Book Review

“Like the other peculiarities of Japanese behavior which obtruded themselves upon us during the war, it raised questions about the whole way of life to which they were conditioned, the way their institutions functioned, and the habits of thought and action they had learned” (Benedict 25). The maxim cited above was articulated by Ruth Benedict in her monograph *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946). The book was intended as the record of the author’s anthropological expedition. In other words, the author’s purpose for writing the book was partially the author’s own academic interest in studying the national character of the Japanese people. At this point, it is essential to take a small detour to dwell on the following points. The book was written only a year after the WWII has come to an end. WWI and WWII were singularly the most murderous and atrocious of all tragic, traumatic, and dramatic events in human history. Cynical as it sounds, the fact that such terrifying events took place with less than two decades between them proved that the world, as people knew it saying at the beginning of the twentieth century, has come to an end. The countries of the world required political, social, and economic transformation. It was not until 1940s that the Americans encountered their enemy, the Japanese, for the first time. The American High Command as well as the country’s political leaders and civil servants, needed people like Ruth Benedict to educate them about their rival. Thus, minimizing the casualties and attaining peace on more or less equal terms was possible. Through Ruth’s book, the nation was introduced to unique culture and history of Japan. Nowadays, Japan is renowned as a technology-advanced country that promotes energy-efficient manufacture and environmentally conscious lifestyle. With the help of her work, Ruth Benedict contributed to the creation of the positive image of Japan in the eyes of the rest of the world.

At this point, it is essential to mention that Ruth Benedict’s monograph is mainly descriptive by nature. The sources that Ruth Benedict used to write her book were mostly observations. The author had made by herself some of these observations and included them into her book. Building on this fact, the researcher inferred many things concerning the national character of the Japanese people. Needless to say, Ruth Benedict has conducted a research of her own. Apart from that, some of the inferences she drew were based on the findings made by her pears and colleagues. It is difficult to say what portion of the book is Benedict’s original research and what portion of it is based on the finding made by the researcher’s pears and colleagues. Assuming that the foregoing statements are correct, the author might have used the material from English language sources mostly. At the very beginning of the monograph, its author admitted that at the time when she was working on the book, the western civilizations’ knowledge about the Japanese people and their culture was limited. Particularly, that was true about the Occidental cultures as Japan, throughout its history, was developing away from the troubles and vanities of the rest of the world. Basically, educating the people of America about the people of Japan has become, among other things, one of the primary goals for writing the book. By and large, that particular goal has shaped the monograph itself.

In the field of anthropology and ethnography, some researchers have remarked that “Japanese rules are very strict against a man’s answering back even in civilian life, and their own army practices penalized it heavily” (Benedict 24). Developing her statements further, Benedict (24) points out that “it is no exoneration of the atrocities and wanton cruelties that did occur in the prison camps to distinguish between these and those acts which were the consequences of cultural habituation”. Clearly, the lifestyle of the Japanese people seemed to be quaint and alien for the American people. However, the alien behavior of their enemy was perceived by the Japanese as a matter of course. The Americans, in their own turn, found the conventions that dictated the moral principles and behavior of the Japanese just as alien ones. “The shame of surrender was burned deeply into the consciousness of the Japanese” (Benedict 24). Thus, the surrender of the American troops at Bataan left the Japanese soldiers in utter astonishment mostly because the latter found the idea of becoming a prisoner of war completely intolerable.

In her book, Ruth Benedict (24) has noted that the most crucial and even ‘the most melodramatic” distinction between the behaviors of the Western and the Japanese soldiers probably lied in “the cooperation the latter gave to the Allied forces as prisoners of war”. Building on that, it is possible to assume that it was not in the nature of the Japanese soldiers to be compassionate and forgiving. Even more importantly, the fact that they were unwilling and reluctant to help and take care of the wounded seems to be quite a valid assumption. Many Japanese soldiers believed that being taken prisoner and having their lives spared disgraces them so much so that being considered dead by their compatriots upon achieving peace and returning home was one of the things that they may have feared the most.

The author maintains the idea that in order to understand the way of the Japanese people, it is essential to understand their conception of “taking one’s proper station” (Benedict 25). With regard to this, it has to be admitted that the Japanese people relied heavily on hierarchy and order undoubtedly. Unlike the Oriental civilizations, the Occidental ones had strong faith in equality and freedom. Therefore, the hierarchy, as one of many social mechanisms possible, was in no way seen viable by the Western civilizations. In Japan, having a firm belief in hierarchy consists in the maxims dictating the protocol for people’s interaction, their attitudes toward one another and the state. Dwelling on the preceding statement, Benedict (25) asserts that “only by describing some of their national institutions like the family, the state, religious and economic life, it is possible for us to understand their view of life”. The notion of hierarchy is the nucleus that determines the paradigm of relationships between the Japanese people; mostly, the social protocol of that kind applied to the Japanese soldiers. There is no denying that the principles are transferable in a sense it is quite natural at some point for the Japanese people to believe others who stick to the same principles. In other words, in the middle of the twentieth century, the Japanese people saw the problems that the world was battling with in the light of their beliefs and convictions.

