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Bargen/Suicidal Honor

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Chapter 1

**Sacrifice and Self-Sacrifice**

**Era Transitions**
When Emperor Meiji died on 30 July 1912, after an eventful, remarkably long reign of forty-four years, his people were disoriented and inconsolable. The length of this reign and the close association of the emperor with his era made Meiji’s death especially traumatic. His passing signaled the end of an era that—in encyclopedic compactness and formulaic generalization—“saw the transformation of feudal Japan into a modern industrialized state with a parliamentary form of government and its emergence as a world power through military adventures abroad.”

The end of the era was also a pivotal religious moment.

Descended in an “unbroken” line of emperors from the sun goddess Amaterasu, Emperor Meiji was born in Kyōto, on 3 November 1852 (Kaei 5.IX.22), as the second son of Emperor Kōmei (1831–1866; r. 1846–1866) and Nakayama Yoshiko (1835–1907), daughter of major counselor Nakayama Tadayasu (1809–1888). His boyhood name was Sachinomiya. On 11 November 1860, Prince Sachi became crown prince and received his adult name, Mutsuhito, used largely for official functions. He succeeded his father on 13 February 1867, at age sixteen, and was formally enthroned on 12 October 1868. Ten days later he chose by lot the name of his era, the nengō, to be Meiji, or “Enlightened Rule.”

His reign was so long that most Japanese, never having known any other ruler, preferred simply to speak of him as tennō, or emperor. He received his posthumous name, Meiji Tennō, on 27 August 1912. This further strengthened the association of the man and the era, as it was “the first time in either Japan or China that the posthumous name of an emperor had been taken from the nengō.”

Fears about chaos in the wake of a divine ruler’s death find universal expression in myths about a permanent eclipse of the sun, to which divine rulers are often likened. In the Japanese creation myths, as told in the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, brother–sister rivalries lead the sun goddess Amaterasu to withdraw into a cave in response to the wind god Susanowo’s horrific assaults on her sovereignty and territory. The world is plunged into darkness. Unhampered
by humans, the deities design an amazingly delightful solution. Their ritual laughter, inspired by a female deity’s erotic dance on an overturned bucket, coaxes Amaterasu from her cave. As the dancer’s performative feat is artfully concluded, a mirror playing upon Amaterasu’s curiosity and vanity allows a powerful male deity to pull the sun from the cave. To avert another eclipse, Amaterasu’s brother Susanowo is sacrificed by mutilation and “divine expulsion” from Takama no hara, the Plain of High Heaven. Thus carefully shielded from her brother’s taboo violations, henceforth Amaterasu reigns supreme. The symbolic mirror into which Amaterasu gazed became one of the three imperial regalia evoked in enthronement ceremonies.

The Japanese are not alone either in their fears of chaos or in the rituals designed to legitimize their ruler and avert catastrophe. Mesoamerican culture provides two dramatic examples of this. Like other Mesoamerican peoples, the Aztecs recognized the importance of the sun to their livelihood and organized their lives around solar time. Anxious about the sun rising every morning, the Aztecs performed human sacrifice to keep it “moving” across the sky. Offerings to the sun occurred at regular intervals, most prominently at the awesome intersection between two calendrical cycles, every fifty-two years, or roughly one human life span. When the era of one Sun ended, the Aztecs entered a state of heightened frenzy and launched a new Sun on its course by offering it the still beating heart of carefully chosen and prepared human sacrifices. Only then could they rest assured of continuing to live by the power of the sun. Thus motivated by myth, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice on a massive scale until the military conquest of Hernán Cortés in 1521. Johanna Broda has argued that religious, state, and cosmic cults provide the context for human sacrifice: “According to Aztec religious theory, blood had to be spilled to make the cosmos continue to exist. The sun, in order to send its light to earth, needed to be fed on human hearts and blood. The ruler’s obligation was to provide this nourishment to the sun; for this purpose he led his armies into the war and exacted tribute in victims for sacrifice.” In short, the sacrificial ritual was a religious offering to a divinity, an offering intended to mark—and pass through—the dangerous liminal moment of transition from the reign of one Sun to that of another. Aztec human sacrifice was designed to ensure the cosmic order represented by the daily rising of the sun.

