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The Japanese Mentality as a Factor in War

Americans find it hard to understand such remote peoples as the Chinese, Indians, and Arabs. But the ideas and social systems of those peoples have enough in common with our own so that there can be some comprehension at least. In dealing with the Japanese, however, Americans—and all other nationalities for that matter—are up against an absolutely unique nation. The mental and moral climate of Japan is so utterly different from any other in the world that nearly every action of the Japs requires skillful interpretation.

This peculiar Japanese mentality has shaped the Pacific war as much as any purely military or geographic factor. Much of what has happened in the Far East conflict is understandable only against this background. NEWSWEEK *has therefore asked one of its contributing editors, Maj. Compton Pakenham, an expert on Japan, to analyze the most important features of the Japanese mind and their relationship to the war. The following article, the first of a series, explains the roots of the suicidal streak in the Japanese character and how it is utilized in the now-famous Kamikaze attacks.*

The greatest thrill comes to the Jap theater-goer in the last scene of the final night of the "Chushingura"—the word means Loyal League—cycle when 46 of the 47 *ronin** disembowel themselves. Their lord had been ordered to commit hara-kiri for drawing his sword in the Shogun's Palace. After months of planning they trap his enemy, cut off his

*A samurai [warrior] who has lost his feudal lord and not attached himself to another.

head, and lay it on their master's grave. Then, vengeance satisfied, they absolve themselves by committing suicide. The moral of "Chushingura" is loyalty to a feudal lord, a trait that was studiously encouraged in medieval Japan by local chiefs until it finally became a national fixation.

In the sudden change brought on by Commodore Perry's opening up the country, the subtle and cynical makers of modern Japan deliberately exploited this loyalty carried to the point of suicide. Fetching the emperor from Kyoto, where the Shogun had kept him captive, they produced him in Tokyo clothed in mystical divinity, the Son of Heaven, the head of all the clans, the father in whom all the previous local loyalties were fused. The relationship of every subject to the emperor was thus made a direct, personal one and to die for him was an honor, earning one the right to join the national ancestors on equal terms.

This emperor worship forms the very basis of the present so-called "suicide" tactics used by the Japs on a vast scale around Okinawa. As the story of the *ronin* illustrates, making a virtue of dying is deeply rooted in the Japanese character. The cult of emperor worship is merely a modern way of exploiting it in a state where the national life is organized on a family or tribal basis.

Death, Glorious Death: For example, there was the promising army air force captain who committed harakiri to atone for having been forced by a dead engine to glide over the imperial palace. There was the subaltern who, when rewarded for merit by being appointed to read Emperor Meiji's imperial rescript to soldiers and sailors of his regiment, misread one of the ideographs and expiated the crime by gouging out his intestines. In both cases the Minister of War expressed his gratification that these officers had recognized such glorious opportunities to prove their loyalty to the emperor.

In his native habitat the Jap is roughly kind, hospitable, considerate, and generous. His humor is animal, and he loves laughter, gambling, and drinking. There is little of the instinctive hero about him. The warning cry of *Abunai!* (Dangerous—look out) clears the Ginza in Tokyo faster and more noisily than would an alarm on Broadway. The Jap can panic quickly and not be ashamed of what he does in the crush.

But introduce the simple formula of unquestioned loyalty to the emperor and you have a grim fanatic, a *kesshitai* (resolved to die) whose mind stops

working. A foreigner opposing the imperial will is as much guilty of high treason as one of the emperor's natural subjects. Put the simple villager in a uniform, send him abroad in his emperor's service, and he begins by slapping the faces of white women and ends up a devil incarnate, boasting of what he did at Nanking, Hong Kong, and Manila. Foreigners who resist *Hakko Ichiu*—imperial dominion of the world, which is part of the gods' eternal plan—are wrong-headed blasphemers deserving the worst.

Death for the emperor is not an unlucky chance taken by the warrior but the highest possible reward for devoted service. A vague stigma attaches to the survivor of even a successful campaign. He has failed to avail himself of the heaven-sent opportunity. And before going abroad for service, it is common for a Japanese soldier first to be sent home, where he conducts his own funeral service.

Maj. Compton Pakenham