

INTRODUCTION

Empowering the Body and ‘Noble Death’

Michael Roberts and Arthur Saniotis

Facing death with equanimity and with a honed, trained body is an expression of sheer power.¹ When a group of like-minded individuals confronts an oppositional force with equal mental and bodily capacities, whether on a sports field or in a warring conflict, the result is power compounded. Each article in this special section ‘confronts’ such powers. Together they explore several regionally specific projects in Asia in which dying for a cause is seen as a virtue.

There are several parts of Asia where social practices and cultural traditions have consciously nourished bodily empowerment. In these select yet dynamic traditions, mind and body are conceived as a unity. Attentiveness to cosmic powers is an integral aspect of disciplined ascetic practices that seek to harness bodily energy in maximal ways. These practices confront death. They are directed toward transcending the fear of death—and death itself. When they are inserted into a moment of violent conflict involving interpersonal combat, they encourage a steely, terrifying fearlessness as well as deadly striking power.

The diverse martial arts spreading across Asia are among the networks that have nurtured these practices of bodily empowerment. Our popular, surface awareness of these forms of physical power comes from the experience—at several leagues removed in cinemas or on a living-room couch—of Japanese soldiers shouting “Banshai” as they charge into fields of death by machine-gun volley, of stories of kamikaze pilots yelling before their planes crash into some ship,² of Bruce Lee shouting as he decimates an opponent with extraordinary physical skill. Elaborate theory underpins the outward exhalation of breath³ at the moment of strike in various forms of martial arts perfected in Japanese and Chinese civilizations. As learned by Arthur Saniotis during his martial arts training, it is a technique for the maximization of strength through a fusion of body and mind—so that the concept *ki ken tai ichi*, for example, conveys multiple yet overlapping meanings: “spirit,” “sword,” “body as one,” and “life force.”⁴ Behind this technique and belief system, Saniotis explains, is a heritage that embraces cosmic processes and seeks mystical mastery as one path toward



self-empowerment. Thus, the practitioners involve themselves in a reciprocal engagement with supra-mundane and non-human worlds.

The universe of being associated with *bushido* culture⁵ has been reworked over the centuries in Japan, with particular emphasis attached to a warrior honing his capacities to perfection. Critical to this development is the training of the mind: the key principle is *mushin*, ‘no thought’ or ‘no mind’.⁶ The term *mushin* is also translated as ‘non-self’ and ‘selflessness’, a central emphasis in Japanese lifeways—indeed, so important that, like the proverbial manner in which Eskimos have many words for snow in order to distinguish its different forms, the Japanese have a similar ‘surfeit’ of terms to convey the idea: *messhi* (extinguished self), *bōga* (forgotten self), and *botsuga* (disappeared self) (Victoria 2003: 70, 120, 122, 135, 205).

Concomitant with *mushin* is *zanshin* (following through), referring to a state of awareness after the completion of a technique, which is the kernel within Japanese martial arts. The critical goal is for the samurai warrior to cultivate an attitude of indifference to life and death while “focussing completely on the present” task (Jones 1996: 2). Such training not only instills precision but also embodies the notion of *mono no aware* (recognition of life’s impermanence) (Lowry 2000: 10). Thus, honed precision⁷ achieved through *ki ken tai ichi* results in an empowered body and maximized force. In a similar vein, Jones (1996: 2) notes that Zen monastic training provided the samurai with a way of moving beyond the parameters of static techniques and strategies to practices tailored to meet the realities of combat.

Aesthetics and Holism in Maximizing Personal Power in Japan

The trained warrior, however, is not merely a robotic killing machine. The best samurai in the various Japanese schools of thought were rounded individuals. Whatever the diversity in specifics, Zen masters were multi-skilled individuals trained in swordsmanship, medicine, poetry, painting, and calligraphy. This is entirely in line with a philosophical heritage that does not separate mind and body in the Cartesian, Western fashion, but sees both as an integrated “complex” (Kasulis 1993: 303) that is “capable of increasing levels of integration” (*ibid.*: 301).

The samurai’s training included rigorous self-discipline and involved austerities that enabled them to live spartanly and to transcend pain. Thus, the renowned seventeenth-century warrior, Miyamoto Musashi, undertook a warrior pilgrimage (*musha-shugyo*), journeying by himself, living austerely, challenging all of the sword masters one by one and defeating them.⁸ Musashi’s mastery of the sword was complemented by his skill in calligraphy, sculpture, and painting.⁹

That calligraphy was one facet of Zen training highlights the degree to which precision is central to mental and bodily empowerment. Precision is a vital ingredient in both battle and sports contests, while calligraphy, painting, and poetry merge together in developing aesthetic sensibilities. The aim in each of these arts

is unity of mind and body in accordance with the ways of nature known as *Tao* or *Do* (the Way). Thus, subtle mastery of the brushstroke is synonymous with the sword's action: natural and effortless. It can also be argued that the power of aesthetics goes beyond the Zen world and permeates Japanese culture,¹⁰ whether today or yesterday.

As a consequence, one dimension of *bushido* has been the value placed on adornment, whether on coiffure, tonsure, or bodily form. Tattooing the body is a way of beautifying self and securing cosmic affinity. A whole cosmology of signs has been linked to body painting in Japanese cultural practices as they have been reworked over the centuries. Moreover, the principles of flower arrangement (*kado*) underscore harmony (*wa*) and the natural correspondence between heaven (*ten*), earth (*chi*), and humanity (*jin*).