Some Aztec sacrificial victims were treated royally before they climbed the steep stairs to have their chests cut open and their hearts ripped out for offering to the sun. In the yearly festival Toxcatl, dedicated to the multifaceted, omnipresent god Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), a captive warrior “was chosen for his perfect physical features” and “ritually changed into a teotl ixiptla,
or image of the god, who paraded for one year throughout the Aztec city. At the end of the year the impersonator of Tezcatlipoca was sacrificed on top of a pyramid/ temple, where his heart was extracted and offered to the sun.”9 Before the moment of his sacrificial death the teotl ixiptla was adorned, loved, and venerated. Just when the captive was recognized as a perfect model, however, the former warrior broke the instruments of his domestication—flutes and whistles—and “reverted to the bellicose aspect.”10 Thus the god impersonator and warrior captive, who had “ascended by himself, [gone] up of his own free will, to where he was to die,” was beheaded, his torso “not rolled down the stairs as was often done in other sacrifices” but “carried carefully away,” and his head “displayed on the skull rack as a visual image of human destiny.”11 “This movement crossed not only geographical, domestic, and public space but also hierarchical space as the god’s image joined with the office and person of kingship. In the adornment ceremony, the teotl ixiptla was transformed into the ruler’s version of the god.”12

Like Amaterasu’s mirror, Tezcatlipoca’s mirror was “used for divination,” functioning as “a metaphor for rulership, for power.”13 The parallels between Emperor Meiji’s general and Tezcatlipoca’s ixiptla are striking. Like the Aztecs’ captive warrior, Nogi too was lavishly decorated and frequently ordered to represent the imperial presence at home and abroad. His self-sacrifice upon the occasion of the emperor’s death inspired such awe that Nogi was enshrined at the foot of his emperor’s mausoleum (and in five other shrines solely dedicated to him).14 Like the warrior who became Tezcatlipoca’s impersonator, Nogi too reasserted his self just as he was surrendering it to his sovereign.

By reenacting an ancient pattern, Nogi recalled the half-forgotten past for his people. Like the Aztec teotl ixiptla’s heart sacrifice, Nogi’s disembowelment regenerated imperial rule and inspired his deification.15 As a metaphorical male way of giving birth, disembowelment can also be likened to the bloodletting rites in which “the Maya lords sought to experience a totality, even a divine totality, by imitating the capacity of women to menstruate (bleed from their genitals) and to give birth.”16 The death of a Maya sovereign required verification, or testimony, which was his blood.17 If the sovereign himself did not shed the blood that bore testimony to his death, then the blood was shed vicariously, through ritual or impersonation, before the succession could occur. In an eerie analogue to Maya ritual, Nogi represented the emperor on the day of Meiji’s funeral. Symbolically, his blood became one with Meiji’s. It evoked Meiji’s and absorbed its power at the same time that it was a donation, the sacrifice needed at the end of an era for the perpetuation of the imperial line. “The kind is dead. Long live the king.”
“Following One’s Lord into Death”

During Emperor Meiji’s nocturnal funeral procession on 13 September 1912, the potentially unstable, even dangerous, hiatus between one reign and the next, the momentous transition from one avatar of the sun goddess Amaterasu to another, was virtually eclipsed by Nogi’s ritual suicide. To fathom the cultural implications (and literary consequences) of Nogi’s junshi as religious sacrifice we need to understand the concept of “following one’s lord into death.”

At its core, “following one’s lord into death” is a form of suicide, and suicide is probably a cultural universal, abstractly defined as “the specific action of a human being that aims at ending his or her life prematurely or allowing it to end prematurely.” The study of suicide has been impeded, notes Georges Minois in his recent *History of Suicide* in the West, because the “silence and dissimulation that accompanied suicide surrounded it with a climate of discomfort.” Judgments of suicide vary from culture to culture and depend on numerous factors, including religion, class, gender, profession, and circumstances. Venerated by some and condemned by others, suicide is committed for every conceivable reason. Some may want to prevent capture and torture at the hands of an implacable enemy, and others to end the torment of incurable disease, escape the Shakespearean “pangs of unrequited love,” or avoid the shame that follows the exposure of a loathsome act. “Following one’s lord into death” is performed for none of these reasons.

