

This fascinating, authoritative
book is the finest account we yet
have of Japan's unsung heroes . . .
It also offers insights into the
Al-Qaeda warriors.
- Richard Overy



KAMIKAZE

JAPAN'S SUICIDE GODS

ALBERT AXELL AND HIDEAKI KASE

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Japan's Suicide Gods

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To die voluntarily in the prime of life is unnatural.
The very thought of death is unbearable for any
person who is sound of mind. But these youths
were sound of mind . . .

The authors



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NOTE TO READERS

The name Kamikaze ('Divine Wind') derives from the thirteenth century when Kublai Khan's Mongol warriors – actually Mongol-Koryo (Korean) allied forces – twice attempted to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281 but failed when Mongol fleets were destroyed by what appeared to be heaven-sent typhoons – or Kamikaze on both occasions. In fact the first demand for Japan's capitulation was brought by Koryo royal messengers before the first attempted invasion. The word Kamikaze gained further currency after October 1944 when a Special Attack, or Kamikaze, Corps was created to destroy an Allied fleet east of the Philippine Islands, and later against American and British naval forces in the Okinawa area. The full name was 'Divine Wind Special Attack Force'. Tokko or 'Special Attack' is an abbreviation for *tokubetsu kogeiki* and is a euphemism for suicide attack. Strictly speaking, the only real Kamikazes were the crash-dive pilots first organized in the Philippines by Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi in October 1944. But the name was later applied to other Japanese suicide units. On these pages, the word Kamikaze is used for both Army and Navy suicide units and is sometimes replaced by the words Special Attack Force, or simply *tokko*. Actually, the name Kamikaze was pronounced *Shimpu* by the Navy when the first series of crash-dive attacks were launched. In the Japanese language, the *kanji* (or Chinese characters) can be pronounced different ways. Thus, *kami* is also pronounced *shin*. *Kami* is old-style Japanese while *shin* was an adoption of the ancient Chinese pronunciation. Ditto *kaze*. In 1960s Japan, Kamikaze became a metaphor for daredevils, reckless taxi drivers and breakneck skiers.

Taiwan and Kyushu figure prominently on these pages. During the war there were key Kamikaze bases on Taiwan and even more dotting the island of Kyushu, considered the cradle of Japanese civilization. Taiwan and Kyushu are roughly the same size, each being slightly larger than Belgium or equal in size to the US states of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined.

PREFACE

After the terrorist blitz on America in September 2001, the human race was forced to confront the most radical face of fanaticism – suicide. In this case, making use of human weapons. The shock was greater because commercial jets loaded with passengers were turned into manned missiles. People everywhere, confronted with a primal fear, wondered if a replica of the Kamikaze crash-dive zealots of the Second World War had suddenly appeared to threaten the peace of civilized states.

The reaction of Western experts to suicide hijackers and youthful suicide bombers in the new millennium was similar to that of Anglo-American witnesses to Kamikaze crashes in the Pacific: ‘We haven’t seen something like this before!’

But stereotypes of the Kamikaze had earlier come to the fore, in May 1972, when three members of a suicidal terrorist group calling themselves the Japanese Red Army landed at Tel Aviv’s airport and opened up with sub-machine guns, killing some 25 and wounding about 80, mainly Christian pilgrims on a visit to the Holy Land. (Two of the assassins were fatally shot.) Ten years later a suicidal Muslim driving a truck full of explosives crashed into a US Marine billet in Lebanon, killing over 200 Marines. It was viewed by many as a Kamikaze-style mission.

Even the Russians, burdened by the ongoing Chechnya problem, spoke of their nemesis as Kamikazes. Example: an article in the *Moscow Times* of July 15, 2000, citing a suicidal incident in Chechnya, said that ‘the Kamikaze driver’ had crashed his truck loaded with explosives through a barrier, killing 40 policemen and wounding 74 others.