Arguably, too, the force of aesthetics in the Japanese universe of being is encouraged through an emphasis on visual modes of appreciation, with the eye assuming a measure of dominance in evaluation. After reading Ohnuki-Tierney's (2002) work, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms*, Roberts was induced to remark to her that "it would seem that 'visuality' is a critical dimension of the Japanese phenomenology of appreciation. Hence, the importance of gardens and calligraphy?" Her response on this point was affirmative: "On the visuality—it is fascinating that the Japanese attribute fragrance to cherry blossoms when in fact [they] do not have fragrance!"¹¹ On this point, Ohnuki-Tierney's remarks underline Stoller's (1989) argument that human sensory perceptions among some non-Western peoples are fundamentally distinct from Western kinds of embodiment. Perhaps here it is also important to realize that for the Japanese, the cherry blossom symbolizes beauty in impermanence, thereby conveying the message that perfection exists in the moment. Despite all its Hollywood fantasia, the film *The Last Samurai* captured this idea when it depicted the Japanese warrior-hero, Matsumoto, gazing with delight at falling cherry blossoms and saying "Perfect" with his last dying breath.

The Japanese world has been the entry point because the idea of 'noble death' (honorable death, virtuous death) has its roots in this context. Saniotis has been the benevolent spirit hovering in and around this whole enterprise, bringing his training in martial arts, his fieldwork among Sufis in Delhi, and his phenomenological orientations in anthropological theory to our discussions. 'Noble death' is Saniotis's gloss on the term *seppuku*, a ritualistic act of suicide or honorable death. This idea in turn cannot be grasped without awareness of other facets of Japanese ways of being, for instance, the concepts of *giri*, *chū* (loyalty), *wa* (harmony), and *kenshin* (dedication), and their ideas of shame and atonement.

It is not easy to translate *giri*, though the terms 'moral duty', 'obligation', 'responsibility', and 'sense of honor' are presented as rough approximations. *Giri* is often associated with the sentiment of atonement. A famous eighteenth-century tale describes how 47 samurai warriors,¹² whose lord drew his sword at Edo Palace when he was insulted by another *daimyo* and was therefore ordered to commit *seppuku*, bided their time and then avenged their lord by killing the insulter in the full knowledge that this would mean their own mass

seppuku—in effect, redeeming their status.¹³ This act rendered them noble or, rather, recovered their lost nobility in ways that enhanced their moral worth. As Young (2002: 414) stresses: “[I]n the samurai’s sacrifice of self we find a romantic image of suicide as a heroic, moral, and aesthetic deed.” So saying, it would be tenuous to impose a Western moral gloss to *seppuku*. *Seppuku* could be viewed by samurai as a way of mitigating the dross of previous human incarnations, rendering the samurai a “better rebirth” or even to be reborn “into the same *samurai* family so that they could continue serving their lord and his descendants” (Jones 1996: 3). In this way, ‘noble death’ is a culmination rather than a cessation of a samurai’s life, an action performed within the ambit of selfless service to his lord.

Because it has been the inspiration for the concept ‘noble death’, embodied Japanese practices have provided our opening acts of sensitization, even though there is no case study involving Japan among the four articles in this special section. On axiomatic grounds we assert that one should not extend key ideas from one cultural context to different domains in oversimplified ways. Therefore, ‘noble death’ as an organizing parameter has not been set in stone within a Japanese straitjacket. The phrase was left undefined to allow ethnographic context to direct participants’ elaborations. But insofar as we are encased within the world of contemporary English-speak, we propose to reflect upon its commonsense meanings in this context. This places us, here, at one fork in the road being carved out in this introduction. But there is another fork to pursue more immediately—one that arises from the serendipity between the Japanese world of martial arts and the pursuit of *silat* in the Malay lifeways that is elucidated in graphic detail by Farrer in his contribution to this collection.

Aesthetics, Mystical Power, and Death in *Silat*

Just as most Japanese would be aware of the idea of *bushido*, most Malays are aware of *silat*. Farrer’s work took place among earnest *silat* practitioners and masters at the apex of its practice. It would seem that there are historical links between *silat*, *kalaripayattu* (the martial arts of Kerala), kung fu, tae kwon do, and the whole range of Sino-Japanese martial arts, a commonality—amidst differences—that must have been facilitated by the networks of commerce across the Indian Ocean and the shores of the Western Pacific, extending back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE. Though they are not replicas of each other, these martial arts share ‘elements’ that include disciplining the body, aesthetic appreciation, precision of movement, harnessing energy, and using an opponent’s movements to one’s own advantage.

The graceful dance known as *bunga*, which is one aspect of *silat*, may not, Farrer warns us, seem like combat training—till one places a razor blade in the palm. Whether *keris* or razor or sword, blade usage is central to the warrior art of *silat*.¹⁴ In *silat*, as with some other martial art forms, particular emphasis is attached to the human eye. In both *bunga* and combat maneuvers, the practitioner is taught to look out of the corner of his eyes. The goal is to develop peripheral vision in

order to track the shadow of one's opponent (Farrer, this volume). *Silat* pupils are also encouraged to sit with a dying person and scrutinize the latter's eyes so as to evaluate his or her relationship with spirits and the "unseen realm" (ibid.).

Mystical dimensions are integral to *silat*. *Silat* practitioners believe in the power derived from the four-cornered *belebat* design that composes their footwork in the *bunga* and from the interconnections between the *urubos* (a talisman showing a snake eating its own tail) and the "shadow soul" (Farrer, this volume). Ultimately, *guru silat* believe that life and death are emanations of "the One," a fundamental idea that to outsiders is suggestive of mystical primordialism. It is no surprise, then, that Farrer describes the *guru silat* as a "warrior-chemist" (ibid.).

