

# Study on the Ethical Concepts of the Japanese Writer Yukio Mishima, Ultra-nationalist

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## ABSTRACT

*After WWII, ultra-nationalism, which was the leading ideology of wartime Japan, seemed to have lost its power to inspire the Japanese. In the 1960s, when the Japanese began to enjoy economic prosperity, Yukio Mishima, deploring that the Japanese were losing the traditional spirit and morality of the nation, was one of those citizens who felt a strong nostalgia for wartime Japan. In an attempt to revive the spiritual exaltation of wartime Japan, Mishima took radical action as an ultra-nationalist, and killed himself by Hara-kiri. Mishima's ethical concepts, which center on the ethos of warriors who dedicate themselves to the defense of their commune, have structural similarities to the ethical structure of the Kanun, which may be called the ethics of »blood«. Mishima's theory of ultra-nationalism has a paradoxical logic, which seems to be related to the ethical concepts of a society without state power.*

## Introduction

The Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima committed suicide in 1970 at the headquarters of the Japan Self-Defense Force, insisting that the Japanese should abrogate the constitution promulgated after WWII under the guidance of the Allied Supreme Headquarters and have a new constitution made by the Japanese themselves. His suicide with one of his young comrades by Hara-kiri was a shock to the Japanese because he was a well-known

writer of Romanticism and the Japanese forgot about the ritual of Hara-kiri after WWII. Why Mishima committed suicide with such an astonishing action has been an enigma to the Japanese for over 30 years, though many previously unknown facts about his life have since been revealed, and many people have analyzed the psychological background of his suicide. The key words of Mishima, who had been actively involved in the political movement for several years before his death, comprise such wide categories as

the Emperor, *bushido* (the code of warriors), bodybuilding, Self-Defense Force and the Shield Society (a phalanx of warriors to defend the Emperor) that it is difficult for the Japanese to understand what he really meant with these words.

When I read »The Defense of Culture«, which explains why Mishima and his comrades should die in paramilitary action defending the Emperor, I noted the structural similarities between the ethics of the Kanun and his theory of ultra-nationalism. An analysis of Mishima's ultra-nationalism, in comparison with the ethical structure of the Kanun, led to discernment of his ethical concepts, which seem to have their origins in the value system of a society without state power. In the present paper, I shall clarify the ethical concepts of Yukio Mishima as an ultra-nationalist. Such clarification may prove useful for analysis of the emotional basis of ethnic nationalism in other areas of the world.

### **Mishima's theory of ultra-nationalism**

Mishima discusses his theory of ultra-nationalism in several essays. In »Counter-revolutionary Manifesto«<sup>1</sup> for which, he says, he takes responsibility though he does not take responsibility for his literature, he clearly indicates that the purpose of his radical action is to defend the Emperor.

#### *Counter-revolutionary Manifesto*

In the manifesto, Mishima declares that what he defends is the culture, history, and tradition of Japan, which is represented by »the form« called the Emperor. He, who embodies clarity, gaiety, sincerity, and the high morality of Japan, who represents the beauty of the Japanese tradition, stands up from the vantage point of the strong to fight communists once and for all, who seek to shatter

the national polity of Japan. The national polity of Japan is epitomized by the imperial system, and freedom of speech, through which a true figure of the Emperor should spontaneously emerge, is included in it. The Japanese involved in the counter-revolutionary action have the same ethos as that of the Kamikaze pilots, who died in suicide bomb attacks during WWII with the belief that other Japanese would follow their heroic action. The presence and the prospect of these kind of people, who do not mind whether their action is effective or not, cannot be a beacon to a happy future and stand in opposition to all ideas which imply a brilliant future for human beings. The battle to defend the Emperor does not defend the future of the people, but defends the fundamentals, which enable Japanese society to exist, although people are unaware of these. Violence is not wrong in itself. Mishima says that the purpose for which violence is wielded determines whether it is right or wrong.

In »The Defense of Culture«<sup>1</sup>, Mishima elucidates his theory of the cultural commune of the Japanese, and advocates that »the form« of the cultural commune be defended at all costs.

#### *The Defense of Culture*

Mishima says that the essence of culture is »the form«, which may be metaphorically described as a crystal through which we can see the spirit of a nation. »The form«, which inspires the activity of a creative person, represents the continuity of the cultural life of the nation, which includes not only works of art, but deeds of the people and »the form« of the deeds. The continuity of a nation's cultural life, in other words, the continuity of »the form« is antithetical to the dialectical concepts of progress and development.

