

HIS101 (Histories of Violence)

The Nature of Violence in Medieval Europe versus Samurai Japan

By Filip Zaleski; 1008241500

21.11.2021

Ins.: A. Guerson de Oliveira, M Meyerson

T.A.: N. Mara-McKay

Violence played an integral albeit in many ways different role in the functions of Medieval European and Samurai Japanese societies. The perceptions of death and killing in both civilizations were dictated by their religious doctrines, behavioural norms, and socially recognized manifestations of value. The different public view on violence was caused by three fundamental dichotomies visible when scrutinizing European against Japanese primary sources: Christianity against Zen Buddhism as advocates for different interpretations of killing, judicial principles against ritual practises as sources of tolerated ‘violent’ behaviour, and the acquisition of socioeconomic assets against honour as benefits from killing. This paper refers to violence as a noun and an adjective incorporating instances of fatal brutality towards oneself and towards others. The meanings of and responses to violence across both civilizations will be analysed in separate sections before an evaluative conclusion will be drawn.

Both Medieval Europe and Samurai Japan housed highly religious societies where aspects of lifestyle and behaviour (and thus of the use of violence) were decided predominantly through the mandates of faith. Christian doctrine of the time emphasized the idea of an “*ecclesiastical sanctuary*”¹ in which boundaries of accepted social behaviour were considered to not be inventions of the church, but the demands of God. In the *Peace of God* act of 1083, clergy referred to the Christian society as a “*pious institution*”² in which killing inhibited the individual’s duty – “*promising [nonviolence] to God*”. Restricting deadly conflict was thought to be God’s order, the church would merely “*aid*” it and in the midst ‘*suffer many perils*’ from violent opposition. While Christianity aimed for peace, Zen Buddhism aimed for the ultimate attainment of honour, an honourable death. The *Tale of the Heike* demonstrates that political influence or wealth would be

¹ “The Truce of God in Cologne,” in *Urban and the Crusaders*, trans. Dana C. Munro (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Department of History, 1895), eds. Daniel Lord Smail, Kelly Gibson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 153.

² *Truce of God in Cologne*, 155.

unimportant if “*evil karma*”³ and misfortune would prevent an individual from dying honourably; this marked destined suicide. In this case, the Emperor and the Nun of Second Rank view themselves as recipients of a divine doctrine that predetermines evil forces upon them; forces that can only be surpassed through *seppuku* and a sacrificial liberation from the physical world. Warriors satisfying religious obligation through suicide or homicide was a mark of virtue, of bravery; before committing *seppuku* in a pious act, Kanehira exclaims: “*This is how the bravest man in Japan commits suicide!*”⁴

Medieval Europe and Samurai Japan had different systems of determining tolerated behaviour, although in both cases religious ideals drafted a moral code. The Christians in Europe composed a judicial structure deriving predominantly from the religious intention to deter violence, while the Buddhists in Japan controlled and judged their actions without such network; solely in obedience to religious principles, the *bushido*, and the status quo (attempts at a centralized judicial system were vastly unpopular). In Europe, killing outside of knightly ritual was widely regarded as disruptive and causing “*tribulations and difficulties*”⁵ for the church. Movements like *Peace of God* were thought of as “*remedies*”, implying that violence was a pathogen and society required healing from it. As professor Meyerson explained in HIS101’s sixth week, Medieval Europe displayed limited policing and although *Peace of God* spread, it was not an entirely potent “*remedy*” for killing. The presence of a judicial system that employed alternate methods of punishment like excommunication with time painted violent resolution as a last resort. This is visible in Galbert of Bruges’ work on the murder of Charles the Good: when Bertulf desires to break free from servitude to the count, he uses “*every course and every device*”⁶ for this purpose before resorting to violence

³ *Tale of the Heike*, trans. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 378.

⁴ *Tale of the Heike*, 293.

⁵ *Truce of God in Cologne*, 153.

⁶ *Murder of the Charles the Good Count of Flanders*, trans. James Bruce Ross, 1967 (reis., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 242.

