationalism that led Japan down the path to a war she could not win."[39] Nitobe, the author who laid the foundation for the self-motivated perspective, is partially responsible for radicalizing Japanese society. By rekindling bushido principles, Nitobe fueled the ultranationalist propaganda fire.

Additionally, stories like the mythos versions of *The Tale of the 47 Rōnin*, inspired people to gain a spirit of bushido. For those who enlisted in the imperial army, they were led by the bushido principles of charging into death, or they held great shame and guilt about the insufficient commitment and dishonor they would bring to their families. Furthermore, Ikegami writes, "The famous first sentence of the [*Hagakure*], 'bushido, or the way of the samurai, means death,' has been used as a slogan by twentieth-century Japanese militarists and ultranationalists because it neatly encapsulates the samurai spirit."[40] The imperial army uses bushido-inspired propaganda to

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[37] Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality," 524.

[38] Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality," 522.

[39] Hurst, "Death, Honor, and Loyality," 512.

[40] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 286.

promote suicide before surrender. The culminating result of the militarist propaganda was illustrated through the development of the Kamikaze program. The influence of bushido can be seen in this pilot's final letter:

> Honorable Mother and Father,
>
> The difficulty of the journey you made to see me was clearly evident in your disheveled hair and in the hollows under your eyes—it made me want to bend my knees and worship before you. In the wrinkles on your brows was vivid testimony of the pains you took to raise me. Words could not express my feelings, and what little I did say was superficial in the extreme. Yet, although acutely conscious of how little time we had, I saw in your eyes and in your gaze all you wanted to say but couldn't. When you took my hand and passed it over your chilblains, I experienced a sense of profound peacefulness unlike anything I have experienced since joining up—like being a baby again and longing for the warmth of a mother's love. It is because I bask in the beauty of your deep devotion that I can martyr myself for you-for in death I will sleep in the world of your love. Washed down with my tears was the sushi you prepared with such loving care, for it was like putting your love to my lips. Though I ate but little, it was the most delicious meal of my life.
>
> Honorable Mother, even if I was never able to fully accept the love you gave me, I received so much wisdom from you. And Father, your silent words are carved deeply into my heart. With this I will be able to fight together with you both. Even if I should die, it will be with a peaceful spirit. I mean this with all my heart.
>
> The war zone is where these beautiful emotions are put to the test. If death means a return to this world of love, there is no need for me to fear it. There is nothing left to do but press on and fulfill my duty.
>
> At 16oo hours our meeting was over. Watching you walk out the gate, I quietly waved goodbye.
>
> Captain Adachi Takuya[41]

Letters like this one show extreme levels of reverence for their parents—filial piety—and exude feelings of being dissatisfied with the dishonor that they have brought to their family; these are all traits reinforced by bushido. But the pilots feel that through the Kamikaze program, they will be able to restore their honor by committing suicide in service of Japan and the emperor. This propaganda that spreads the idealist vision of bushido is what led these pilots to end their lives.

Outside of the scope of war, Japanese society, to this day, has a different relationship with suicide and death in comparison to western audiences. Takie Sugiyama Lebra examines Japan's relationship to suicide in her book, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*. She details, "American condemnation of suicide makes self-destructing only a desperate submission to despair, but the

[41] Captain Adachi Takuya, Letter to his Parents, 28 April 1945, in "Last Letters of Kamikaze Pilots," *Manōa* 13, no. 1 (2001): 120–23 at 122.

Japanese respect for it allows it to be an honorable and purposeful act."[42] The history of suicide in Japan has created a more positive connotation of it. The less stigmatized view resulted in Japan having one of the highest suicide rates in the world up until the 1960s.[43] The stories told of seppuku and other forms of ritualist suicide, no matter the intentions and motivations of the participants, have ultimately led Japan to have a relaxed notion of suicide and an increased rate of it.

Seppuku is a ritualist form of suicide, also known as hara-kiri, that has been present in Japanese history since the medieval period. The practice was not standardized until it became a legal punishment under the Tokugawa Bakufu. With the rise of the Meiji government, seppuku was outlawed as a form of capital punishment, but the tales of the practice would inspire the next generation during WWII. The motivations of the practice have been split between the bushido-inspired group that claims people committed seppuku for self-motivated reasons. The other group claims that seppuku was the result of societal pressures or governmental enforcement. The presence of suicide in Japanese culture and history has had a numbing effect, as Japanese society has a different connotation of suicide in comparison to the West. No matter the motivations debated between historians, the relationship between Japan and suicide has caused an abnormally high suicide rate up until the 1960s. Seppuku is a cultural phenomenon that is uniquely Japanese and causes problems that the Japanese have had to face. The future is brighter for Japan's relationship with suicide, as their suicide rate is steadily decreasing.

[42] Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1976), 190.

[43] Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, 192.

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