The self-disciplining of *silat* masters roughly parallels the trajectory of Indian *sannyasin*, insofar as their 'journeys' are directed toward transforming their dirty selves into clean, wholesome beings. This preparation sometimes includes a "graveyard ordeal" at cemeteries and contemplation of death in ways meant to secure equanimity in the face of death (Farrer, this volume). Farrer therefore develops the image of 'deathscapes' and provides his ethnography with a theoretical 'stretch' that renders it perhaps the most theoretical of the essays in this section.

His elaboration of 'deathscapes' is directed against approaches that highlight semiotic structures or static Durkheimian models that focus on collective representations. He follows Gell in emphasizing the 'doing' in art forms and thereby valorizes the analyst's focus on "an embodied set of practices." In this line of interpretation, Farrer adopts Kapferer's concept of "virtualities" (or "virtual worlds") and is explicitly in step with Kapferer's stress on the creation of meaning in ritual.¹⁵ In effect, in our reading, the dynamic agentive world of being/doing is rendered central: one cannot 'do' without having a 'being' within the doing.

At the ethnographic level, moreover, we find that Malay *silat* artists speak of *mangkat* (noble death) and *mati jihad* (good death), as well as approximations of their opposites. These concepts are not always clear-cut, and Farrer underlines the ambiguities permeating their usage as well as "the limits of translation."¹⁶ Significantly, however, the imprint of the extremely hierarchical world of Malay sultanates is inscribed within this terminology: *mangkat* is to be 'wafted aloft' and describes a royal person's death.

Just as significantly, a classic form of ignoble death in the Malay context was decapitation, an image that *silat* masters were more likely to present as an outcome of their (type of) action—as illustrated through past tales of retribution that often involved an ethnic other, whether Chinese or Indian, as object/victim. Here, then, the sharp edge was administered against someone tainted, a Kaffir, in other words, even when unstated. This version of a 'good' killing and 'bad death' has approximate affinities with the Manichaean perceptions guiding the Nepali Maoists described by Lecomte-Tilouine: as a weaker and oppressed underclass, they understood their killing to be a cleansing operation to rid their land of "decaying corpses" and vermin, albeit vermin of royal blood or stooges of royalty.

The rich details in Farrer's essay are a good introduction to a collection of articles that are weighted more toward ethnography than theory. His knowledge derives not only from dialogues with *guru silat*, masters of the art. Since securing a black belt in kung fu in 1996, Farrer himself has had a long involvement in *silat*, having studied five of its forms and become a *silat* instructor in 1998.¹⁷ This, then, is a case of "performance ethnography" in Zarrilli's terms (1998), or what I call practitioner ethnography. Where feasible, it is the best form of participant observation.

Hero, Martyr, and 'Noble Death' in English-Speak

To set the context of debate more generally, we focus initially on the commonsense understandings that may be associated today with the idea of 'noble death' in the world of English-speakers (and, by qualified extension, in the West). The term connotes a certain moral worth to one's way of dying, but its limits can be assessed by juxtaposing it with the notion of 'hero', and then placing both ideas beside the concept of 'martyr'.

The Battle of Britain pilots are widely regarded as heroes who, in dire circumstances, endangered or sacrificed their lives in defense of their country. But they are rarely presented as martyrs. The idea of 'martyr' would seem to demand a religious context and be predicated, ever since the early modern period, on the sharp distinction between religion and other spheres in the Western world. Martyrs are victims of more powerful religious forces, individuals who went to their deaths in stoic defiance without changing their faith.

Joan of Arc is the classic case of the martyr. But let us introduce you to "the voluntary martyrs of Cordoba" in Spain in the ninth century CE through Cook's work. In circumstances where Spanish Christian society "was in the process of being assimilated by the Arabic speaking Islamic civilization," in the period 850–859, "a number of monks and Christian leaders voluntarily committed actions they knew would lead to martyrdom, primarily [by] cursing the Prophet Muhammad or impugning his prophethood, in the capital city of Cordoba. Although the numbers were not very great—around a total of 50 over the nine-year period—their spiritual example was a powerful one for Latin Christianity, which was just then beginning to come into its own."¹⁸

These instances occurred in the medieval context when society was permeated by religious values and, in the language made famous by Weber, "enchanted" lifeways.¹⁹ Following the development of secular rationality into a position of hegemony in the West, it would seem that the badge of martyrdom is not pinned that readily (except perhaps in Italy and Ireland) on those who sacrifice their lives heroically in contexts deemed to be non-religious. Generally speaking, moral worth is attributed through such adjectival renderings as 'noble death'. Moreover, such worth, the grandeur of nobility, is not the prerogative of all heroes. Those who are heroic in an attacking mode and in contexts of equivalent strength do not quite attain the aura of those heroes and heroines who die fighting against the odds, outgunned, outnumbered, and as 'victims'

of superior forces. They must also be on the 'right' side, of course—the side of the writer/speaker. The attribute is usually a political term associated with legitimacy of cause. If he died fighting in Afghanistan today, Osama bin Laden would never be accorded the glory of a 'noble death' by most Westerners.

The idea of 'noble death' is also rooted in the vocabulary of the superior classes, betraying its origins in feudal Europe/Japan and revealing the manner in which the aristocratic ranks of society monopolized such attributes as chivalry²⁰ and bravery. It is only in more recent times, from the late nineteenth century onwards, that such concepts have seeped through into more generalized usage. This temporal dimension within its usage in the English-speaking world can be explored through a challenging case, the death of convict William Westwood at the penal prison of Norfolk Island in 1846.

