

SUICIDIO E CULTURA IN ESTREMO ORIENTE

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RIASSUNTO.

Il presente lavoro intende prendere in esame i fenomeni suicidari in estremo-oriente secondo una prospettiva culturale. Vengono descritti quei comportamenti suicidari esclusivamente collegati a variabili di tipo sociale e che possono essere considerati come conseguenza di tradizioni consolidate, escludendo gli atti conseguenti a patologia mentale. Si farà una distinzione tra suicidi individuali e collettivi descritti in letteratura. Il lavoro si conclude con alcune osservazioni relative all'importanza in oriente dei fattori culturali nel determinare i comportamenti del singolo.

Parole chiave: suicidio, cultura, estremo-oriente.

SUICIDE AND CULTURE IN THE FAR EAST.

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SUMMARY.

The aim of this work is to consider suicide phenomenon in the Far East from a cultural perspective. We describe those suicidal behaviors linked solely to social variables stemming from consolidated traditions, without considering behaviours related to mental disease. A distinction is made between individual and collective suicides described in the literature. The work concludes with some observations on the importance of cultural factors in determining individual behaviours in the Far East.

Key words: suicide, culture, Far-East.

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“Every population has its favourite way of dying and its order of preference very rarely changes.” (Durkheim, 1897).

Etiopathogenetically speaking, suicidal behaviour is currently considered to be the outcome of a series of variously integrated factors that play a more or less important role, depending on circumstances.

Some authors have emphasized the importance of cultural and social influence in explaining the underlying motives for suicide. Durkheim, in particular, advanced a sociological hypothesis of suicide, which he divided into four distinct categories (egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic) (Durkheim, 1897).

Historically, the suicide phenomenon has been assessed and interpreted in different places and regions, yielding reactions that alternate between reprehension and acceptance by the society in question.

Over the ages, suicide in oriental civilisations has often assumed religious and ritual aspects, which were preserved until recently and still exist in some remote geographical areas (such as the practice of suttee – that will be described later - or drowning in the Indian stretch of the River Ganges, or intricate ceremonial preparations for jumping into active volcanoes or for hara-kiri) (Tatarelli, 1992).

In India, for example, followers of Brahmanism in search of nirvana (release from the ills of “Absolute nothingness”) often take their own lives during major religious festivals. The same doctrine spread to Tibet and China under the influence of Buddha Siddhartha Gautama (563 BC).

During this period, suicide was of two types (Moron, 1976):

- 1) By those seeking perfection.
- 2) By those fleeing the enemy.

Another form of suicide, conditioned by cultural and social factors and closely linked to local traditions, was governed by economic motives and/or survival.

A form of tragic, semi-legendary “suicidal erosion” once existed in Japan, whereby elders were taken or accompanied to the mountains when they were no longer able to work or contribute to the survival of their village. This custom was described with masterly skill by the director Imamura in the film, “The ballad of Narayama,” adapted from the novel of the same name by Fukazawa Shichiro (1961)*.

Like other populations, as the Eskimos, ancient Scandinavians and Crow Indians, the inhabitants of Samoa did not condemn, but even encouraged the death of older or ailing members of the community. Each of these cultures more or less explicitly assented to suicide as a way, for example, of saving the community’s nutritional resources or of enabling nomadic societies to travel unhindered by old or sick members (Jamison, 2001).

Another important reason for suicide in Far Eastern countries, was defence of honour. While in Western cultures, suicide is considered a sin or a crime against society, in

Asiatic cultures, it seems to have different connotations and is viewed as an honourable way of saving face and saving one's own family from disgrace (A.P.A., 2004).

Polytheistic religions are well-known to be less disapproving of suicide and, in some cases even elevate it to ritual status or attribute higher motives to it. In Brahman tradition, since the soul is believed to be pervaded by sin until it reaches the spirit of Brahma, various forms of sacred or ritual suicides are practiced, as suttee, drowning in the sacred waters of the Ganges or throwing oneself under wheels of the sacred Juggernaut chariot. Buddhism, too, which considers life an evil from which to be freed, accepts suicide even as a form of protest on special occasions (e.g. the Vietnamese bonzi (Jamison, 2001).

