

Essay summary of disembowelment in japanese history

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Honor was defined in Dr Johnson's Dictionary in several senses. The first sense described honor as "nobility of soul, magnanimity, and a scorn of meanness." This sort of honor derives from the perceived virtuous conduct and personal integrity of the person endowed with it. On the other hand, Johnson also defined honor in relationship to "reputation" and "fame"; to "privileges of rank or birth", and as "respect" of the kind which "places an individual socially and determines his right to precedence."

This sort of honor is not so much a function of moral or ethical excellence, as it is a consequence of power. Finally, for women, according to Dr Johnson, honor is synonymous with "chastity". On the other hand, dishonor means loss of honor, respect, or reputation; the condition of having lost honor or good repute. Many Japanese heroes choose to engage in disembowelment because it forms the way of graceful suicide by a samurai in Japan. By this method, samurais are deemed to be free from the dishonor. A samurai is a professional warrior belonging to the Japanese feudal military aristocracy.

Disembowelment or evisceration is the removing of some or all of vital organs, usually from the abdomen. The results are, in virtually all cases, fatal. It has historically been used as a severe form of capital punishment. The last organs to be removed were invariably the heart and lungs so as to preserve the victim's life force for the full procedure. In Japan, disembowelment also formed part of the method of execution of or graceful suicide by a samurai. In killing themselves by this method, they were deemed to be free from the dishonor resulting from their crimes.

The most common form of disembowelment was referred to in Japanese as seppuku (where the term "hara-kiri," literally "stomach cutting," is regarded <https://assignbuster.com/essay-summary-of-disembowelment-in-japanese-history/>

as vulgar), involving two cuts across the abdomen, sometimes followed by pulling out one's own innards. The act of beheading, in most cases by one's best servant, was added to this ritual suicide in later times in order to shorten the suffering of the samurai or leader, an attempt at rendering the ritual more humane. In the English language, hara-kiri and seppuku are often treated as synonyms.

Seppuku was a key part of bushido, the code of the samurai warriors; it was used by warriors to avoid falling into enemy hands and to attenuate shame. Samurai could also be ordered by their daimyo (feudal lords) to commit seppuku. Later disgraced warriors were sometimes allowed to commit seppuku rather than be executed in the normal manner. Since the main point of the act was to restore or protect one's honor as a warrior, those who did not belong to the samurai caste were never ordered or expected to commit seppuku. Samurai women could only commit the act with permission.

In his book *The Samurai Way of Death*, *Samurai: The World of the Warrior* (ch. 4), Dr. Stephen Turnbull states: Seppuku was commonly performed using a tanto. It could take place with preparation and ritual in the privacy of one's home, or speedily in a quiet corner of a battlefield while one's comrades kept the enemy at bay. In the world of the warrior, seppuku was a deed of bravery that was admirable in a samurai who knew he was defeated, disgraced, or mortally wounded. It meant that he could end his days with his transgressions wiped away and with his reputation not merely intact but actually enhanced.

The cutting of the abdomen released the samurai's spirit in the most dramatic fashion, but it was an extremely painful and unpleasant way to die, and sometimes the samurai who was performing the act asked a loyal comrade to cut off his head at the moment of agony. Sometimes a daimyo was called upon to perform seppuku as the basis of a peace agreement. This would weaken the defeated clan so that resistance would effectively cease. Toyotomi Hideyoshi used an enemy's suicide in this way on several occasions, the most dramatic of which effectively ended a dynasty of daimyo forever, when the Hojo were defeated at Odawara in 1590.

Hideyoshi insisted on the suicide of the retired daimyo Hojo Ujimasa, and the exile of his son Ujinao. With one sweep of a sword, the most powerful daimyofamilyin eastern Japan was put to an end. In time, committing seppuku came to involve a detailed ritual. A Samurai was bathed, dressed in white robes, fed his favorite meal, and when he was finished, his instrument was placed on his plate. Dressed ceremonially, with his sword placed in front of him and sometimes seated on special cloths, the warrior would prepare for death by writing a death poem.

With his selected attendant (kaishakunin, his second) standing by, he would open his kimono (clothing), take up his wakizashi (short sword) or a tanto (knife) and plunge it into his abdomen, making a left-to-right cut. The kaishakunin would then perform daki-kubi, a cut in which the warrior was all but decapitated (a slight band of flesh is left attaching the head to the body). Because of the precision necessary for such a maneuver, the second was often a skilled swordsman. The principal agreed in advance when the

kaishaku made his cut, usually as soon as the dagger was plunged into the abdomen.

This elaborate ritual evolved after seppuku had ceased being mainly a battlefield or wartime practice and become a para judicial institution. The second was usually, but not always, a friend. If a defeated warrior had fought honorably and well, an opponent who wanted to salute his bravery would volunteer to act as his second. In the Hagakure, Yamamoto Tsunetomo wrote: From ages past it has been considered ill-omened by samurai to be requested as kaishaku. The reason for this is that one gains no fame even if the job is well done.

And if by chance one should blunder, it becomes a lifetime disgrace. In the practice of past times, there were instances when the head flew off. It was said that it was best to cut leaving a little skin remaining so that it did not fly off in the direction of the verifying officials. However, at present it is best to cut clean through. Some samurai chose to perform a considerably more taxing form of seppuku known as jumonji-giri (. " cross-shaped cut") in which there is no kaishakunin to put a quick end to the samurai's suffering.

It involves a second and more painful vertical cut across the belly. A samurai performing jumonji-giri was expected to bear his suffering quietly until perishing from loss of blood, passing away with his hands over his face. While the voluntary seppuku described above is the best known form and has been widely admired and idealized, in practice the most common form of seppuku was obligatory seppuku, used as a form of capital punishment for disgraced samurai, especially for those who committed a serious offense such as unprovoked murder, robbery, corruption, or treason.

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The samurai were generally told of their offense in full and given a set time to commit seppuku, usually before sunset on a given day. If the sentenced was uncooperative, it was not unheard of for them to be restrained, or for the actual execution to be carried out by decapitation while retaining only the trappings of seppuku; even the short sword laid out in front of the victim could be replaced with a fan. Unlike voluntary seppuku, seppuku carried out as capital punishment did not necessarily absolve the victim's family of the crime.

Depending on the severity of the crime, half or all of the deceased's property could be confiscated, and the family stripped of rank. Seppuku as judicial punishment was officially abolished in 1873, shortly after the Meiji Restoration, but voluntary seppuku did not completely die out. Dozens of people are known to have committed seppuku since then, including some military men who committed suicide in 1895 as a protest against the return of a conquered territory to China by General Nogi and his wife on the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912; and by numerous soldiers and civilians who chose to die rather than surrender at the end of World War II.

In 1970, famed author Yukio Mishima and one of his followers committed public seppuku at the Japan Self-Defense Forces headquarters after an unsuccessful attempt to incite the armed forces to stage a coup d'état. Mishima committed seppuku in the office of General Kanetoshi Mashita. His second, a 25-year-old named Masakatsu Morita, tried three times to ritually behead Mishima but failed; his head was finally severed by Hiroyasu Koga. Morita then attempted to commit seppuku himself.

Although his own cuts were too shallow to be fatal, he gave the signal and he too was beheaded by Koga. In 1999, Masaharu Nonaka, a 58-year-old employee of Bridgestone in Japan, slashed his belly with a sashimi knife to protest his forced retirement. He died later in the hospital. This suicide, which became widely known as 'risutora seppuku', was said to represent the difficulties in Japan following the collapse of the bubble economy. Well-known people who committed seppuku.