It is therefore no surprise that some experts claim that today’s suicide bombers are the direct heirs of Kamikaze ideology and spirit. After the ‘Nine-Eleven’ attacks in America, many Japanese citizens bared their resentment against Western newspapers who equated the suicide hijackers with America’s (and Britain’s and Australia’s) *bête noire* of the Pacific War: the Kamikaze (‘Divine Wind’) flyers. ‘Kamikaze Terrorist

Attacks' and 'Kamikaze Blitz on the USA', screamed headlines in Europe and America, evoking images of the death-rain caused by suicide planes diving against Allied naval armadas in the Pacific. Other newspapers spoke of 'The Faces of Kamikaze Terrorists' and published photos of suspected hijackers. Eminent Japanese, including those critical of sending pilots on suicide missions in the Pacific War, protested, saying it was groundless to make these comparisons. They were correct: the real Kamikaze flyers were far from being terrorists. In the first place, the intended victims of Kamikaze sorties had an equal opportunity to defend themselves. Second, many US warships not only defended well but, with radar giving advance warning of danger, took countermeasures that worked so well that masses of Special Attack – or Kamikaze – planes were shot out of the sky, causing sailors to liken many an encounter to 'a turkey shoot'. (But all told, the skill and effectiveness of Kamikaze missions created a deep psychological shock among Allied forces.) Third, thousands of Kamikaze pilots, many of them novices with only a few hours' flying experience, missed their target altogether, ending up in a watery grave.

There were some superficial parallels between Japan's Kamikaze flyers and the Al-Qaeda activists willing to sacrifice themselves. Both volunteered to die for their sacred beliefs. Both shared a vision of self-righteousness and divine punishment to enemies. Both meditated on the carnage to come. Their preparation for the mission in hand involved both physical and spiritual means and the strength of each lay in their enthusiastic seeking of death. A survey has shown that, like the superior education level of many Kamikaze pilots, a high percentage of Al-Qaeda faithful, perhaps as many as 80 per cent, have attended college or university. And (also like the Kamikaze) there has been no shortage of volunteers.

More striking was the existence of written instructions, some of them beatific in tone, guiding the faithful of each organization step by step to the final aerial death-dive. The following excerpts from these writings are given consecutively, the Kamikaze entries taken from a top-secret manual for pilots that is hardly known in the West;¹ the parallel entries are taken from hand-written documents found in the luggage of one of the zealots of September 2001:

- 'When diving into the enemy, shout at the top of your lungs: "*Hissatsu!*" (Sink without fail!)
- 'When you strike, shout "Allah is great" because this shout strikes terror in the hearts of the infidels.'

*

- ‘Be always pure-hearted and cheerful. A loyal fighting man is a pure-hearted and filial son. . . . Do your best. Every deity and the spirits of your dead comrades are watching you intently.’ [All Kamikaze pilots were told they would become gods at death.]
- ‘Purify your heart and clean it from all earthly matters. . . . Remember the verse that if God supports you, no one will be able to defeat you.’

*

- ‘To live and be surrounded by Imperial blessings. To die and become one of Japan’s guardian deities and, therefore, receive special honours in the temple.’ [A choice that was presented to Japanese pilots.]
- ‘Everybody hates death, fears death. But only those, the believers who know the life after death and the rewards after death, would be the ones who will be seeking death.’

Psychologists, commenting on the events of September 2001, said the framework of war was a very common reaction in America; that to make sense of something so incredible one had to compare it to something familiar. In the USA exclamations such as ‘It’s just like Pearl Harbor!’ were often heard. The explosive shock of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 had been followed by another – the sinking of the British heavy cruiser *Repulse* and the allegedly unsinkable battleship *Prince of Wales* in the South China Sea a few hours later. A survivor, Sub-Lieutenant Geoffrey Brooke, who was aboard *Prince of Wales* when it was fatally hit by bombs and torpedoes, said the shock waves caused by Pearl Harbor and the sinking of the two warships ‘equalled’ that felt by the loss of thousands of human lives in the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, and the hundreds killed and injured at the Pentagon.

In fact, though, this parallel is flawed. At Pearl Harbor one nation’s armed forces had bombed those of another, thereby widening a war that Adolf Hitler had begun.

Among Japanese citizens who were offended by the comparisons of the Kamikaze with the hijackers were many war veterans, including two pilots who had themselves volunteered to join Kamikaze units in their youth but survived when the war ended and all suicide missions halted. Both men said that after the media comparisons of the September 11 events, they wished to correct some misunderstandings.

Takeo Tagata, who was 86 years old in the second year of the new millennium, became an instructor of Kamikaze pilots before he

himself in the last days of war decided to join their ranks. During dogfights he had often outwitted less experienced American and British pilots whom he encountered in the skies, mainly over China and Taiwan. He is categorical: 'Tokko [Kamikaze] flyers did not kill a single non-combatant. They fought in the air, man to man.'