We will now consider a selection of collective and individual suicidal behaviours practised in the Far East, not related to mental pathologies, but performed in the name of particular ideologies or as part of specific cultural practices.

Collective cultural suicides.

One important episode in the history of collective suicides was conducted by the Balinese at the start of the XX century, resembling another by the South-African Xhosa. In 1906, Dutch forces landed in the south of the island of Bali to subjugate its population. The rajas (the heads of the seven small kingdoms into which Bali was divided at the time of the first contact with Europeans) with their wives and courtiers, descended onto the streets, formed a long procession and went to meet the Dutch troops and die. When the Dutch realised they were shooting on men and women who showed no form of resistance, they ceased fire, upon which the Balinese stabbed themselves to death with their own kris (finely crafted steel daggers) (Mead, 1962).

In Japan, the term "seppuku" indicated compulsory collective suicide for anyone losing their honour or identity. On July 5, 1333, the death of eight hundred and sixty warriors was ordered, followed by parents, women and monks. The collective suicide conducted at that time brought about the death of some six thousand people, all from the Hojo clan, who had been defeated in battle (Salvini, 1998).

Individual cultural suicides.

Two particular forms of suicide have been reported in India: suttee and sallekhana.

Suttee.

A sati is defined as a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre or tomb. The Sanskrit term "sati" has the same root as satya (truth or virtuous way) and alludes to a woman who has followed the righteous path of virtue. The most loyal woman in Hindu mythology is the goddess Sati, first wife of Shiva and daughter of Brahma, creator of the universe who, angered at her father for humiliating her

husband, threw herself into the fire and prayed until her death.

In the name of Sati, Indian women sacrifice themselves for their husbands thus displaying, according to traditional culture, a divine example of devotion for their spouse (Waterstone, 1997).

The ritual of self-immolation is referred to as *suttee* and is still a deeply rooted tradition in many parts of rural India and Rajasthan, which is currently the cultural centre of the goddess Sati Mātā.

Historically, the widow's pyre is not typical of India alone. Its presence in Europe is recorded in Greek myths and archaeological documents have been found on its diffusion among the Shiite populations from the steppes of Central Asia. Its existence in India dates back to the first century BC (Dalrymple, 2000).

The practice of self-immolation was quite widespread in India and handprints, as the ones on the walls of the Jodhpur fortress, indicate where the satis sacrificed themselves after their husbands' death in battle.

In the early 1800s cases of *suttee* increased in Calcutta, possibly as a reaction to the great cultural changes imposed by British rule. In 1829, the English governor general, Lord William Bentinck passed a law stating that participation in or contribution to a *suttee* constituted a criminal offence; and so it has remained in Indian legislation.

After the British prohibition of 1829, the practice of *suttee* began to disappear throughout India. But in Rajasthan it still continues today in some of the more remote villages, where at least 40 cases have been recorded since the proclamation of independence. The most recently reported *suttee* took place on 4 September, 1987, in the village of Deorala, where an eighteen-year-old girl was burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The girl, named Roop Kanwar, was a university student who sacrificed herself to the flames while holding her husband's head to her breast. The *suttee* would take place before a crowd in prayer and a votive chapel would then be erected at the place of cremation. A lecturer in cultural anthropology of Chicago University, Richard Shweder (1991) reported Indian public opinion to be divided in judging the event. The detractors retained that the girl must have been forced to do so, or have been under the effect of drugs or out of her mind. Conversely, the supporters considered the girl a heroine, a saint, almost a goddess (Dalrymple, 2000).

To gain some understanding of the practice of *suttee*, Mantovani (1998) invites readers to consider the profound values of Hinduism, in which this type of suicide is rooted. We are aided by Shweder (1991) who stressed that, in the Hindu world, the death of a husband has not only material but also metaphysical meaning. Widows spent their lives seeking to purify themselves by fasting, prayer, isolation and reading sacred texts. Hence, widowhood was interpreted by the Hindu world as punishment for past transgressions. The husband perceived the need to die first to purify himself and thus conciliate the next reincarnation. Cremation with the husband absolved the woman of any blame and guaranteed her eternal union with her husband in subsequent reincarnation cycles. *Suttee* consequently had two positive purposes: it accumulated good karma for future reincarnations and provided a heroic alternative to the life of penance and mortification otherwise awaiting the widow.