Japan is one of the cultural communes with »the form« of its own. According to Mishima, »the form« of Japanese culture

is the Emperor, whose rituals guarantee its own temporal continuity. The Emperor, who stands for the wholeness of the cultural commune, is qualified to succeed to the throne because he has a tie of »blood« with his ancestors. Upon ascending the throne, the Emperor obtains divinity in the Great Food Offering Ritual in which he plays the role of a host to receive the ancestor-god as a guest. He reconfirms and strengthens his divinity in the ritual of the Festival for the New Tasting every year. Every succeeding Emperor is deemed to be the original or a copy of the original Emperor. The successive repetition of »blood« in the imperial family is deemed to be an endless replay of the original, primordial cultural events.

Mishima assumes that the cultural commune of the Japanese has developed on the basis of a consanguine relationship with the people; that is, it is a sort of huge extended family, whose supreme chief is the Emperor. The existence of the cultural commune of the Japanese has an ethical value, because it is a commune of consanguinity, which has its origin in the ancient, divine obscurity of the universe. In the cultural commune of the Japanese, the Emperor is the only source from which the values and morals of the Japanese flow, and through whom we can access every detail of the Japanese culture. The esthetic value of the Japanese has been engendered in the mimesis of the imperial culture, which is pedestrian as well as noble. The Emperor, who represents classicism and stands in opposition to creativeness, is the source of power which inspires both esthetic and ethical emotions among the Japanese. The Emperor, who symbolizes order and ethics, sometimes becomes the fountain from which rebellions and revolutions originate. Because the aegis of the Emperor covers both order and disorder, the Emperor is considered to represent the wholeness of the cultural commune.

If the existence of the Emperor is threatened by an enemy within or without, the Japanese must take up arms to defend the Emperor. The fight to defend the Emperor might be a fierce, bloody one in which the people do not hesitate to liquidate the enemy. When a Japanese dies in battle, death extinguishes his ego and enables him to attain oneness with the Emperor-god, through which he is eternalized. It may be said that he is reborn, because he who dedicates himself to the Emperor and dies for him coalesces into the eternal life of the commune. The acts to defend the Emperor, which succeeding generations carry out, guarantee the continuity of the commune, and the death of generations while defending the Emperor guarantees the recurrent momentum of the commune. The Japanese act to defend the Emperor with an instinctive feeling for the continuity of life, which may be analogous to the biological laws of life.

After WWII, the tie between the state and the kinship system was cut. The social as well as constitutional changes imposed on Japan by the Allied Supreme Headquarters led to the degeneration of Japanese culture and society. It brought the Japanese a boring peace and an insipid culture like culture seen in a museum. When Japanese see that their culture is in a shameful, terrible state, they are compelled to stand up to restore its dignity and strive to regenerate it. To achieve this end, the Japanese must dedicate themselves to battle and die in it, which ensures the restoration of the Emperor's honor and dignity. Thus, the honor of the cultural commune of the Japanese will be restored.

In »The Logic of Moral Revolution«<sup>1</sup>, Mishima admires the young officers of the February 26th Incident, the largest military uprising in modern Japan, which occurred in 1936. The passion and sincerity of these men, who regarded the Emperor as a god and dedicated them-

selves to him, galvanized Mishima to take radical action.

### *The Logic of Moral Revolution*

The young officers of the Imperial Japanese Army, resenting the corruption of politicians, officials, and entrepreneurs, who showed little sympathy or ability to deal with the plight of the poor peasants hit by catastrophic weather in northern Japan, attacked the high officials of the government with 1400 foot soldiers and took control of the central area of Tokyo in an attempt to make the Emperor take the helm of Japan. Mishima regards the uprising as a revolutionary action of high morality, intended to make the young officers get involved in the ultimate purity of the imperial system. However, these officers were defeated because the Emperor, angry with those who had killed his close advisors, refused to accept their demands and gave a military order to crush the uprising immediately. The young officers, finding that the Emperor-god was outraged, asked the Emperor to send an emissary to oversee them kill themselves honorably. The Emperor refused to grant them an honorable death. The young officers were arrested and shot to death after a secret military tribunal.

According to Mishima, the young officers were destined for defeat because they had to wait for the Emperor-god to accept their demands. They could not attack the Emperor and the imperial system because they were inspired to take action by »the form« called the Emperor. They could do nothing but wait patiently for the Emperor to recognize their selfless devotion to him. This is why a revolution inspired by »the form« is doomed to failure. However, Mishima says that the young officers experienced a momentary bliss when they believed, though vainly, that their dreams had been fulfilled.