Welcoming Death: The Fortitude of William Westwood

Westwood was aged 16 when transported to the penal institutions of New South Wales in 1837. He escaped in 1841 and became a bushranger with the colorful sobriquet 'Jackey Jackey'. Recaptured, he was then sent to the prison at Port Arthur. Any visit to Port Arthur today is adequate to convey the brutal conditions of surveillance and punishment that dominated prison life in the early nineteenth century. There, Westwood escaped again. He was thence dispatched to Norfolk Island, wholly penal and miles away from any land, where he joined a mutiny and was sentenced to death. As he languished in death row, he penned the following lines to a chaplain who had befriended him at Port Arthur:

Sir, the strong ties of earth will be wrenched and the burning fever of this life will soon be quenched and grave will be a haven, a resting place for me William Westwood. Sir, out of the bitter cup of misery I have drunk from my sixteenth year ... ten long years ... I welcome death as a friend, it is that which deceives no man. All will then be quiet ... no tyrant will disturb my repose, I hope. Sir, I bid the world adieu, and all it contains.

William Westwood, 26 years, his writing.²¹

These are magnificent lines. One can imagine a subalternist scholar²² today investing Westwood with heroic greatness, with nobility perhaps. But that would be a reading of the past through the lens of present-day values. Such an interpretation would reflect the seepage of aristocratic virtues into our contemporary evaluations. After reflecting upon these evocative lines in the light of his own interest in 'noble death', Roberts concluded conjecturally that the vocabulary of nobleness would have been alien to the laboring poor of nineteenth-century Britain and thus of colonial Australia.

To underline this point, a clarification of context is called for. If the laboring poor were downtrodden, convicts were doubly so. In the penal institutions in Australia, recalcitrant prisoners were regularly flogged with the cat-o'-nine-tails in full view of other convicts. Those who did not wail or utter sounds earned the respect of their mates. They were the hard men, the admired men. As a

bushranger and escapee, Westwood would have been among those so admired. How then would his peers have described Westwood's resolute fortitude, his welcoming death as a "friend"? A 'noble death'? Surely not. When Roberts presented this speculation to Maxwell-Stuart, his answer was brief: "You are absolutely right—the Tasmanian convict expression for a rebel prepared to push a point as far as the gallows was an 'out and outer.'"²³ Grandeur was clothed with other adjectival vestments.

The concept of 'noble death', therefore, is infused and imbricated with upper-class mores. It is also grounded in individualism as that phenomenon has taken shape in the West. Contemporary forms of 'noble death' are attributed to individuals who sacrifice self on behalf of a legitimate cause in dire circumstances beyond their control. The famous 'Scott of the Antarctic', Captain Robert Scott, is a classic example. In the (incorrect) popular tale, he walked out of his tent to die because his incapacitation was endangering his comrades. Likewise, by unwritten rule or romanticized popular legend, ship captains, whether naval or merchant marine, are expected to stay with their vessels even as they founder to the bottom, for the attachment of captain to ship is held as, well, kind of 'sacred'. Edward John Smith, captain of the ill-fated Titanic, "appears to have made no effort to save himself" when it was sinking after hitting an iceberg on 14 April 1912. Significantly, the statue in his memory at Lichfield was molded by Lady Scott, Scott's widow.²⁴ 'Noble deaths' embraced.

Liberation Struggles in Nepal and Sri Lanka

Though aimed primarily at an English-reading audience, all of the investigations in this special section have been among peoples whose expressions have been predominantly in their native tongues. However, in pursuing their present liberation struggles—'just causes' from their point of view—both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tigers) and the Maoists of Nepal have drawn upon the repertoire of global justifications. They have also deployed the concept of 'martyr' to describe their hero-figures and fallen. Innovatively inserting a term borrowed from South India, the Tigers mostly describe their dead as *māvirar* (great heroes) in Tamil, but loosely translate this as 'martyrs' in their English representations.²⁵ The Maoists speak of their dead as *shahid*, using the Arabic term for 'martyr' that has long been inscribed within Urdu, a major language of the Indo-Gangetic plain. Through Urdu, the word *shahid* slipped into the other languages of this region as a description of those who died in the anti-colonial struggle against Britain. Thus, the militant revolutionary of the late 1920s, Bhagat Singh, is often referred to as *Shahid* Bhagat Singh. In effect, this version of 'martyr' has been indigenized in North India for over 80 years and has probably been part of Nepali-speak for many decades.²⁶

Lecomte-Tilouine's essay thematically dissects the self-representations of Maoist revolutionaries in contemporary Nepal. This is a field that has not seen much scholarly research, so these early writings are breaking new ground. Poetry, sometimes from diary entries, is one of the major genres that she deciphers. Because it

is a medium for both the literate and non-literate, poetry is a significant arena (cf. Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005; Roberts 2002). The evocative outpourings of the Maoist proponents are not only propaganda but also a means of self-motivation that simultaneously bonds one to another.

The Maoists draw on the radical democratic vocabulary that is rooted in Marx and channeled through Mao Tse Tung (or Zedong), but this intellectual inspiration from abroad is merged with ideas emanating from a Hindu cosmos replete with fierce deities, primordial energies, and ambiguous avatars of the Good. Perhaps the most significant facet of this heritage is the manner in which the fighters clothe their commitment in the traditional imagery of *bali dān*, a sacrificial gift.