Hichiro Naemura, an entrepreneur in the Osaka area, is a former Army pilot, who is five years younger than Tagata. He was upset by what he termed 'hurtful comparisons' between Japan's Kamikaze volunteers and those who destroyed New York's World Trade Center towers. Naemura, like Tagata, a former instructor of Kamikaze pilots, declared: 'The Special Attack [suicide] pilots did not in any way violate international law or the Geneva War Convention. They were absolutely not terrorists.'

We have met these hardy survivors and some of their wartime exploits are recorded in these pages.

Other citizens, who vented their dissatisfaction with the Western media in its references to the Kamikaze phenomenon included the Governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, who is also a popular novelist and controversialist. In defending the Kamikaze pilots, the governor offered a contentious analogy of the September events, saying that the use of atomic bombs in August 1945 against Japan was a terrorist act. Here is a quotation from Ishihara, well known for the bluntness of his speech. (He was once chided by US Senator Max Baucus for being an 'America-basher'): 'The September 11 terrorist attacks with their indiscriminate massacre of civilians did not resemble at all the Kamikaze attacks in the Pacific War; they resembled the indiscriminate nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'

On the other hand, some observers in the West claim that only by using extreme measures could Japan be forced into surrender. Britain's Bertrand Russell contended that it was the samurai code of Bushido – one of the engines of Kamikaze education – that saw surrender to the enemy as ignominy; that this was also a reason why Japan never ratified the Geneva Prisoner of War Convention of 1929.

Professor Emeritus of Tokyo University Keiichiro Kobori agreed with the Governor of Tokyo, saying that the West often viewed the Kamikaze pilots unfairly. 'The Pearl Harbor attack, like the Kamikaze attacks,' he said, 'was strictly limited as to targets: warships and military facilities.' He added: 'I can say with authority that the personal lives of the Kamikaze pilots were consonant with Kishido [Western-style chivalry].' By which he presumably meant that members of the Kamikaze corps, a large number of whom were college-educated, were of a higher order of warrior.

Finally, the authors have attempted in this book to provide readers with some uniquely Japanese perspectives on war, culture, suicide and religion.

Field Marshal William Slim, who was wartime Supreme Allied Commander SE India, said of his opponents: 'Everyone talks about fighting to the last man, but only the Japanese actually do it.' After the Pacific fighting was over, Imperial Navy Captain Rikihei Inoguchi, who was a key participant in drawing up the initial strategy for suicide attacks, told US interrogators: 'If our wish is for a peaceful world, it would be well to study the spirit of the Kamikaze pilots . . .'

NOTE

¹ See Chapter 6, The Suicide Manual.



Map 1 The Philippines and South-east Asia



Map 2 Key Kamikaze bases in Japan

INTRODUCTION

JAPAN: THE NAKED TRUTH

The foreigner visiting Japan today is astonished at how seriously the Japanese take the work ethic, even the idea of punctuality. The latter amounts to a national obsession. For instance, trains run on time, the average delay in the year 2001 being less than 60 seconds. The population of Japan is receptive to such lofty principles as character-building and education-throughout-life which in the work place is expressed by such slogans as ‘Don’t spare yourself!’ and ‘Exercise self-control!’

Certain character traits stand out that are impressive and seem entirely fitting for a swollen population hemmed into four relatively small islands. Self-discipline, compulsory for a society to function properly, is evident. So is the pursuit of consensus and the shunning of loud and boisterous public behaviour. This is combined with lusty involvement of citizens in social activities like attendance at traditional festivals. All of this together ensures order within communities, deepens a sense of togetherness and, not least, eases daily stress. Since the Japanese enjoy a longevity that is according to United Nations statistics the highest in the world (in 1998 the average lifespan for men was 77.6, for women 84.6);¹ since contemporary Japan is sometimes called a well-oiled machine; since Japanese society has been described by experts as being ‘subversion-proof’ – there would seem to be good reason, if not to take the Japanese as a model, at least to learn more about them.

Is consensus perhaps the key to understanding Japan's post-war accomplishments? Whatever, in the spring of 2002, the well-known peace-maker and former president of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, seeming to take a page from Japan's success story, called on the USA to build a 'true multilateral consensus' among leading nations in order to prevent new Nine-Elevens and other forms of global terrorism, not to mention solving the problems of economic inequality and environmental degradation.