When suicide takes the form of “following one’s lord into death,” it constitutes an act of self-inflicted human sacrifice. Although we, despite the headlines and news segments reporting “suicide bombers,” are accustomed to thinking that sacrificed persons are unwilling to die, this has not always been the case. Following a sacred ruler into death, typically performed by seclusion in the sovereign’s tomb or by live burial, has often been a willingly performed religious act. (For prehistoric times, the archaeological evidence of volition is seldom unambiguous.) In cultures where religious and secular spheres were not clearly separated, “following one’s lord into death” was frequently based on the belief in an afterlife that mirrored the world of the living. The ritual sacrifice was intended to affirm the divinity of the deceased ruler and to be apotropaic in that the attendants would protect their ruler from the dangers of the afterlife. It was also intended to make endurable the anxieties concerning the succession that often characterized an interregnum period.

The Japanese Custom in Context

When and where did the custom of “following one’s lord into death” arise and what were its earliest forms? The historical evidence indicates that
junshi evolved over the centuries from a specific form of sacrifice to a specific form of self-sacrifice. Although the custom of junshi in its fully developed form was unique to Japanese culture, there were similar customs in other cultures that help us to understand and appreciate that uniqueness. Common to all of these customs was the religious belief that the needs of the dead are the same as those of the living, and that the living do well to pacify the spirit of their deceased. It should perhaps be emphasized that these sacrifices, unlike those of the Aztecs and Maya, were funerary customs.

Evidence of these ancient practices is relatively new, as are the debates about them. Between the year of Nogi’s victory at Port Arthur in 1894 and his junshi in 1912, archaeologists discovered large Egyptian royal tombs of the Archaic Period (c. 3000–2670) in Abydos and Saqqara that revealed an ancient custom of mass human sacrifice not previously associated with divine Egyptian kings and queens of the Old, Middle, or New Kingdoms. (These were also the years during which Jane Ellen Harrison and Friedrich Schwenn wrote their studies of sacrifice in ancient Greece and Rome.) In the ethnocentric words of Walter Bryan Emery, the chief excavator at Saqqara, “this barbaric mortuary custom had died out in the more cultured North [of Egypt]” by the end of the First Dynasty. As Emery catalogued the numbers of sacrificed men, women, and children in various tombs, he surmised that the Egyptian belief in life after death might have motivated whole retinues to continue serving their divine lord in the afterlife, “whether willingly or otherwise we do not know.” In the course of time, the sacrificial custom of following a ruler into death, as practiced by the royal retinue of the First Dynasty at Abydos and Saqqara, took a less bloody form. Humans and animals were replaced with mumiform figures known as shabtis, shawabtis, or ushabtis.

Among the Yoruba who live in what is now Nigeria, the custom of funerary sacrifice at the death of a king survived into the twentieth century despite attempts of British colonial officers to end the custom. Those who were expected freely to offer their lives in order to accompany their ruler into the next world included the Master of the Horse, whose name in Yoruba—Ab’obaku—can be translated as “One who is to die with the king.” Wole Soyinka (b. 1934), winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature, dramatized this funerary custom in a powerful play entitled Death and the King’s Horseman (1975). In Soyinka’s play, the King’s Horseman proclaims, as he prepares for his voluntary death, “Life is honour. It ends when honour ends.” Although it is explained to the British colonial administrator that the king cannot be buried until his horseman dies “so as to accompany him to heaven,” the British are shocked and do their best to abort the ritual. Ironically, it is the horseman’s son who returns home from England in order, not
only to fulfill the religious custom of his people and thereby preserve Yoruba cosmology and social cohesion, but also to assert Yoruba “spiritual and cultural freedom against colonial intervention.”

Although the ancient Scyths, who ruled a realm between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, seem to have lacked a belief in an afterlife, “the Scythian sense of corporate identity” impelled them to perform “acts of limited self-sacrifice” during a forty-day cortège. Only those who had been especially close to the Scythian king followed him into death. The fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus described the sacrifices made by his Scythian contemporaries in vivid detail:

In the open space around the body of the king they bury one of his concubines, first killing her by strangling, and also his cupbearer, his cook, his groom, his lackey, his messenger, some of his horses, firstlings of all his other possessions, and some golden cups; for they use neither silver nor brass. After this they set to work, and raise a vast mound above the grave, all of them vying with each other and seeking to make it as tall as possible. . . . When a year is gone by, further ceremonies take place. Fifty of the best of the late king’s attendants are taken, all native Scythians. [They are] strangled, with fifty of the most beautiful horses.

