



PROJECT MUSE®

Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The
Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History (review)

Jack Goody

The Journal of Japanese Studies, Volume 30, Number 1, Winter 2004,
pp. 203-206 (Review)

Published by Society for Japanese Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2004.0013>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55102>

scene or of the images of the people within. What are their names and where exactly do they live? What is the relation of boy to woman? Why is the boy crying? Is it because he has learned of the massacre of his ancestors at the hands of Japanese soldiers (unlikely given his apparent age)? Is it because Nakamura-san, the leader of the children's association, just cracked him around the ear to bring order to the dialect rally practice? Does he miss his schizophrenic mother who has gone to the main island of Okinawa for modern psychiatric treatment? Is he being deprived of an afternoon snack? Or is he simply upset at having his photo taken? The point here is that the boy and the woman are, ironically, objectified in this photo in a way that runs counter to Allen's purpose in the text, which in turn alerts the reader to the selective setting of scenes in this or any other ethnography.

But don't judge this book by its cover. Despite these few lapses, Allen is fully aware of the problems of trying to tackle the issue of identity and of the difficulties facing ethnographic representation. Given these inherent difficulties, he does a marvelous job—perhaps the best possible—representing Kumejima to the reader and demonstrating convincingly the concentric and overlapping circles of identity that Kume people inhabit and the local knowledges they produce and consume. And he maintains an admirably accessible level of sophistication while doing so. Collectively, the well-selected and engaging cases Allen examines in Kumejima go a long way to correct simplified pictures of the complex place that is Okinawa. That fact alone makes the book a must-read for anyone interested in the place. There are many more sites throughout Okinawa Prefecture that invite similar treatment, and other researchers across disciplines would do well to take their inspiration from this book.

Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History. By Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002. xvii, 411 pages. \$45.00, cloth; \$20.00, paper.

Reviewed by

JACK GOODY

St. Johns College, Cambridge

The lives of Japanese “student” soldiers who took part in the kamikaze attacks on U.S. warships in the Pacific during World War II is the fascinating and original topic that forms the subject of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's latest book. She shows very clearly from the diaries and letters of these combatants that many of them were highly educated, sensitive, young men who

were well read in European philosophy and literature; some proclaimed themselves Marxists, others Christian, many liberal. Few belonged to the extreme right or subscribed to the ideology that they were fighting (dying) for the emperor; their patriotism was of a more “rational” variety, mediated by their country, their families, their friends (especially their classmates).

In order to approach this problem, the author has had to have a profound knowledge of Japanese culture and history, which she develops to great effect in chapter two as well as in all of part one on the symbolism of the cherry blossom before the Meiji period. But she has also to be very familiar with the extensive European literature and the philosophy the students read in several languages, especially German. This in itself was a massive task.

The book makes a number of theoretical points. Taking issue with writers such as Perry Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm on nationalism as an aspect of modernization, she takes pains to distinguish between nationalism, which is “collective and institutional, orchestrated by the political and intellectual leaders” and thus predicated upon the state; cultural nationalism, which is nonpolitical and intellectual; as well as patriotism, which refers to “a person’s identification of him/herself as a member of a social group” (p. 248). This analytical distinction is useful to her in looking at writings by the students, in which they are singularly free of any belief that they are dying, as die they must, for the emperor. But, in practice, patriotism and nationalism in these senses are very much intermingled as far as action is concerned. Indeed, the fascinating aspects of the students’ situation are the ambiguity they felt about dying (p. 281) and the fact that “these men ‘volunteered’ to reproduce the ideology *in action* while defying it *in their thoughts*” (p. 300).

The author’s answer to this paradox is that the students were subject to “ideological manipulation” (p. 302). The fascist state “refashioned” the symbolism “so that the same blooming cherry blossoms came to stand for metamorphosed souls of fallen soldiers—after death” (p. 260). Apart from the rituals surrounding the Yasukuni shrine to dead warriors, there is little evidence of how “the state” manipulated these students, who are constantly referred to as agents. From my standpoint, it would perhaps be preferable to refer to them as actors, indicating that they were not only passive agents but active actors. It is true that if we see them as such, there is yet more of a problem about the gap between thoughts and actions. Why did they go along with an ideology in which they did not “believe”? The author refers at times to other fascist powers in World War II that got the same compliance from their soldiers, whether students or others. Those soldiers faced not the certain death of the kamikaze pilots, but at least a major uncertainty about their fate, whether they would live or die.

