

## More Suicidal than the Samurai?

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The Ancient Samurai had their *hara-kiri*; the Ancient Indians had their *suttee* but I believe the ceremonial suicide practices of the precolonial Yorubas, especially during and shortly after the Oyo Empire i.e. circa 1400-1886 A.D. rivalled them. To commit murder was regarded as highly disgraceful and reprehensible [1] but to commit suicide, under many circumstances, was regarded as honorable! There is no doubt the precolonial Yoruba were obsessed with “honorable” suicide. Right up to 1893 when they fully came under the control of the British Empire suicide was celebrated and not just among the military classes but among royalty and common people.

1. The king of the Oyo empire had a council of noblemen called the *Oyo Mesi* with the power to reject the king; whereupon the king had to commit suicide.
2. Upon the king committing suicide his first born son had to commit suicide too.
3. Wives of the king and other members of the royal family sometimes had to commit suicide when the king died.
4. The head of the Oyo army with a title called *Aare Ona Kakanfo* had to return from war victorious within 60 days or commit suicide
5. Yorubas fought an entire war to ban royal suicide between 1860 and 1862 [The Ijaye war] and ironically there were suicides during this war!

But why this obsession with suicide? Suicides were celebrated with fanfare and music, pomp and dancing. I believe it had to do with the traditional religion of the Yoruba. Precolonial Yorubas worshipped 401 Gods. Two of the most prominent of these were Sango the God of thunder and his wife Oya. Sango was a controversial king who was deified after he hung himself. According to Yoruba religion those who mocked him for killing himself were struck by lightning as revenge

from the god Sango. Sango’s wife the Goddess Oya also committed suicide by drowning and the river where she did this is still called “Oya” today [the portion of the River Niger in south western Nigeria]. Having two deities who had reached exalted status via suicide made suicide appear honorable and highly desirable. The proof of this hypothesis is that Yorubas of today [who are overwhelmingly Christian or muslim] detest and abhor suicide. And the very few suicides that do happen today are hushed up, denied and swept under the carpet. Nobody celebrates suicide among the Yoruba of today.

Eyewitness Account of A Particularly Sad Mass Suicide In The Year 1854 During The Ara War

*“A band of about 1,600 [one thousand six hundred] young men choosing death [to surrender].....put the muzzle of their loaded guns in their mouths, pulled the trigger with their great toe and shattered their brains to pieces. The great and wealthy Lefioji.....with his own jackknife cut his own throat. His eldest son met him weltering in his blood, life not extinct, being unable to complete the deed....put an end to father’s groans, loaded the gun afresh and shattered his own brains! [2]*

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