An American expert has called Japan 'the largest mononational State in the world'.² This has advantages. There are no insurgent minorities flaunting exclusivity, nor aggressive religions that may cause a cleavage in society. Japan's economic wizards have an addiction to long-term planning. Some overseas visitors are shocked to learn that the portfolios of Japanese officials are crammed with detailed blueprints, many of which stretch 20 years into the future – or longer. Of no minor importance, Japan enjoys universal literacy and its citizens are (despite a flood of mind-numbing distractions, similar to Western nations) voracious readers.

Most generalizations about Asia stop at the Japanese border. Within it, the people have been unique in the capacity of retaining an individuality and a social system set up many centuries ago. An anonymous observer is probably near the truth in describing Japan as a combination of 'benevolent paternalism and an innate communal line of thought'. Such people are not easily cowed, or pushed into accepting alien imports, whether they be ideologies or religions. An example is Christianity which has tens of thousands of followers in Japan but has been unable to make more significant inroads despite the vigour of missionaries. But the Japanese are equally unlikely to be tempted by left-wing ideologies such as 'communism' – if anyone can say in the new millennium exactly what this means.

Over a century ago the Reverend W.E. Griffis made this observation about the Japanese: 'In moral character, the average Japanese is frank, honest, faithful, kind, gentle, courteous, confiding, affectionate, filial, loyal. Love of [blunt] truth for its own sake, chastity, temperance, are not characteristic virtues.'

The European editor of the *Japan Mail* noted, also a century ago, that the Japanese had a penchant for nicety of detail, being meticulous to a fault. When that editor was travelling through various provinces in Japan, he noticed that the distances along roads were given not only in feet, but also in inches. Such exactitude has disappeared on Japan's roads. But many traditional characteristics remain.

It is no secret that the qualities that have helped make Japan a world economic power and plucky trading partner – such as energy, precision,

commitment, discipline, daring – were also those that made Japan an implacable opponent at war. (British Major-General Julian Thompson, says in a review of *The Full Monty: Montgomery of Alamein*, published in London, that during the war ‘the Japanese were man-for-man more formidable than the best of the Germans’.) If there is a blot on the Japanese landscape it is probably the level of work-related stress. Studies show that one in 12 suicides are work-related, that on average there are over 30,000 suicides annually.

With the passage of time, historians, journalists and film makers – many of them conservative in their thinking – have taken up the war theme, with the result that films of a provocative nature have been produced, including some which challenge the verdict of the International War Crimes Tribunal that in 1948 passed sentence on Japan’s defeated national leaders. And – an indication of the new era – in recent years a number of well-appointed museums have opened, dedicated to the memory of Kamikaze pilots. In the process, a number of Kamikaze survivors (those whose sorties were cancelled when the war ended) have become sought-after speakers on the domestic lecture circuit.

The Kamikaze, in the words of one British naval witness, were ‘unlike anything that was known’ in all the wars of the Western world. In addition, there were the ‘human bombs’ called *Ohka* (‘Cherry Blossoms’) and the manned torpedoes known as *Kaiten* (‘Reversing Fortune’) – pitiless weapons that sentenced their users to untimely death.

For the younger generation, the Kamikaze phenomenon is a curiosity from the past; to the older it is a reminder of a cruel epoch. In retrospect, there was probably a bad conscience on the part of the High Command in organizing and carrying out Special Attack – or suicide – operations. In fact, training and execution were left to front-line units. Moreover, there was little top-level guidance until the late spring of 1945, some six months after the Kamikaze sorties were begun. Meanwhile, in today’s Japan, not a few citizens who winced at the squandering of the lives of thousands who joined the Special Attack units now feel free to regard the fallen pilots as selfless heroes.

A Kamikaze sortie was different from the usual battle scene in which a doomed soldier, fighting for his life, is surrounded by an enemy and determines to die in their midst. In a crash-dive attack, a flyer took off from a base far from the pandemonium of battle. Before doing so he had time to write final letters and, usually, a farewell poem. He may even have left a lock of hair and nail cuttings as mementoes for his family. Then, inside the cockpit, he forgot himself as he aimed his craft at a target and shouted imprecations before impact. Many of the letters and diaries of members of the Special Attack units reveal a

different story from that given to the public in wartime as well as the early post-war years. Not everyone was heroic; some were less than enthusiastic about taking leave of the world. The writings of the pilots are not a confused jumble but the outpourings of sane, often highly rational and literate beings. Some of the letters combine a strong spirit of independence and self-discipline.

