

Samurai culture and customs

What was seppuku and kaishaku?



Let's have a chat about seppuku - the ritual suicide samurai were famous for (among other things)

Note that this is really a small part of the whole story here so please chime in should you feel something is missing.

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First it's important to know that being a samurai was really considered a profession. A highly respected profession with very reasonable compensation in the form of hard currency as well as secondary benefits such as real estate for the entire family.

These benefits of course came with a certain price and respect and loyalty where demanded from samurai who were in service of their lord.

Should the samurai make an irreversible mistake he could offer his life to save the name of his family and his lord.

A fine example is where a samurai was sent to negotiate a situation and ended up killing someone of the other party.

While his Lord probably can't be accounted for the actions of his servants, according to the customs in that period it would surely be seen as a blemish on the good name of his Lord.

The ultimate display of 'taking credit for his actions' would be to take their own life.

Depending on the severance of the crime/mistake/insult, the Shogun or Daimyo could offer a part of the samurai's ownings to the other party but also banish or execute an entire family.

Samurai could offer their own life but could also be 'urged' to perform seppuku. There have been cases where a samurai refused seppuku after where a force seppuku (read: execution) would take place. This could also be the case if the samurai committed very serious crimes such as the betrayal of the lord.

Anyway, volunteered seppuku was considered a good gesture towards the lord and the aggrieved party. In some cases it could even be considered a 'killed in action' death, which ensured a good name for his own family AND allowing them to keep using the awarded benefits for his services.

Surely samurai were courageous men but obviously; being able to take care of his family - even from his after life - is a great factor in whether someone fears death. This eventually led to a belief that samurai worshipped death! However if you take the social and financial reward for being killed in name of your lord then things are suddenly in a more humane perspective.

Most people know the basics about the actual seppuku: a tanto wrapped in cloth plunged into the hara (the abdomen area; which is why it's also referred to as hara-kiri ~ belly cut). Maybe a quick twist for the dramatic effect. However this is only one part of the story.

Those active in the Japanese warrior arts are well familiar about the rituals in starting and ending your training.

A tenfold of rituals were used when it comes to seppuku.

A last meal, bath, strict dress code, an audience, quite some seppuku accessories and of course the kaishakunin.

In terms of swords and swordsmanship, the kaishakunin is quite interesting as this is the assistant during the suicide.

This could be a befriended samurai or your superior, but it could also be an honorable enemy who grants you a warrior's death.

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After the suicidé plunges the tanto into their stomach the kaishakunin would perform kaishaku which is a partial beheading and actually kills the seppukunin (seeing the basics of the Japanese language here?).

An extremely important factor in the kaishaku is that the head must NOT be completely separated from the body. The swordsman who executed the kaishaku must stop his strike in time to leave a small portion of the flesh and skin intact so the head won't start rolling over the floor. Also I don't need to explain why the kaishakunin should not need a second swing to execute the person who is already in excruciating pain from the abdominal cut.

Allowing absolutely no margin for error, the kaishaku was practiced in many traditional samurai schools. An example of such training are of course the kaishaku-waza but a bit more unknown, the practice of suemonogiri which is a cutting exercise of a non-fixed target.

Tameshigiri on the other hand was purely meant as blade testing and uses a fixed target.

This concludes this mini story about some aspects of the Japanese samurai ritual suicide that aren't often discussed.

For those who know me, I could go for hours but I'll leave the rest up to your own research and curiosity.

Anyway, did you know that about 43 years ago there has been a (double) ritual suicide with kaishaku? Or that women were taught as children how to perform jigai, a quick and (kind of) painless death to save their honor in certain situations?

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