The classical models of such gifts in Nepal were of two types: the kingly or *kshātriya* rite, involving the offering and killing of buffaloes, and the *brahmanical* rites of animal or vegetable offerings to the gods.²⁷ Both rites, as Lecomte-Tilouine stresses, were “directed toward the unification of the collective,” as the latter was defined by the context of the occasion. The Maoist sacrifices of individual selves have a similar collective goal centered on their leader and party. But whereas both types of traditional rite accord the victim moral worth, the Maoists disparage and demonize their enemies. Engaged in a brutal conflict, their pictures of the opposing forces are organized by Manichaeic schemes that are underlined still further by the image of themselves as the downtrodden who are challenging evil forces with superior resources.

But the differentiation is not clear-cut: the Maoists also depict themselves as the vanquished demon Raktabija (literally, Blood-Semen), whose blood creates another demon—in effect, contending that their martyred dead have “demonic” capacities of multiplication (Lecomte-Tilouine, this volume). One suspects that this ambiguity is in line with the character of many Hindu deities, for popular readings depict them as possessing a double-sided character.²⁸

This particular tropic imagery is similar to themes deployed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), thereby suggesting quite profound inspirations rooted in Hindu cosmology as it straddles the regions of the sub-continent in diverse yet overlapping ways. It is surely striking that both Nepali Maoists and Tamil Tigers rely on horticultural imagery and draw upon the metaphor of the seed in celebrating the power of their martyred dead. The LTTE, as Schalk insists, do not bury their dead, but rather “plant” them. And their dead are conceived of as seeds, so that notices on Black Tiger Day proclaim: “[W]e are not dead; we have been sown.”²⁹ To those who know Shulman’s writings, this will be no surprise. In southern Indian heritages, semen, milk, and blood are closely interconnected, and their overlaps are part of popular folk practices and beliefs (Shulman 1980: 103–105, 345–346). The goddess Kannaki’s torn left breast is said to have wrought avenging, and therefore legitimate, destruction. Likewise, but inversely, creative forms emerge from the anvil of destruction. Creation and destruction transform into one another: “[L]ife is born out of death.”³⁰ For Hinduism more generally, “death is necessarily sacrificial, because, without it, no life can happen” (Bowker 1991: 157–158).

The Maoists, as Lecomte-Tilouine reveals so incisively in her article in this collection, see themselves as gifting their bodies for the greater good in ways

that make them immortal. Their world-view is permeated by a focus on death. Death is even beautiful. Many a fighter repeats variations on a theme embodied in a key catchphrase proclaimed by the Maoists' demi-god leader, Chairman Prachanda: "We die while laughing, we laugh while dying." Thus, says Lecomte-Tilouine, death is "interiorized and accepted in advance."

In the Nepali instance, then, the triumphalism normally associated with underclass movements of Marxist inspiration is tempered—perhaps even subordinated—by a substantial dose of fatalism. While such strands are not absent in the representational terrain plowed by the Tigers, the mix does not seem so one-sided. The lamentation and mourning that occur at LTTE rites, the morbid cast of so many representations, are counterbalanced by the celebratory exuberance of the Tigers' cultural pageants (e.g., those known as *Pongu Thamil*, or Tamil Resurgence). Even their mourning rites involve a transformation of energy that evokes the final, triumphant goal of an independent state (see Roberts, this volume).

Roberts analyzes pictures depicting one such rite involving personnel from the LTTE's commando unit, the Black Tigers, from within which suicide attackers are recruited. Through a clarification of background material, including flower symbolism in Tamil culture, a *prima facie* case is made for the suggestion that some Black Tigers could have been using the martyred dead as intermediaries in a votive request for a 'good death', namely, one that secured effective strikes and served their comrades well. Roberts's analysis employs Turner's concept of "conjunctiveness" and Copeman's emphasis on "ongoing agentive capacity" to contend that this is a moment of fusion between past, present, and future. In this contention, Roberts is building on previous essays that draw out the regenerative potentialities of such commemorative Tiger rituals (see Roberts 2005a and 2005b).

That the LTTE should have a more optimistic outlook than the Maoists is not surprising. Their organization has had a transnational network from early in its existence, and it has controlled territory since late 1990, thereby rendering it a *de facto* state. Moreover, despite misreadings by some Indian journalists, as well as scholars of 'suicide terrorism' who straddle the globe and dip into this-and-that case,³¹ it is widely known that the LTTE is not Marxist-Leninist at base. The Tigers' ideological determinations have been largely nationalist and indigenist, while also being driven in the Tamil tongue and thus being beholden to its heritages (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994: 54–74; Ravindiran 2004: 17).³²

In many ways, moreover, the LTTE is the epitome of a modern rational organization, as Roberts's essay in this section takes pains to elaborate. Thus, along one dimension the Tigers' institutionalization of mourning rituals and the elaborate creation of a sacred topography through cenotaphs and 'resting places' for their martyrs are part of a strategic program meant to captivate the people they command and to draw on them for their resources. But this instrumental usage, in Roberts's argument, comes from within their hearts and thus from within the cosmos that has nurtured them. Whether the Tiger fighter is Saivite or Catholic, his or her cosmological background has been nourished in the Tamil language and is permeated by a belief in the energizing principle of *sakti* (see Roberts

2005a). When Prabhākaran (more properly, Pirapāharan) pays homage to the *māvīrar* on 27 November every year, therefore, he is not merely deploying a tool but also grieving for and honoring one of his dearest comrades, Shankar, and all Tiger dead.³³ To those LTTE fighters who are so inclined, these sentiments, Roberts conjectures (this volume), are a means of harnessing the spirits of the dead to energize the ongoing cause. On this point the Tiger representations are not quite as explicit as those of the Maoists, but in pressing this argument Roberts is informed by the age-old practice in parts of India, especially southern India, of burying the heroic dead and marking them as iconic gravestones called *nadukal* (hero stones—literally, planted stones) that are then invested with supra-mundane power (Kailasapathy 1968: 76; Rajan 2000; Settar 1982).