When an uprising fails, the instigators must kill themselves immediately be-

cause they have committed the sin of disloyalty to the Emperor-god. Then the souls of the dead who remain loyal to the Emperor, uniting with the Emperor-god, achieve eternity and bliss.

In »Sun and Steel«<sup>2</sup>, Mishima analyzes his psychological and philosophical background, which constantly seduces him to choose an early death by suicide. He says that he experienced the bliss of oneness with the commune at the end of WWII when most of the Japanese were willingly prepared to die in battle. He longed to repeat this after WWII.

### *Sun and Steel*

Mishima confesses that during boyhood, he lived in a world of literature under the presupposition that he did not have a body, did not belong to reality of the society, and did not have any intention to do any meaningful acts. During the war, he, who was absorbed in listening to his own inner voice, hated the sun, which he regarded as the symbol of honor and glory. However, one day, prodigiously showered by summer sunlight shortly after WWII, he felt that in reality he must have belonged to the category of people who admire the sun, and he then decided to increase the amount of his muscle by bodybuilding, which would perhaps qualify him as a sun worshiper.

When Mishima had developed the musculature of his body, he found that his physical strength grounded his sense of existence and transformed it into a sense of power. He realized that the sense that power needed an opponent, one who enables it to be power, was the fundamental relationship between the world and us. In this regard, we need the world. When he was practicing *Kendo* (Japanese fencing), he felt that the thing lurking beyond his bamboo sword was the existence or the essence of existence, which has features opposite to literature. What appeared abruptly before his eyes was existence it-

self; that is, an opponent, who refuses to be depicted in words. Mishima and the opponent exist in the same world wherein they see each other without using the imagination. The opponent can never be an idea, but a reality which seeks to strike a blow. He regards the opponent as death itself. Mishima says that he saw the sun of death beyond the pain which his body felt when his opponent hit him. Mishima's power, which is fighting, running and crying within him, asks him to perform an action which is so pure that it is beyond imagination. The sun of death ensnares him, and he is incessantly led to his death.

Mishima's relentless thirst to kill himself led him to *bushido* and death by Hara-kiri carried out in accordance with the procedure of *bushido*, which made it possible for him to die as a heroic warrior. What makes it different between a romantic death and a decadent death is the presence or absence of a sense of honor which makes death able to be seen, the presence of a tragic situation and the beauty of the body of a dying man. Mishima wanted a romantic death, which could only occur in a tragic moment when everyday imaginings concerning death and danger and world destruction were transformed into duty. The place where Mishima feels happiness is the tragic world, wherein he can achieve oneness with the commune without using words of literature. He deplors having lost a chance to die along with the Kamikaze pilots, who attained blissful death in the tragic situation of war, when the abrupt cessation of the war in 1945 saved him.

After WWII Mishima trained his body so that he could carry out a beautiful, heroic death. When he had obtained physical power, the will to fight and the skill to battle, he decided to end his life with a radical action, accompanied by words of no individuality, which might exert a really monumental power. In order to

achieve a heroic death, he needed a phalanx of warriors who would take an oath to die together in battle. When he dies with the phalanx of warriors, he is able to glimpse the sacred world of the gods with his last breath.

### **Ethical concepts of Mishima as an ultra-nationalist**

Mishima's logic of ultra-nationalism described above leads us to his ethical concepts, as follows.

Japan is a cultural commune, founded on the basis of the kinship system. It is considered to be a huge kin group into which relatively small kin groups, such as extended families, coalesced. Japan, which is an ethical entity, is represented by »the form« called the Emperor, who obtains divinity by the Great Food Offering Ritual upon ascending the throne and renovates it in the ritual of the Festival for the New Tasting every year. The rituals, which the Emperors have repeatedly performed since ancient times, guarantee the temporal continuity of the commune. The cultural commune of the Japanese, which looks as though it is covered by a dome called »the Emperor«, is a space of freedom, in which even some kinds of anarchy may be accepted.

As long as the cultural commune of the Japanese exists with an ethical value, it has an obligation to continue to exist in the world. If its existence is threatened, the warriors of the commune must come to its defense. Therefore, it has the ethos of a warrior's commune, which admires acts of valor and self-sacrifice. A warrior, who dies in battle defending the commune, can transcend himself and be united with the Emperor, who is a supreme-priest of the commune as well as a divine entity representing the continuity of communal life. Violence in defense of the commune is regarded as an ethical

force, because the commune is an ethical entity.