Sallekhana.

In India the term *sallekhana* refers to death by starvation in Jainist tradition. Like Hindus and Buddhists, the Jains believe that taking the right action just before death may directly influence subsequent rebirth (*samsara*) and remove negative karma. The ideal death for the Jains is when the mind is able to control the body. Fasting erodes negative karma from the body leaving the mind free to concentrate on spiritual destiny when death is approaching.

In India, death is often likened to sleep before rebirth and it is believed that the body alone dies while the soul is indestructible and immortal. Despite the existence of a number of rites, suicide is generally condemned and the perilous spirits of suicide (*preta*) are believed to live in dark woods beyond the village (Waterstone, 1997).

Suicide in Tikopia

A particular form of suicide, practised by both men and women, was observed in the Polynesian island of Tikopia (Firth, 1961; Inglese, Peccarisi, 1997). This method entailed venturing offshore, the men in canoes, the women swimming alongside. The reasons why the inhabitants of Tikopia decided to take their own lives generally stemmed from disappointments and injustices they had endured. According to Polynesian popular cultural belief, survivors could, however, redeem their social role.

In an old book analysing suicide among the Tikopia islanders, Raymond Firth (1961) affirmed that this act could not be associated with either the inflexibility of the social structure or with any ongoing mental state, since suicide attempters acted in response to a variety of competing values.

The author also stressed that the acts seemed to differ from each other in terms of probability of having a fatal outcome. Only in a few cases was it certain that the person had actually chosen to take their own life, whereas in the majority of cases, death was simply a possibility, since the act was supposed to be an audacious, courageous undertaking aimed at reintegrating the person into the island's social life.

One rather important factor contributing to the outcome of the suicide was the efficiency and readiness with which the rescue vessels were sent out; these had the task of identifying and rescuing sailors or solitary swimmers. In the light of these considerations, it can be said that rather than a real death wish, suicides in Tikopia expressed the desire to take a chance and run the risk.

Another form of suicide has been observed in Tikopia: women would hang themselves in response to the death of their spouse or the village chief.

We can thus surmise that the fundamental value on the island was one of social integration which had a very high price, proportionate to its importance.

According to Lemert (1967), the price of a value is the extent to which other interests have to be sacrificed to comply with that value. In the case in point, the cost of social integration was worth payment with one's own life.

Harakiri.

Bushido was the code of conduct observed in the Kamamura age by noble warriors of

feudal Japan, i.e. the samurai. Practised since the end of the XII century, bushido became the written code in XVI century; it was abandoned in the mid-XIX century with the abolition of feudalism and its influence now survives almost exclusively in the army.

Rather like the widespread rules of chivalry in medieval Europe, bushido - which in Japanese means “the way of the warrior”- was based on virtues as uprightness, patience, frugality, courage, courtesy, sincerity and scrupulous performance of duty: qualities which, once tainted, could only be redeemed by ritual suicide or hara-kiri.

In Japanese, the term hara-kiri refers to ceremonial suicide by disembowelment with a sword, originally restricted to the nobility but later adopted by all social classes.

The term, which in Japanese means “cutting the belly”, was subsequently adopted to indicate all forms of suicide to save honour.

Hara-kiri was initially carried out in feudal Japan by the samurai to avoid the disgrace of being captured. Later, it became a form of indirect execution: nobles whose death was considered essential for the good of the empire, would be ordered by the “mikado” or emperor to perform hara-kiri.

This form of suicide was preceded by a complex ritual. The imperial message was accompanied by a highly ornate sword that was to serve as the suicidal arm. Those ordered to perform hara-kiri were given a specific number of days in which to prepare the ceremony. A platform draped in red was built in the nobleman’s house or in a temple. The nobleman, wearing a ceremonial gown, took his place on the platform, knelt down, prayed and publicly confessed his guilt. He then plunged the sword in the left of his abdomen, cutting from left to right. When the ceremony was over, the corpse was decapitated and the sword returned to the emperor as proof of the death of the nobleman by hara-kiri.