and having to accept the “*frightful consequences*” this would bring to himself and his kinsmen. This line in the source displays a general awareness that killing (particularly of one’s superior) was socially condemned. In *Notarized Peace Acts and Related Acts from Marseille*, Jacme decides not to take revenge on Antoni for murdering his wife out of “*fear for the divine preference and heeding*” and the recognition that God does not wish sinners to die, rather they be “*turned around*”⁷. In *Nibelungenlied*, King Gunther abides by the Christian law code to approve Siegfried’s oath denying adultery accusations against him⁸, giving insight into the way this culture tackled disputes. By contrast, ritual customs in Japan normalized widespread administration of violence, making it the primary method of delivering justice. The samurai would reference death as something meant for them because they considered it the only form of justice. Lord Kiso’s and Kanehira’s final decision pertain to deciding where to die, exclaiming that they are wrongly still alive; they “*meant to die*”⁹ in battle. Literature from Samurai Japan provides the historian with a sense of all paths leading inevitably to death; death as the ultimate tool for the resolution of conflict, the first resort. Counsellor Tomomori proposes to “*cut off [Awa no Minbu Shigeyoshi’s] head*”¹⁰ as a means of repelling weakness from the warrior class and keeping society seemingly functional. Moreover, Kaneko no Juro Hidetada says: “*Neither [Yoshimori nor Moritsugi] will emerge the loser from a battle of wild talk and insults,*”¹¹ suggesting that a loser simply needs to emerge; there needs to be a clear result produced by violent combat and the loser must inexorably be killed without judicial trial. When Kanehira persuades Lord Kiso to commit *seppuku*, he effectively depicts samurai society’s obsession with testing warriors’ boundless commitment to honour: “*No matter how*

⁷ “Notarized Peace Acts and Related Acts from Marseille,” in *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader*, eds. Daniel Lord Smail, Kelly Gibson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 421.

⁸ *Nibelungenlied*, trans. Daniel B. Shumway, 1909 (reis., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 273.

⁹ *Tale of the Heike*, 291.

¹⁰ *Tale of the Heike*, 374.

¹¹ *Tale of the Heike*, 364.

glorious a warrior's earlier reputation may have been, an ignoble death means eternal disgrace"¹².

His words outline that one's life was solely judged by how they die – in that moment, all their prior life actions are disregarded. The pursuit of an honourable end explains the determination to die honourably, that is in a circumstance where defeat is certain or sacrifice to one's lord is taken.

The overarching purposes of violence in Medieval Europe against Samurai Japan stem from their differing perceptions of value. In the former, violence was a tool principally used for eliminating economic or political opposition, as such acquiring assets. Galbert of Bruges wrote that knights in his region were motivated by "*money, influence, and persuasion*"¹³, whereas King Gunther stops Siegfried's lawful judgment when convinced that his killing would provide new land¹⁴. In the latter, killing was intensely related to honour. Defeating strong foes would boost one's dignity, while *seppuku* achieved the same by signifying an ultimate control of one's fate. In both civilizations, in fact, violence would exhibit a means of upward social mobility and improve a warrior's public label. The difference lies in that European martial prowess was associated with the ability to acquire maximal amounts of land and resources, while in Japan it was killing formidable foes and gaining supreme martial status. This means that warfare in Japan was oriented less around materialism and more around death as the gateway for an honourable parting from the Buddhist cycle of *samsara*. The cultures' different cherished values reflected different attitudes towards vassalage. The betrayal of Count Charles was motivated by just two and four-mark bribes¹⁵. On the other hand, the samurai disregarded their own death, instead regretting "[*dying*] without seeing [*their*] lord rise to prominence"¹⁶, as in the case of Tsuginobu's demise. Violence was intended as a tool that enabled

¹² *Tale of the Heike*, 293.

¹³ *Murder of the Charles the Good Count of Flanders*, 237.

¹⁴ *Nibelungenlied*, 273-274.

¹⁵ *Murder of the Charles the Good Count of Flanders*, 240.

¹⁶ *Tale of the Heike*, 265.

lords' success instead of vassals' personal gain. Tsuginobu speaks of the '*honour his [sacrifice] would be in [that] world*'.

Scrutinizing sources of Medieval Europe and Samurai Japan provides numerous implications for the intricacies of violence in both societies. Warriors adhered to principles of loyalty and honour, although different ideas for justified violence existed. In Medieval Europe, violence was closely connected to personal or group socioeconomic advantage, while Samurai Japan ritualized death as grandest source of honourable recognition.

References

- “Nibelungenlied” in *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader*, eds. Daniel Lord Smail, Kelly Gibson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). First published 1909 by Houghton-Muffin Co.
- “Notarized Peace Acts and Related Acts from Marseille.” In *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader*, eds. Daniel Lord Smail, Kelly Gibson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- “The Murder of Charles the Good Count of Flanders” in *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader*, eds. Daniel Lord Smail, Kelly Gibson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). First published 1967 by Harper and Row.
- The Tale of the Heike*. Translated by Helen Craig McCullough. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- “The Truce of God in Cologne” in *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader*, eds. Daniel Lord Smail, Kelly Gibson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). First published 1895 by University of Pennsylvania Department of History.