It is the general supposition that things were different on the allied side because they were fighting a “just war,” which is presumably why the author

does not make such comparisons. But the fascists too thought they were fighting for a worthy cause. Even though some of the Japanese students may have intellectually accepted Japan to be already defeated, they did so in the hope that a new Japan and a new Asia would emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes, which would be the ashes of capitalism and materialism too.

But what is it that persuades the young they should fight? How do they come to recognize the justness of the cause—against Iraq, for example? The question of death is perhaps less pronounced in that situation because the overwhelming predominance of force on one side and the use of distance weapons mean less likelihood of harm coming to the attacking side. Why did men join the army and volunteer for such mortal missions? Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney here brings in the notion of the use of aesthetics by the military (“the militarization of aesthetics”) and in particular she focuses on the use of cherry blossom symbolism (essentially Japanese as compared to the use of the plum blossom by the Chinese) and its changing significance over time. The range of meanings of this flower, circling around life and death, was manipulated by the state in order to get these men to sacrifice their lives for the emperor. The formulation is mine; hers is obviously at greater length and with more subtlety. But although this could form a possible scenario, the author almost never substantiates how the state carried out this manipulation. The actors appear to have been more active than that, not following “fascist” instructions but willingly engaging in military matters.

Flower symbolism undoubtedly helped them along the way. But the cherry blossom itself, in any of its myriad forms and meanings, hardly seems to have been the “critical” factor. For this, one surely has to look at similar situations in which young men gave (or frittered) away their lives in other contexts. I do not myself believe that motivations on the one side (“fascist”) were totally different from those of others (“democratic”). I can well think that Japanese youth believed that it was right to resist French domination in Indochina, British in India, Burma, and Malaysia, Dutch in Indonesia, Russian on the Kamchatka Peninsula, the Americans advancing in the Pacific; that their militarism was necessary to combat the aggression of others, past and present; that what was required was a “new Asia” in which Japan played a leading role in the turning back of the Europeans.

The author draws a strong contrast between the leaders of totalitarian regimes, whose “sins against humanity should never be exonerated” (p. 304), and the pilots who were the subjects of the monstrous acts of Japanese imperialism in drawing these young men full of dreams and idealism to their deaths. There was of course something special about the kamikaze pilots, but to regard them simply as the subjects of “ideological manipulation” (p. 302) is surely a simplification. They accepted their fate, even “volunteered” for it, at least in a limited way. How different were they from the many young officers, students like them, who went to an almost certain

death in the trenches of World War I and in the fighters of the Battle of Britain? We would of course claim they acted out of commitment to a cause in a just war. But what about the many from Britain and the United States who are, as I write, undertaking a war in Iraq that a majority of outsiders does not see at all in the same light?

Much of the book is concerned with the cherry blossoms whose symbolism the author sees as central to Japanese concepts of their country (and their patriotism) and the focus of which shifted to the death of young pilots who fell to the ground like petals. The concentration is on aesthetics and symbols, especially their emotive power and polysemic nature, but the author is more concerned with the failure of symbols to communicate (on reconnaissance) because of the large field of meaning they represent. For the pilots, the cherry blossom was the means by which "they confronted their responsibility to Japan"; it was "the flower with which they think and feel" (p. 282). Aesthetics (a concept to which the author frequently resorts, including in the title) seems to refer to the appreciation of beauty (p. 285) and particularly to the cherry blossom, even when it becomes a symbol of death. I take it the "militarization of aesthetics" in the title refers to the appropriation of the cherry flower for military purposes, but the book surely shows the shortcomings of this appropriation that fails to hide the negative aspects of the military life, including aspects of death itself. To be engulfed in the cherry blossom would be to disregard some of the more intellectual aspects of these intellectuals, as well as the suffering they partly chose to undergo.

I say "chose" because whatever pressures there were, external or internal, the students were volunteers, they had alternatives, as in many other cases. They would scarcely see themselves as manipulated by the state, nor yet by their families, who often objected to their course of action. Conscientious objectors were few, far fewer than in many other places. They went to war, and volunteered for kamikaze, partly because of patriotism, of love of one's birthplace and hence of oneself. But very largely they volunteered because of their peer group, which allowed itself to get caught up in the recruitment process. Once on the parade ground, one had entered a "closed institution." That is not too different anywhere. Under a mass call-up, the students (and others affected) consider themselves as having a higher motivation than those "professionals" in the army for a job; they are carried along by the spirit (including the emulation) of their cohort as well as by the model of past wars and a locally based sense of duty ("patriotism").

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney has written a fine and original book that raises these questions and others too. In particular it throws a completely new light, for non-Japanese readers, on one of the most startling "differences" in World War II, only to show that there were many similarities in behavior under "fascist" and "democratic" regimes.