Roberts uses this material from the world of the Sri Lankan Tamils to question the conventional modernization-secularization thesis, which interprets the advance of rationalism as a force that sweeps magical and enchanted beliefs and practices away or confines them to backwater nooks. Weber's writings are among those that have sponsored this notion, though there are disagreements among Weberian specialists on this issue, with some insisting that Weber believed in a relativist and 'perspectivist' position rather than any unilinear, developmentalist picture (Brubaker 1984: 4; Kalberg 1980: 1151, 1155–1157; for elaboration, see Roberts, this volume). But there is enough within Weber's vast corpus of publications to suggest that he linked rationality and disenchantment in ways implying that the triumph of rational structures would disable reliance on the supra-mundane. Among the Sri Lankan Tamils assembled under Tiger command in search of an independent state, this is simply not the case.

However, Roberts's thesis on these lines proceeds through quintessentially Weberian methods that emphasize the agentic world and the power of symbols. In his stress on "embodied practices," Roberts replicates the vocabulary and approach of both Copeman³⁴ and Farrer. All three authors, as well as Lecomte-Tilouine, could be said to be pursuing Weber's emphasis on social action, even though they employ slightly different vocabularies. If the direct inspirations from Weber are not obvious, it is merely because they have been filtered through countless teachers and in this collection have been 'brokered' by anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern, Geertz, Gell, and Kapferer.

Though he engages social actors residing within the realm of Indic civilization, in his contribution to this section Copeman is not addressing a situation of violent conflict involving a mass of people—unlike Lecomte-Tilouine and Roberts. Nevertheless, he examines a fundamental confrontation: a challenge directed at the heart of Hindu familial values and practices by a home-grown body of reformers assembled as an association called the Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti (Body Donation Society) or DDDS. This is a minute but highly articulate group located centrally in the capital city of Delhi and possessing influential connections. Its members press their radical demands, moreover, by advocating, as well as personally adhering to, Hindu ascetic codes—arguments that supplement the welfare-oriented, utilitarian arguments that promote body donation in the international circuit. In campaigning for individual Hindus to donate their cadavers for medical purposes and the alleviation of other Indians

in need of organ replacements, the DDDS is asking families to forego the cremation of dead relatives. Cremation is both mandatory and widespread among the greater bulk of Hindus in India. For kinsfolk of a dead person, to confront an absence of cremation is to face a traumatizing abyss.

Thus, the DDDS reformists are, rather like those Indians who produce cookbooks about the use of leftover food (Appadurai 1988), modernizers. But whereas the cookbook writers are pursuing rupee value through a useful commodity, the DDDS reformists are seeking to maximize medical welfare. Their philosophy is utilitarian, but they also insist that donors (including themselves) hold their bodies in trust for this future use by adhering to strict dietary and disciplinary regimes so that their cadaver becomes a perfect, maximally disposable gift after they pass away. As Copeman concludes, “It is not that renunciation is disenchanting by being made practical, but rather that utilitarianism is enchanted by being made ascetic.”

The DDDS represents a medicalization of the Hindu reform movement in ways that engage modern complexities in a nuanced manner. If we, as writers on ‘noble death’, move a culturally specific concept between domains in order to probe meanings, the DDDS also represents an exploratory engagement that utilizes asceticism intelligently in order to produce striking ‘modernist’ effects. The ascetic rendering of cadaver donation illuminates the way in which all body and body part offerings place a renunciatory obligation on donors. Moreover, the remarkable poetry written by DDDS members reveals a preoccupation with quantification that is a novel spin on cadaver donation as well as understandings of *karma*.

Some Common Threads

As the title of this special section indicates, all four studies dwell on the manner in which bodily power is enhanced, with Copeman, unusually, focusing on post-mortem maximization. All of the articles examine committed individuals assembled together in ventures that demand self-discipline and selflessness. The vocabulary of renunciation and austerity runs through their discourse and practices in varying measures and combinations. Notions of personhood are therefore engaged and reshaped in the course of these practices. When war and rebellion are involved, the emphasis is on the negation of self in support of the cause.³⁵

In the line of emphasis presented in this collection, the parallels with the Japanese world in its expansionist phase from the late 1890s are obvious. The nihilistic, self-negating strands of Zen thinking were among the ideological resources deployed by the Japanese state in order to mobilize people for its imperialist expansion in Manchuria, China, and elsewhere (Victoria 1997, 2003). Such instrumental usage would not have been feasible without pre-existing cultural foundations. Thus, in addressing the world today, a socio-psychological study of the Japanese contends that “the Japanese conceive of the self as socially embedded” and concludes: “[B]ecause suicide in Japan is viewed

as a potentially honourable, virtuous, and even beautiful act of self-sacrifice expressing one's duty to one's group, the Western perspective is quite foreign to the Japanese self-conceptual framework" (Young 2002: 414). Continuing, the study states: "For the Japanese self-sacrifice is, as Brentano would express it, a 'rule of the heart'. The values giving moral legitimacy to suicide run deeper than the act of suicide itself because self-sacrifice plays an integral role in Japanese life" (ibid.).³⁶ However, the integral nature of suicide in Japanese life operates within philosophical understandings rooted in Zen Buddhism's notion of "*karma* as a type of causation," whereby a person's present situation has been determined by "past moral actions" (Palmer 1997: 5). Whether or not such a notion of moral causality is fatalistic does not mitigate the centrality of self-sacrifice for samurai, on the one hand, and Japanese military personnel during World War II, on the other.