In the case of voluntary hara-kiri, the nobleman redeemed his honour and the family property remained intact; in the event of forced suicide, half of his goods were confiscated by the state.

This form of suicide was also practised as a token of extreme devotion to a deceased superior or by way of a political protest. Some 1500 deaths are said to have come about in this way, approximately half of which were carried out voluntarily.

In 1868 hara-kiri was abolished as a compulsory method of self-execution. More recently, hara-kiri has rarely been chosen as a voluntary form of suicide. However, in latter-day conflicts, including the Second World War, numerous Japanese soldiers used the method to avoid dishonour or capture.

In any event, the Japanese still attribute a positive value to suicide, treating it as an act of reason and, in some cases, as the most honourable way of defending one’s own good name. Indeed, the history of Japan abounds in episodes that demonstrate how the Japanese make an art of dying well (Benedict, 1968).

Hiya or Lian.

Hiya, according to Philippine or Lian, according to Chinese culture, may be translated as “face”. It is a form of suicide carried out to save exactly that, i.e. the face (or honour) of a person and his family, following reprehensible conduct or a

dishonourable act that must be cleansed through sacrifice (A.P.A., 2004).

Kamikaze.

The word kamikaze is derived from two Japanese terms “kami”, which means “god” and “kaze” which means “wind, gale”; the term can thus be translated by the expression “divine wind”, originally referring to the name of the typhoon which in 1281 destroyed a fleet of Mongols during an attempt to invade Japan.

Kamikaze refers to those persons who decide to sacrifice their own life by acts of terrorism.

Kamikazes took their place in the history books during the Second World War. They were Japanese soldiers who deliberately crashed their aircraft, loaded with fuel and explosives, into United States ships. Their first action took place on 5 July 1944 and 17 airplanes were used to attack the USA fleet located in the Marianas. This first mission proved unsuccessful but the technique was repeated on 15 October, 1944, when 5000 planes loaded with explosives hurled themselves against enemy ships.

The kamikaze creed was influenced by “Bushido”, the moral code of the Japanese warrior that emphasized courage and virtue. To become a kamikaze during the Second World War, a soldier had to belong to a special corps.

Nowadays, the kamikaze technique has also been adopted by Muslim populations from the Middle East (suffice it to think of the kamikaze attack of 11 September 2001, which destroyed the towers of the World Trade Center). Integralist groups recruit their death troops from the poorest fringes of the population. They are called “shahid” and are generally young people living in abject poverty, who are promised a glorious future and reminded that unimaginable rewards are bestowed on anyone dying in the name of Allah

Karojisatsu.

People die in Japan due to excess work load, which causes two lethal pathologies: karoshi and karojisatsu.

The former is an organic illness, exploding in the 1980s, that onsets in the case of severe alterations in biorhythm and leads to death by heart attack or brain haemorrhage.

Karojisatsu is, instead, a more recent illness which began to spread in the 1990s and will undoubtedly be discussed in more depth over the next decade. This ailment, too, is due to overwork but in this case death is voluntary since karojisatsu is a particular form of suicide. According to data provided by the Japanese police, work-related suicides number 1,300 per year.

We know that work in Japan is considered far more than a remunerative profession and any work-related subject tends to assume extreme proportions. In the 1960s, according to government figures, the Japanese worked 2,432 hours per year, or almost 50 per week. In 1987, new legislation on working standards reduced weekly working hours to 40, which fell to an average of 38 in 1997.

Japan can boast record working hours but also record suicide rates. Every year,

19/100,000 inhabitants take their lives in Japan, compared to 12 in the United States and 7.5 in the United Kingdom. (Source of data; the Japanese Ministry of Health).

Victims of *karojisatsu* are of varying socio-professional extraction but have in common a working day of 10 or 12 hours, with no days off. This pace of work is quite frequent in Japan, since there are no laws governing overtime: if management so demands, an employee can stay at the office until six o'clock in the morning.