The Japanese people (and especially the Japanese countrymen) believed that the mission of each state in the post-war world is to find its station and to make it the benefit for people. Unwittingly, that was the point in the history of Japan when its leaders officially subscribed to the principles of equality, non-interference with other nation’s internal affairs, inviolability of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The process of the Westernization of Japan began as the Allied forces defeated the Axis states (Germany, Italy, and Japan). Authoritarianism, aristocratism, and monarchy were so much ingrained in the consciousness of the Japanese people that it was difficult for them to adapt to the conditions of the world changing rapidly and drastically. Still, Japan has retained its model of the aristocratic society. Thus, whenever people in Japan established new contacts, it was customary to state the parameters of social distance between the people who interact. The Japanese people admit themselves that it is not only the social status of the communicants that dictates the protocol for their interaction. Family ties, gender, age, and previous dealings of those involved in the interaction should also be taken into account by all means. The researchers (mostly, anthropologists and ethnographers) list the circumstances under which the communication is taking place among the deciding factors of the event of interaction itself. Filial piety, for example, is considered one of the features characterizing the patterns of interaction between people in the Japanese society. In addition to that, filial piety is the feature that many Oriental cultures have in common (specifically, the Chinese and the Japanese).

As of mid-1940s, the authorities of Japan took raising the national standard of living as their number one priority (Benedict 149). Evidently, the world has changed drastically since the Wars (WWI and WWII). Humanity is trying to battle different issues as opposed to the ones it was facing in the middle of the twentieth century. However, with quite a few exceptions, the troubles that such people as the leaders of the most powerful and even developing states have today are basically the same. Some of the most brilliant minds of this scientific and cultural era attempt to push the boundaries of human knowledge in order to improve the quality of life for all people. As far as the current geopolitical situation is concerned, it is crucial that the nations of the world remain united to preserve the hard-won peace. Under the circumstances of the process of globalization and urbanization that have been gaining momentum lately, Japan is deeply concerned with the existing environmental issues. As one of the world’s most technologically advanced nations, the Japanese people realize how important reviving the natural habitats and preserving the wildlife and the environment are. The customs of the Japanese have enabled the creation of exquisite masterpieces of art. Scientific curiosity and aspiration for the advancement of science, in their own turn, made the Japanese the nation that pioneered the technologies. Thus, Japan has become one of the world’s leading manufacturers of electronics. With regard to this, it is important to take a step back and contemplate the following. It is a rather regrettable thing to admit that throughout the world, the cases of manipulating public opinions tend to become more frequent. It is hard to say whether the Japanese people as the world’s leading manufacturers of electronics in general and computer hardware in particular realize the responsibility placed upon them.

There were many sour and tragic pages in the history of Japan. The evidence does support that the country’s authorities and, by and large, the nation as a whole have managed to leave all bad things behind. In her monograph *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, the ethnographer and anthropologist Ruth Benedict gives insight into the mindset of the Japanese people and the specificities of their culture. The researcher pursues the goal to shed some light on one of the world’s most mysterious nations. The starting point of the research itself is the moment when the American and the Japanese cultures collided in the WWII. In her book, Ruth Benedict characterizes the Japanese as intelligent, decent, timid, stubborn, loyal, reserved, and nearly fearless people. In addition to that, the fact of the nation’s becoming successful and prosperous may have required a great deal of resilience. Eventually, it happened that the Japanese have managed to build themselves a life of peace and plenty and, at the same time, to preserve their culture. Moreover, after having read Ruth Benedict’s monograph, one may conclude that the collaboration of people representing different cultures (the ones that have basically different vision of the world) can have some stunning result. Further, the Japanese know how important preserving identity and culture is for any nation. Exploring Ruth Benedict’s monograph *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* was an educational experience. I would definitely recommend reading it to all those who study Oriental cultures, the history of Japan, and attempt to find solutions to the world’s urgent issues. More importantly, however, I highly recommend reading Ruth Benedict’s work to all those who have developed a keen interest in exploring cultures with different traditions, mindsets, and visions of the world.

Work Cited

Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. netLibrary eBook edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1989.