Defending the commune with one's own flesh and blood is an act of honor and pride for warriors. Insofar as fighting the enemy in defense of the commune is deemed an ethical act, killing the enemy is also an ethical act, though such action can lead to anarchy. The act of defending the commune, which must be repeated as long as it exists, is antithetical to the dialectics. The battle proceeds as a tragedy because it is an action to defend the ethical entity.

### **Ethical structure of the Kanun**

The comparison of Mishima's ethical concepts with the ethical structure of the Kanun reveals the essential meaning of his beliefs. The ethical structure of the Kanun will be briefly discussed below.

The Kanun is a customary code which keeps social order in the tribal society of northern Albania. The Kanun dictates that if 1) a person breaks an oath or a besa, 2) a person injures or kills a guest, 3) a person kills a member of another kin group, 4) a person dishonors a member of another kin group, the offended party must take revenge on the offending party. The Kanun allows a murder which happened within a *shpi* (family) to be resolved in it with some arbitrariness. Acts of revenge are regulated by the Kanun whose ethical structure is epitomized as follows: 1) a guest is a kind of god or a messenger of the gods, 2) commensality of a host with the guest-god is a ritual by which the host makes communion with the guest-god, 3) the host becomes divine through commensality with the guest-god and by receiving a blessing uttered by the guest-god, 4) the oath, besa, honor and blood of a person (host) who obtains divinity from the guest-god are equivalent to those of the gods, 5) when a person loses this divinity for himself or others by

committing sacrilegious acts, such as breaking an oath, injuring a guest, etc., the damaged divinity must be neutralized by offering the blood of the offender or a member of his kin group to soothe the anger of the furious gods<sup>3</sup>.

The people in northern Albania live in a society, which consists of patrilineally organized kin groups called *shpi* (family), *vllazni* (brotherhood) and *fis* (clan). In this society, where kinship systems are of great importance, an individual lives as a member of a kin group. His individual rights and freedom of will are rather restricted, and each individual is expected to meet the obligations of the kin group, which includes the dead (ancestors) of the lineage. In a society where people practice ancestor worship, the dead are regarded as a sort of god (ancestor-god). If the dead are ancestor-gods, the kin group is assumed to be a divine, ethical entity because it is a commune consisting of the living and the ancestor-gods. An ancestor-god, disguised as a stranger, sometimes visits the living to make communion with them. The living must offer shelter and hospitality to the guest-god. In return for the hospitality, the guest-god gives blessings to the hosts, and the power of the spoken words ensures the happiness and good health of the living<sup>4</sup>.

If an individual receives praise, it is praise for his entire kin group. If anyone living or dead is insulted, it is an insult against the whole kin group. Such dishonor must be avenged by the living of the kin group. If a person is killed, the spilt blood asks for the blood of the slayer or a member of his kin group. When the living do not satisfy the demand of the dead, the furious blood takes revenge on the living. Therefore the living cannot fail to take revenge. Because a kin group comprised of the living and ancestor-gods is a transcendental, ethical entity, the violence of revenge prosecuted by the kin group is deemed a sacred force sacrificing

the offender, whose blood is dedicated to the furious ancestor-gods<sup>4</sup>.

The Kanun functions well as a customary code in a society which has following cultural features that: 1) there's no functioning state power, 2) a kinship system is of great importance, 3) a kin group is deemed a transcendental commune consisting of the living and the dead, 4) the kin group has an ethical obligation to keep its existence in the community, 5) animism and ancestor worship are prevalent, 6) the ethos of warriors is highly regarded, 7) spoken words are appreciated more highly than written words.

### Discussion

When Mishima's ethical concepts are compared with the ethical structure of the Kanun, the following structural similarities emerge.