This is what happened in the so-called "Dentsu case", one of the first episodes of suicide in which the magistracy recognized the employer's responsibility. The story dates back to 1990, when Ichiro Oshima was employed by Dentsu Inc., an advertising firm in Tokyo. He was entrusted with such a demanding project that he was forced to stay at the office every day until dawn, sleeping an average of two hours per night. In the summer of 1991, on completing the project, Oshima committed suicide. His parents sued Dentsu Inc, affirming that the death of their son was caused by depression owing to excess overtime. In 1996, the court of Tokyo pronounced a verdict in their favour, subsequently confirmed by the Supreme Court in March 2000, sentencing the advertising agency to payment of a large fine.

This verdict was an important step forward because, for the first time, *karojisatsu* became part of labour legislation; compensation for suicides due to overwork would have been impossible to obtain beforehand.

Concluding remarks.

It is often impossible to interpret the suicide phenomenon without relating it to the culture in which it originates and is upheld. Self-destruction can only be assessed in the light of the historical period in which it occurs, its geographical birthplace and bearing in mind the socio-cultural, religious, ideological and anthropological environment in which it is rooted.

One of the closest cultural links, for instance, is between religious belief and popular tradition. Despite diversity among the major religions and various cultural origins, a certain specificity emerges in the Far East and has been discussed in the presentation.

One example of this specificity is undoubtedly the way in which death is considered. More precisely, the importance given to funeral rites - accompanied in some cases by acts of self-sacrifice (cf. the Toraja in Sulawesi) - the cult of the deceased and generally animistic respect for forefathers in the community of origin.

In Hinduism, in particular, death is never considered definitive and concerns the body and the body only; belief in reincarnation emphasizes the perpetuity of the soul and the belief that the spirit transmigrates from one carrier-body to another. In this case, only correct moral behaviour during one's lifetime will pave the way to better quality in the next life.

Within the same Indian mythology, rather than being in antithesis, life and death are complementary. Vishnu is none other than the reborn god who reappears in various new roles. Shiva, god of destruction and death, is also a deity who creates and preserves and is symbolized by the lingam (phallus), sexual symbol of male and

female energy and thus regeneration and life.

In this type of religious tradition, the very ethics of individual existence become the focal point for understanding the behaviour of an entire society.

Hence in Buddhism, which is more a moral code than a true religion, the objective of all existence is to transcend earthly life and achieve nirvana, entailing detachment from all material things and extinction of desire, opening the way to harmony and happiness.

In Buddhism, as in Hinduism, we can observe extreme spirituality permeating religious practice, and the value attributed to controlling the body and to its constraints. This need for spirituality seems to be another example of specificity in Far Eastern popular tradition.

Another characteristic proper to Orientals is loyalty to own family, own identity, and own nation and its laws. Rather than a religion or system of fixed or conventionally recognized dogmas, Shintoism should be viewed as the way in which society is united by common values and attitudes, in which myths and religious practices are seen as the cord linking things together.

Great emphasis should also be laid on children's traditional, undisputed devotion towards their parents, to whom they owe total obedience, even to the detriment of their own life. Such devotion leads to absolute consideration and respect for Masters and complete loyalty to the Sovereign and fatherland.

Connected with these values is perhaps one last essential characteristic specific to the oriental race: the sense of honour, cornerstone of the individual and community ethical system, that makes a feeling such as shame intolerable.

Any shortcomings in sense of duty and loyalty seem to produce an inability to tolerate the scrutiny or judgement of others. This also occurs in various other cultures, as the West, when an important narcissistic nucleus is wounded (in this case at individual level) and crumbles along with own self-image.

These life philosophies, which often differ greatly from Western mentality, with their rigidity based not so much on dogma as on behaviour and compliance with shared ideas and traditions, tend to emphasize the more altruistic component of suicidal behaviours, according to Durkheim's classification.

Only by taking account of these considerations, which stress the great importance of social variables in human behaviours, can such a definitive act as suicide be judged more fully.

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