Despite the passage of many years, the older generation can remember the time when the entire nation was called upon to 'Display the Kamikaze Spirit!' – to be ready to give up one's life for nation and throne without a murmur. In the schools all students read about samurai ways, of Bushido (the Draconian 'Code of the Samurai'), of the ritual of seppuku (or hara-kiri). Life after all was transient and what was more consoling than to believe that after death one's spirit would 'continue to live with the living and the dead'? The introduction of Kamikaze tactics in the Pacific War, as a desperate measure to 'bleed the enemy white', was considerably less of a shock for Japanese than for Westerners.

A Japanese military doctor captured by the Americans during the war, when describing the difference between Western and Japanese philosophy, said the former tells a person how to live, the latter how to die.

The word suicide, it becomes clear, does not have the immoral connotation in the Japanese language that it has in English. In Japanese there are various words for suicide and they have subtle differences. For example: *jisatsu* (translated as 'self-killing') carries a negative, even sinful connotation, as the word suicide does in many Western cultures. But *jiketsu* (literal translation, 'self-determination' but actually meaning 'suicide') and *jisai* (literally 'self-judgement' but also meaning 'suicide') suggest an honourable or laudable act done in the public interest; for example, an act carried out to protect the honour of the one who commits suicide. Unlike Judeo-Christian morality, there is no ethical or religious taboo against suicide in Shintoist Japan.

Some Japanese make an earnest attempt to prove a difficult premise: that the Kamikaze deaths were not suicides. For instance, Saburo Sakai, an ace pilot and author of the book, *Samurai*, attempts to show that what looked like suicidal acts to Americans – when pilots chose to kill themselves by aiming their aircraft at the decks of Anglo-American ships – was not self-killing in the conventional sense of suicide because the overwhelming majority of the Special Attack, or Kamikaze, pilots never thought they were 'throwing away their lives'. For Sakai it makes all the difference if those who take their own lives (in this case Kamikaze pilots) do so cheerfully and for the most patriotic reasons.³

The nonchalant way a prominent family reacted to the loss of their son, a Kamikaze pilot, in the latter stages of the Pacific War, is typical of a deep-rooted stoicism in confronting death. In early 1945 Lieutenant General Kyoji Tominaga, a former Vice Minister of War who was now in disgraced forced retirement (he would later be recalled to duty), was informed by telephone at his Tokyo residence that his son, Yasushi, had lost his life when he sallied forth on a suicide mission. Yasushi, who had been a college boxer and was a collector of butterflies, had the reputation of being a bright, vivacious, if slightly mischievous youth, who loved the English language (he promoted English-language speech contests) and was an avid fan of Hollywood films, especially westerns like John Ford's *Stagecoach*. On the tail of his *Hayabusa* (peregrine falcon) suicide plane he had painted a skull and crossbones, apparently borrowing the idea from watching a US film. On learning the news, the general, clad in kimono and standing in his tatami-matted room with Western-stye furniture, simply uttered 'Is that right?' (*So deska?*) and thanked his informant, Lieutenant General Michio Sugawara, a close friend who commanded the Sixth Air Army on Kyushu. Then, turning to his wife, he said, 'Yasushi's gone.' She held his hand but both showed no emotion in the presence of their seven-year-old son. The general and his wife maintained 'stiff upper lips'.

Western experts on Japan have recorded some profound observations on the Japanese. On the idea of death, Professor Basil Hall Chamberlain, who taught Japanese and philology at the Imperial University of Tokyo in the late nineteenth century, explained that the Japanese had 'less high-strung nerves than Europeans'. He even classed 'indifference to death' among Japanese physical characteristics, because he argued that nobody could doubt that a less sensitive nervous system must tend in that direction. He conceded, though, that 'opinions and beliefs had some influence in the matter. Buddhism,' he went on, 'is a tolerant, hopeful creed, and promises rest at last to all, even though it may have to be purchased by the wicked at the price of numerous transmigrations. Christianity, on the other hand, with its terrible doctrine of the final and hopeless perdition of the immense majority of the human race, may have steeped in a still more sombre hue the naturally excitable and self-questioning European mind.' The professor added that the Greeks and Romans appeared to have braved death with a commendable indifference to which few moderns could attain.

On the nature of religion, Professor Chamberlain quoted a useful passage from a distinguished seventeenth-century German explorer and surgeon, Engelbert Kaempfer: 'The Japanese profess a great

respect and veneration for their gods, and worship them in various ways. And I think I may affirm, that in the practice of virtue, in purity of life, and outward devotion, they far out-do the Christians. They are careful for the Salvation of their Souls, scrupulous to excess in the expiation of their crimes, and extremely desirous of future happiness. . . . Their Laws and Constitutions are excellent, and strictly observed, severe penalties being put upon the least transgression of any.'

