Kamikaze, Cherry Blossom, and Nationalism

By Margaret Sleeboom

Drawing on diaries, unpublished in English, Ohnuki-Tierney provides a lucid discussion of the views and motives of the kamikaze pilots (tokkotai, or ‘special attack corps’). She presents them as idealist romantics who sacrificed their confused lives for the country they held dear. Ohnuki-Tierney describes their patriotism as a product of a cultural context of a complex interpenetration between global intellectual, political, and military threats from the West, and their own Japanese cultural traditions, which were themselves also the products of interactions between the local and the global (p. 49).

Ohnuki-Tierney’s book is divided into four parts. Part one focuses on the meaning and symbolism of the cherry blossom, part two on the militarization of the masses since the nineteenth century up to World War Two, and part three on the way in which young men ‘volunteered’ to defend their country against American invaders. Part four examines how the state managed to change the conceptions of emperor and cherry blossom, the latter being a Japanese master trope of imperial nationalism at the beginning of the Meiji period. Ohnuki-Tierney locates the power of (national) symbols and rituals in méconnaissance, a term borrowed from Jacques Lacan, referring to the communication absence occurring when people do not share a meaning but derive different meanings from the same symbols and rituals.

The author explores how state nationalism is developed and how it succeeds in being ‘accepted’ by ‘ordinary’ individuals, who, rather often, embrace as ‘natural’ basic changes in culture and society initiated by political, military, and intellectual leaders. The student pilots all had their own ideas and ideals. Among them were members of Japan’s Romantic Movement and of Cogito, a platform that became closely tied with ultra-nationalism, Marxists, utopian humanitarians, and Christians. Distinguishing between the patriotism of pro-patriot, which was espoused by individual pilots, and state nationalism, which was fostered from above, promoting pro-patriot (romantic patriotism) and patriotic (country, p. 47). Ohnuki-Tierney argues that, though each of the five discussed pilots reproduced the latter ideology in action, they reproduced it in tune to thought.

Japanese cherry blossom and the West

One aim of the book is to examine the power of aesthetic politics for purposes, using the state’s manipulation of cherry blossom and patriotism as a case. According to Ohnuki-Tierney the notions of the state and various ideologues, which motivated tokkotai to fly for their country, were both imported from the West. Thus, the pilots were tricked by the state into sacrificing their lives: ‘When the “general will”, transformed into the cherry blossom, and the imperial and national Japanese philosophies and ideologies explain their behaviour. The sharp distinctions between state and country, nationalism and patriotism, and official kill and romantic self-sacrifice, make Japanese patriotic tokkotai victims of the West. Indeed the Rest’s Western concepts of nationalism, Western ideologies and philosophies, and during and after the Pacific War, seem to have rather too much to answer for. It seems the book lacks data on tokkotai attitudes toward Asia, on the views of non-intellectual tokkotai about sacrificing their lives, on the conditions under which the diaries were written, and on the intellectuals responsible for state policies. Thus, in describing the minds of the student-pilots, Ohnuki-Tierney argues that the Japanese philosopher Tanabe Hajime (a devout Christian) was influential, and most extensively read. But she does not refer to his Logic of Species, which is still cursed today by Chinese intellectual nationalism as a racist basis for Japanese imperialism (Bian Chongdao 1988). Neither does she refer to the role of the extreme right, which, in the 1980s and 1990s, converted former tokkotai haves on the southern island of Kyushu (Chiran and Bansei) into popular tourist spots. Furthermore, the Yasukuni Shrine is presented as the resting-place of the souls of the tokkotai, separate from the neighbouring souls of class-A war criminals, still celebrated by the far right. Moreover, no mention is made of the post-war role of class-consciousness of pacifist national identity in Japan (Ori 2001).

Ulterior motives

The tokkotai diaries have been much discussed in Japan of the 1990s, but only sparsely in English (cf. Sasaki 1997). Though it aims to alter the current image of kamikaze, it does so by focusing on the intellectual elite who represent only one-sixth of all Okinawa tokkotai (Sasaki 1997:55). Furthermore, Ohnuki-Tierney ascribes the truly amazing number of longevity diaries left by tokkotai pilots to the importance of ‘writing’ as a mode of communication in Japanese culture (p.189), not to their academic background. More seriously, the behaviour of the romantic pilots remains mysterious due to a lack of contextual analysis. The meaning of ‘voluntary’ recruitment, the influence of cherry blossom and nationalist, self-sacrifice, state propaganda, and education are insufficiently linked to the reading of the diaries. Finally, I doubt whether Ohnuki-Tierney has done the image of the kamikaze any favour. Whereas she provides soldiers following their state orders to fight a war they believe to be unjust, the soldiers here described, who believe their war to be justified for reasons (rooted in religi-ous, philosophical, and utopian ide-ologies) at variance with those of the state, are not likely to receive any sympathy.

References
- Dr Margaret Sleeboom is a research fellow and Director of the Socio-Genetic Margi- nalization in Asia Programmes (SNAP) at the International Institute for Asian Studies. m.sleeboom@let.leidenuniv.nl

Poem picture in the form of a coiled snake in a seven- tenth-century work on Telugu poetics, discussed by V. Narayana Rau in his chapter in Literary Cultures in History. The poem is a prayer to Krishna and con- tains a large number of his names.