Religious historian Bruce Lincoln, writing of this Scythian custom in 1991, might have been referring to Nogi when he wrote of Scyths who felt, at the death of their rulers, that “their own lives . . . became unfocused, aimless, impossible.”

The earliest literary evidence of Greek parallels to Scythian rituals comes from the Homeric age. It was, according to Friedrich Schwenn, customary in the archaic period for a nobleman to be accompanied into the underworld by his attendants. In Book XXIII of the Iliad, Achilles, before staging elaborate funeral games, sacrificed twelve Trojans as a tribute to his dead friend Patroklos:

and so he killed twelve noble sons of the great-hearted Trojans with the stroke of bronze, and evil were the thoughts in his heart against them, and let loose the iron fury of the fire to feed on them.

Then he groaned, and called by name on his beloved companion:

“Good-bye, Patroklos. I hail you even in the house of the death god For all that I promised you in time past I am accomplishing. Here are twelve noble sons of the great-hearted Trojans whom the fire feeds on, all, as it feeds on you. But I will not give Hektor, Priam’s son, to the fire, but the dogs, to feast on.”
Achilles’ choice of fire sacrifice is meant as a sign of respect for the Trojan youths. He has in mind more gruesome treatment for the man who slew Patroklos. Hektor’s unaccompanied corpse he means to feed to the dogs.34

About Roman funerary customs we are far better informed. The historian Tacitus tells us that Emperor Otho (32–69 C.E.), when defeated at Bedriacum, committed suicide35 and was followed in death by several of his loyal soldiers.36 This episode was a textbook example of what the ancient Romans meant by devotio, a ritual that entailed a love of death exemplified by voluntary self-sacrifice. As L. F. Janssen explains: “True devotio cannot be brought about by pressure, but it has to be personal, self-imposed obligation.”37 Emperor Otho’s followers resemble the Japanese warriors who followed their lord in death on the battlefield, especially when the motive was sheer devotion and loyalty, rather than a dishonorable fear of dying at the hands of the enemy.38 The “devotus’s charge into the midst of the enemy,” not only “actively terrif[ies] the enemy, but the death that [the devotus] suffers ensures that they too will die.”39

Gladiatorial games (munera) had their origins in something very like junshi. “Like the retainers who had in earlier times been buried with their masters in order to render posthumous service, gladiators acted in a bloody drama in which the virtus of the fighters symbolized a triumph over death.”40 Accordingly, as a form of human sacrifice, munera were first staged “at the funerals of prominent men.”41 Paul Plass points to the closure that such deaths were expected to bring: “At Rome death was originally brought under a measure of control by additional death staged at the dead man’s tomb.”42

Among the Germanic peoples to the north, songs commemorated Gefolgschaftsbestattungen (burials with entourage). Archaeological evidence of this ritual has been found in Queen Asa’s ninth-century tomb at Oseberg in Norway.43 Among Slavic and Baltic peoples, those who followed their lord seem to have done so willingly and as a matter of course because they expected to live on in the aptly named “afterlife.”44

A degree of uncertainty prevails in the discussion of the Chinese custom of xunzang. The term xun (J. jun) refers to “the killing of a person or persons to guard a dead man.”45 It has long been thought that the purpose of these human sacrifices was to provide the deceased sovereign with attendants in the afterlife or to feed the “potent spirits” of that threatening realm.46 Jacques Gernet noted, in 1972, that the practice “required the prince’s closest companions and his concubines to follow him in death.” He added that “these human victims were to be replaced more and more often in the course of the first millennium by mannekins or figurines.”47 The practice continued well into the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.).
More recent scholarship has modified earlier interpretations of this Chinese practice. Evidence found near An-yang between 1927 and 1936 in royal tombs of the Shang or Yin dynasty (1765–1122 B.C.E., traditional dates), indicates that the accompanying bodies were not those of the Chinese sovereign’s grief-stricken attendants. Mark Edward Lewis has shown that the bodies were the results of “the mass execution of slaves and prisoners to ‘accompany’ the deceased Shang rulers. . . . The hundreds of bodies discovered in some royal tombs were probably prisoners taken in warfare, and it is even possible that some campaigns were fought solely for the purpose of obtaining these sacrificial victims.” In other words, the alleged Chinese prototype did not involve imperial attendants and was not a form of voluntary ritual suicide.