As with the Japanese, the inward focus in our four case studies involves a 'face' oriented toward death. While this might seem most prominent with the *silat* pupil rehearsing death in a grave, it is clearly pervasive in the conditions encountered consistently by Maoist and Tiger fighters. Take the attitudes of the Tamil people in the interior of Batticaloa district where Margaret Trawick conducted fieldwork in early 1998. Many civilians "expressed profound ambivalence towards the LTTE," but most people had no faith at all in the Sinhala-dominated government, while the memories of army massacres in the area were deeply etched in their memories.³⁷ When she conducted interviews with the teenage students of the school at Anilaaddam, Trawick discovered that they "took it for granted that if they joined the LTTE they would die." So the choice facing the students at the end of their schooling was simple: join the LTTE or live (Trawick 2002: 368).³⁸ This was not fantasy. All LTTE fighters carry cyanide vials, and their oath of commitment is one that accepts self-inflicted suicide if duty and comradeship so demand. In the standard Tiger view, the cyanide capsule is their "friend" (Schalk 1997a: 64).³⁹ William Westwood would empathize with them.

The emphasis in this collection of essays is on ethnography, with a leaning toward the deciphering of ideological representations. The theoretical compass is restrained, so that it is a tale of 'ethnography plus'—extensions outwards on the foundation provided by actor-oriented case studies. These thrusts profit from their juxtaposition beside one other and the insertion of the Japanese martial arts traditions and practice of virtuous suicide within this comparative framework.

In contrast with the other three contributions, participant observation is negligible in the study by Roberts: it is analysis at a distance. This limitation is thrown into sharper relief by the extent of time spent by Farrer among his *silat* martial arts personnel—not merely as an observer, but as a practitioner. It will be understood, however, that both by upbringing and self-definition, Copeman could not conceivably become a Hindu engaged in the traumatizing prospect of cadaver donation. Nor could one expect Lecomte-Tilouine to convert herself into a Maoist rebel nor Roberts to transform himself into a Tamil Tiger.⁴⁰ This is a lighter note on which to conclude a deadly serious subject.

Notes

1. This special section originated in part from Saniotis's concept of 'noble death'. He intended to bring his research experiences among the Sufis of Delhi to the comparative sweep of this collection, but illness and other commitments prevented him from participating in the middle stages of this venture. In joining the introductory commentary, Saniotis brings to the discussion a long and deep familiarity with Japanese martial arts. Like Farrer, he speaks here as a practitioner.
2. This is not fiction. The suicide manual for kamikaze pilots reads: "Remember when diving into the enemy to shout at the top of your lungs: '*Hissatsu*' [Sink without fail]" (Axell and Kase 2002: 82).
3. When Monica Seles burst onto the tennis scene as a youngster in the early 1990s, her orgasmic grunts as she hit every ball aroused titters and comment. Since then this practice has become standard fare among tennis players, an outcome of theorized practice and a pragmatic technique of harnessing energy and honing precision. The grunt or shout at the moment of strike is in fact deployed in many forms of human confrontation. An eight-man rugby scrum yells as it 'locks horns' with the opposing scrum and shoves. The infantryman is taught to yell as he thrusts his bayonet into a dummy bag replicating the enemy soldier, whether to frighten the other or to hone his own focus or both.
4. From the glossary accessed on Kristen Kyle's Web page, "The Last Warrior: Samurai Culture" (http://www.kristenkyle.com/rbb_tlw2.html) and Kasulis (1993: 306).
5. *Bushido* refers to "the way of the warrior; [a] complete philosophy about an upright, honourable way of life; a way of life considered long, *step*, full of numerous difficulties, travelled as a means of self-cultivation and leading ultimately to self perfection" (http://www.kristenkyle.com/rbb_tlw2.html). Also see Ohnuki-Tierney (2002: 115–120) and Axell and Kase (2002: passim). Note that the opening sentence of the famous *Hagakure* (1716) reads thus: "Bushido means to die" (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002: 117).
6. See Victoria (1997: 123; 2003: 4, 70), as well as http://www.kristenkyle.com/rbb_tlw2.html. In its cinematic spin on this aspect, *The Last Samurai* emphasizes the difficulty encountered by Tom Cruise, as a non-indigenous hero, in learning this essential ingredient of combat skill.
7. When Col. Niimi Hideo, moved by right-wing extremism, used his sword to assassinate Major General Nagata Tetsuzan in 1935, he "felt deeply ashamed" (in his own words) because he had not felled Nagata in one blow (Victoria 2003: 30).
8. Cf. G. Cameron Hurst III, "Samurai on Wall Street: Miyamoto Musashi and the Search for Success" (http://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltart_Hurst_0101.htm). Musashi wrote the famous *Book of Five Rings* on military art and science in 1703.
9. Fabian (2000: 22) states: "As Mushashi himself discovered, to develop as a total human being, martial valour and ferocity needs tempering with the sensitivity and softness more frequently associated with non-martial, creative arts."
10. Note the stress on aesthetics in Ohnuki-Tierney's book (2002).
11. Communication by e-mail, Ohnuki-Tierney, 18 February 2003.
12. Ohnuki-Tierney (2002) warns us that there were only 46 samurai, but 47 is now the legendary figure of popular understanding.
13. See Ohnuki-Tierney (2002: 143) and Axell and Kase (2002: 9–11). There are several *kabuki* performances devoted to this tale and more recently, of course, films.
14. In response to Roberts's query, Farrer noted that news clips of training camps conducted by radical Islamic groups in Indonesia indicate the use of *silat* techniques, such as *loi*, a side-to-side jumping technique (e-mail note, June 2005). Some *silat* postures have also been incorporated in commando training in Singapore.
15. This approach emerged through the detailed exegesis in Kapferer's *A Celebration of Demons* (1983), but has been expanded and redirected in Kapferer's other works (1997, 2003, 2004). It is particularly his 2004 article in *Social Analysis* that Farrer draws on.
16. E-mail communication with Farrer, 15 April 2005.

