

## The Ethics of Suicide: A Historical Sourcebook

In *The Ethics of Suicide: A Historical Sourcebook*, to appear with Oxford University Press, Dr. Battin and I are exploring global and historical ideas of the ethics of suicide. This huge sourcebook will provide a philosophical and historical backdrop to the vastly different ways humans have understood the ethical issues in suicide, ranging from prohibiting it absolutely to requiring it occasionally. This backdrop will be of general historical interest as well as expanding ideas and assumptions in the current philosophical debate on suicide.

While substantiating and clarifying work that has already been done on this book and locating sources for inclusion, we have been particularly focused on historical African cultures. The texts we have focused on have been mainly reports and memoirs of Christian missionaries who were among the first to keep a written record of these cultures. Most of the texts we are examining describe the cultures of the Ga, Ashanti, and Yoruba peoples.

For example, an 1897 account of the historical Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, compiled by Rev. Samuel Johnson, details an elaborate culture involving suicide. Most accounts by both Christianized natives and foreign

such texts. Rev. Johnson's account sketches many complex Yoruba social practices surrounding suicide. He records many royal suicides stemming from the idea that a king rejected by his people had to die, but it was sacrilege for anyone to lay a hand on him, thus he was required to kill himself. This tradition dated back to one of the earliest historical kings, Sango, who was later deified as a part of Yoruba religion. Along with this practice, kings appointed close cabinets of people who were to wear "death cloths". These elaborate silk garments gave them legal impunity while they were alive, but required that they commit suicide when their king's reign ended.

My research continues with similarly interesting finds in accounts of Middle Passage slaves and a general's memoir of Napoleon's attempted suicide.



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