The same can be said about the earliest forms of funerary sacrifice in Japan. The eighth-century compilation known as the *Nihon shoki* or *Nihongi* traces the custom of junshi back to the reign of the legendary Emperor Suinin (29 B.C.E.–70 C.E.). When Yamatohiko no mikoto, the emperor’s younger brother, passed away, “his personal attendants were assembled, and were all buried alive upright in the precinct of the misasagi [imperial tomb]. For several days they died not, but wept and wailed day and night. At last they died and rotted. Dogs and crows gathered and ate them.” Whether or not the attendants died willingly is unclear. Were they weeping and bewailing their own fate, or Yamatohiko no mikoto’s, or both?

The text is clearer about the emperor’s response. “The Emperor, hearing the sound of their weeping and wailing, was grieved in heart, and commanded his high officers, saying:—‘It is a very painful thing to force those whom one has loved in life to follow him in death. Though it be an ancient custom, why follow it, if it is bad? From this time forward, take counsel so as to put a stop to the following of the dead.’”

Emperor Suinin’s resolve to end the custom was put to the test when his consort died in the thirty-second year of his rule. He consulted with his ministers about the wisdom of his earlier decision. In the service of the emperor was one Nomi no Sukune, a great wrestler from Izumo, who proposed a brilliant solution: “Henceforward let it be the law for future ages to substitute things of clay for living men, and to set them up at tumuli.” These “things of clay” were, of course, the artistic figurines known as *haniwa*.

Doubts have been expressed about this episode, similar to those voiced in reference to the Chinese custom of *xunzang*. In an extensive note on the *Kojiki* (compiled in 712), referring specifically to the story of Emperor Suinin, Donald L. Philippi questioned “these dubious old narratives.” Paul Varley has also expressed skepticism. He maintains that the clay shapes were not
originally meant to represent courtly attendants (as the *Nihon shoki* has it), nor were they “a human fence [hito-gaki] at the tomb” (as the *Kojiki* states). According to Varley, the prototypes of the *haniwa* were merely “plain cylinders” meant “to reduce erosion or to mark off certain areas on the burial mound for ritual purposes.” Delmer Brown surmises that *haniwa* “may have been placed around a burial mound [built to pacify deceased rulers] in order to keep the soul from straying outside it.”

There are also doubts about the custom of junshi in the case of Queen Himiko (d. 248? C.E.) of Yamatai. The third-century Chinese contemporary compendium *Wei chih* (Record of Wei) chronicles Japanese events in a section called “Wajinden” (An account of the people of “Wa”). According to this text, when Himiko died, “a great mound was raised, more than a hundred paces in diameter. Over a hundred male and female attendants followed her to the grave.” The *Wei chih* does not indicate whether the attendants’ deaths were voluntary or involuntary, but the text emphasizes that something went awfully wrong with the succession in the wake of these deaths: “Then a king was placed on the throne, but the people would not obey him. Assassination and murder followed: more than one thousand were thus slain. A relative of Himiko named Iyo, a girl of thirteen, was [then] made queen and order was restored.”

Joan R. Piggott concludes that archaeological evidence for this event is lacking, and Walter Edwards surmises that the Chinese compiler Chen Shou (233–297) might have projected onto Japan his own country’s “practice of placing human sacrificial victims in royal tombs.”

The only ancient Japanese practice that seems symbolically close to that of entombing sacrificial victims with the dead king is the temporary enshrinement (*mogari no miya*) of a dead sovereign or a family member of the imperial house. The *mogari no miya*, which lasted from less than one month to over six years, has been recorded from the time of the first legendary emperor, Jimmu (660–585 B.C.E.), to that of Empress Jitô (645–702; r. 690–697). When Emperor Kôtoku unsuccessfully prohibited junshi in 646, he also tried to end the custom of *mogari no miya*. Politics as well as religion often played a central role in *mogari no miya* because women who had been sexually intimate with the deceased emperor were secluded in his death chamber, often for an extended period of time, until the succession was decided. Clearly, this practice stops short of accompanying one’s lord into death, but it may be a relic of a more radical response to the loss of one’s sovereign. The ritual practice of temporary enshrinement provided the occasion for an ordeal intended to ensure the imperial succession through a symbolic form of junshi.