The foundation of the commune indicated by the Kanun and by Mishima is »blood«; that is, consanguinity. As for the Kanun, the commune of »blood« refers to the kinship system of *shpi-vllazni-fis*, while for Mishima, it means the cultural commune of the Japanese. Such communes are presided over not by the ruler, but by the chief representing the commune, whose rituals guarantee the temporal continuity of the commune. As for the Kanun, the chief refers to a patriarch or a chieftain of the kin group, while for Mishima, it means the Emperor. A commune developed on the basis of »blood« has an absolute, ethical obligation to preserve its existence in the community. As for the Kanun, the community means the tribal society, while for Mishima, it means the international community of nations. The international community of nations in modern world, where no universal sovereign power exists to preserve order, may be metaphorically called a society without state power. The ultimate purpose of the communes of »blood« is to

continue to exist. Any action of a member of the commune, taken to safeguard and flourish the commune, is supposed to be ethical, while any action that weakens and harms the commune is unethical. Given that a commune based on »blood« connotes the endless repetition of »blood«, its principles are in opposition to the concepts of progress and development. Because internal conflicts are settled by the commune itself, which is allowed to make any decision with some arbitrariness, the commune is considered to be a space of freedom. Communes are both enemy and ally towards each other, as all of them are potential rivals. As for the Kanun, other communes are *shpi-vllazni-fis*, while as for Mishima, they are the cultural communes of other nations. When one commune grows too much, a conflict with other communes is unavoidable because they must compete for the control of a living space. In order to keep the existence of the commune in the community, the warriors must stand up to fight for the survival of the commune. It can be a ferocious, internecine battle because the communes base their survival on it. When a warrior dies in battle, he will merge with the »blood« of the commune. The honor of the dead is restored by the victory of the commune, and the dead are appeased by the rituals performed by the commune.

Thus, we can identify the structural similarities of ethical concepts between the Kanun and Mishima. Though kin groups of the Kanun have different features from the cultural commune of the Japanese, Mishima sees little contradiction between the two, as he imagines that the cultural commune of the Japanese is an entity analogous to a huge extended family. In this context, it becomes clear that the ethical concepts of Mishima are closely related to those of a society without state power.

The ethical structure of the Kanun, which may be called the ethics of »blood«,

is a value system which functions well in a society without state power. It is a value system with its own polarity, which does not necessarily evolve into a value system of a society with state power<sup>4</sup>. A society without state power, which regards spoken words more highly than written words, may be regarded to be a society of the mythological world. If the continuity of the cultural commune of the Japanese is guaranteed by the repetition of rituals performed by the Emperor, it is not a commune of the historical world, but a commune of the mythological world.

In the 1960s, when Japanese society was experiencing accelerated economic development, Mishima began to look back to wartime Japan and aspired to die for the Emperor, to eternalize himself in death. Apparently, Mishima's theory of ultra-nationalism, which ultimately centers on the ethos of warriors who die in battle to defend the Emperor, involves logic aimed at preserving the merits of the cultural commune of the Japanese. At the same time, it is a paradoxical logic,

which seems to be rushing towards the ethics of a society without state power. This paradox appears to be the essence of the imperial system of wartime Japan, whose slogan was to make the world one family, which had the power to rouse feelings of ecstasy and bliss among the Japanese during WWII. The theoretical destination of the logic is that if the world is united into one family under the aegis of the Emperor, the state powers all over the world including Japan will disappear, ultimately resulting in a new world where the true harmony and peace which characterize a family should prevail. The alternative end-result of ultra-nationalism is a society wherein the passion of ethnocentrism and exclusionism might be dominant. The ethical concepts of Mishima, which may date back to the primordial culture of an ancient society without state power, seem to be a logic present and applicable not only in Japanese society, but in societies and nations all over the world.

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## **STUDIJA ETIČKOG KONCEPTA JAPANSKOG PISCA MISHIME, ULTRA – NACIONALISTA**

### **S A Ž E T A K**

Nakon drugog svjetskog rata, ultra nacionalizam, kao vodeća ideologija ratnog Japana, počela je gubiti svoju inspirirajuću moć među Japancima. U 60-tim godinama 20-tog stoljeća, kada su Japanci počeli osijećati ekonomski prosperitet, Yukio Mishima, žaleći što Japanci gube tradicionalni nacionalni duh i etičnost, pripadao je građanima koji su osijećali jaku nostalgiju za ratnim Japanom. S namjerom oživljavanja duhovne egzaltacije ratnog Japana, Mishima je poduzeo radikalni čin kao ultra-nacionalist, i ubio se izvršivši »Hara-kiri«. Mishimini etički koncepti, koji se usredotočuju na ethos ratnika koji se posvećuje obrani zajednice, ima strukturnu sličnost etičkoj strukturi »Kanuna«, koja se može nazvati etikom »krvi«. Mishimina teorija ultra-nacionalizma ima paradoksalnu logiku, koja je, izgleda, povezana s etičkim konceptom društva bez državne moći.