17. Farrer's e-mail response to Roberts's query, 19 June 2005.
18. See Cook (2004: 139–140), where he draws on Waltz (1970: 143–159, 226ff.).
19. Weber's focus, however, is more on disenchantment and secularization. See Weber (1948a: 350–351; 1948b) and Roberts (this volume).
20. When the bilingual intellectual Nitobi Inazo wrote *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* in English in 1899, he translated *bushido* as "chivalry" (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002: 117).
21. Display cabinet, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart, supplemented by information sent by Elspeth Wishart (senior curator), letter dated 3 June 2005.
22. For the uninitiated, let us note that the term 'subaltern' does not refer to midshipmen, but rather, in the Gramscian sense, to the underclass. The renowned series, *Subaltern Studies*, under Ranajit Guha's editorship, was sponsored by Oxford University Press in Delhi from the 1980s.
23. E-mail note from Maxwell-Stuart, mid-April 2005. Maxwell-Stuart is one of the editors of *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives*, published by Melbourne University Press in 2001.
24. From *Encyclopedia-Titanica*, edited by Karl Metelko (<http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org>).
25. The LTTE use *māvīrar* to denote their fallen only. There are no living hero or heroine *māvīrar* (Schalk 2003: 397–399). See also Schalk (1997a).
26. E-mail communications from Partha Ghosh (23 June 2005) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (24 June 2005). The latter notes that the term *shahid* was part of the Left vocabulary in Bengal in the 1940s. Ghosh notes that "sometimes it is used even in a romantic context: 'for her I will become a *shahid*.'"
27. Even the vegetarian gift-sacrifice is treated as if it were an animate victim. For an analysis of the Bartaman rite in Nepal, which involves Hom vegetal sacrifices, see Gray (1979).
28. Hinduism, of course, has significant regional variations. The character of the Tamil, Bengali, and Nepali gods suggests that in the sub-continental context, the fierce, ambiguous side of the religion is more pronounced at the peripheries of its civilizational reach.
29. See <http://www.TamilNet.com>, 6 July 1999. Also see Schalk (1997a: 68), Trawick (1999: 155), Hellmann-Rajanayagam (2005), and Roberts (2005a).
30. See Shulman (1980: 90, and also 28, 53, 105, 108, 345). One cannot understand Kapferer's (1998) work on Sinhalese nationalism without attending to the influence of this paradigm in his analytical work.
31. See one question presented to Pirapāharan in an interview for *Frontline*, 30 December 1985 (<http://www.tamilcanadian.com/eelam/nl/m301285.shtml>), and Pape (2003: 343). Also see Bloom (2005: chap. 3) and Reuter (2002: chap. 8) for examples of global surveys that encompass the LTTE through brief 'visitations'. For a review of the LTTE's transnational networks, see Peiris (2001).
32. For the socialist currents in the development of Tamil nationalism, see Ravindiran (2004). These currents, arguably, were most significant in the late 1960s and 1970s, but the decline of two of the militant groups and the rise to hegemony of the LTTE since 1986–1987 have subsumed these early strands. This is not to say that socialist elements are totally absent among the LTTE leadership.
33. For details about the grief caused by Shankar's death on 27 November 1982, after he was smuggled into Tamilnadu, see Schalk (2003: 400–401).
34. More obviously in Copeman's earlier article in *Social Analysis* (2004).
35. Remarkably, it took a little while before the literature on suicide bombers was directed to the force of sacrificial gift-giving as a means to draw recruits to a radical cause (see, e.g., Strenski 2003), a line of argument that must surely complement conventional studies that focus on material deprivation or political rage. Such an approach also challenges simplistic, dismissive arguments that stress fanaticism.
36. There are three different words in the Japanese language to refer to suicide, and two of them "suggest an honourable or laudable act done in the public interest." Thus, "suicide ... does not have the immoral connotation ... that it has in ... English" (Axell and Kase 2002: 4). Note also the comments on selflessness in the text and endnotes above.

37. The local people referred to the prawn project massacre of 1987 and the rice mill massacre of 1991 (Trawick 2002: 367). To this one could add the Sathukondan massacre of mid-1991. The 1991 state massacres followed the killing of some 600–750 Sinhala and Muslim policemen (out of the total of about 800, the Tamils being spared) who had surrendered on official orders after the LTTE broke the peace with a sudden offensive and surrounded the police stations.
38. Note that Trawick is fully conversant in folk Tamil, having worked in Tamilnadu for years and produced a classic book, *Love in Tamil Poetry*. Thus, her leisurely interviews with the students (Trawick 2002) are not of the same character as the sociological survey conducted by Mia Bloom (2003 and 2005: chap 3) during a fleeting visit.
39. Also see Schalk (1997b: 61–63), Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1994: 67), and Roberts (2005a and 2005b).
40. This did not prevent the editor of the *Daily News* from rejecting Roberts's articles on cricket on the grounds that he did not wish to have "anything to do with that LTTE political scientist," when an intermediary broached the prospect.

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