Another quotation: in the 1850s Royal Navy Captain Sherard Osborn visited Japan and made this perceptive comment: 'Our day's observations led us to a conclusion which every hour in Japan confirmed – that the people inhabiting it are a very remarkable race, and destined, by God's help, to play an important role in the future history of this remote quarter of the globe.' The good captain could not of course have foreseen the genie-like explosion of Japan's economic and financial influence in all four quarters of the globe.

In the late nineteenth century, Lafcadio Hearn, an American, Greek-born authority on Japanese subtleties, who taught English literature at the former Tokyo Imperial University (he later became a Japanese citizen), looked for the source of Japanese stability and concluded that two awesome religions, Shinto and Buddhism, were 'the creators and preservers' of Japan's moral power. While Buddhism helped train citizens to master disappointment and sorrow, show composure in the face of adversity, and accept the impermanence of the universe, Shinto inculcated reverence for ancestral memory and devotion to Emperor and country, placing them ahead of family or self. Hearn, in a memorable work entitled *Kokoro*, describes the deep emotion of a boy visiting a Shinto shrine who bursts into tears because he is conscious of the 'prodigious debt' of the present to the past, and of the 'duty' of love and respect for the dead.

A further word on the Japanese worship of ancestors. From ancient times the people of Japan believed that the soul of the deceased remained behind to be celebrated by their descendants. It was believed that the soul would watch over the 'good fortunes' of these descendants together with the ancestral gods, or *kami*, who protected the livelihood and prosperity of the people from antiquity, remaining unchanged into future generations.

Finally, deep in the hearts of the Japanese people is the faith that the souls of the deceased dwell in the quiet and lofty place of one's birth from where they watch over the family, and will respond if called upon.

During the conflict in the Pacific, countless speeches and writings mentioned the modern warrior's debt to Bushido and the Code of

the Samurai. Centuries-old Japanese letters advised that discipline for warriors, pared down to its fundamental component, meant readiness for death. The image of the valiant feudal warrior is presented in *Hagakure* (translated as *Hidden Behind the Leaves*), no doubt the most influential of all the samurai writings, authored by an eighteenth-century monk from Hagi Han – presently Saga Prefecture on Kyushu. It says that Bushido, or the Code of the Samurai, teaches the warrior how to die with nobility. Honour means fighting to the bitter end, surrender is equal to dishonour. Further, it is only at the instant when one determines to die that a man attains purity. Also from *Hagakure*: ‘Calamity, when it occurs, is not so dreadful as was feared. It is foolish to torment oneself beforehand with vain imaginings.’

In feudal Japan, Shintoism and Buddhism, with an infusion of Confucianism, made important contributions to Bushido, the obligatory way of life of the warrior class, with emphasis on self-discipline, courage and loyalty. Bushido taught one ‘to bear and face calamities and adversities with patience and a pure conscience’; that ‘true honour lies in fulfilling Heaven’s decree and [that] no death incurred in so doing is ignominious’. Followers of the code were called upon to fight on ‘until one’s sword was broken and one’s last arrow spent’. In Inazo Nitobe’s readable classic, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, the author says that the teachings of Confucius are the most prolific source of Bushido. Confucius is quoted as saying, ‘A man must live in such a way that he is always prepared to die.’

Today, nearly all Japanese perform periodic Shinto rites even if they do not consider themselves to be Shintoists. Moreover, all Japanese Shintoists are concurrently Buddhists.

A fact worth remembering in this brief discussion of Bushido is that Japan had lived in uninterrupted peace for more than 250 years (there is no parallel in world history) from 1615 – except for a Christian rebellion on the island of Amakusa, off the coast of Kyushu, in 1637–38. (Protestant Dutch gunboats helped suppress this Catholic rebellion.) The samurai, often stereotyped as ‘fierce warriors’, turned into pen-pushing bureaucrats while harbouring the ideal of the samurai way of life. Because of this long period of unbroken peace, the code of Bushido began to be regarded as something idealistic, metaphysical and romantic.

Nitobe again: ‘What Japan was [he was writing in 1905] she owed to the samurai. They were not only the flower of the nation, but its root as well. All the gracious gifts of Heaven flowed through them. Though they kept themselves socially aloof from the populace, they set a moral standard for them and guided them by their example.’

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