

Book review on book exploration of the state of war

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Introduction

Thomas Conlan, in his book, *The State of War*, shows how the political and military changes through war in a country or region, greatly affects a society. The widely held concept in the world is that only technological innovations, class struggle or demographic fluctuations are the only events that can cause society transformations. Thomas Conlan explores the battles fought in Japan in the fourteenth century to show how the war greatly influenced the Japanese society. He highlights the life of the warriors at that time in the history of Japan. Book *Exploration of the State of War* In today's culture praise is given to the many nameless soldiers who have participated in the World War 1 and 2. The fourteenth century Japanese warrior would be greatly shocked since the essence of participating in the war for him was the recognition he would receive. He reasons that there should be rewards, honour and fame for participating in a battle. Secondly, in the Japanese culture in the fourteenth century, the warriors would be flamboyant in the way they dressed. Those who dressed extremely well stood out in the battlefield and were expected to be outstanding performers. Another difference that Thomas Conlan notes with the present world is that in the wars fought in the history of Japan, women participated as warriors on horseback. There were even armours designed for the female body. There are records at that time showing that there were women soldiers who used to do the work of verifying the petitions of the warriors. This shows the extent of authority the women had as the verification of petitions was the work of military leaders. There were several social classes in Japan before the fourteenth century war broke out.

The social class known as the courtiers dismissed the women warriors. This attitude has continued in many people even today. There was war in the 1180's in Japan and the Kumakura Bakafu clan emerged as the political leaders. They solved judicial conflicts and as result helped maintain stability in the country. Japan at this time was divided into three social strata. There were the courtiers and the warriors. The warriors owned enough land and had authority to mobilise the country's resources. The rest of the people had the duty to fight for their warrior Lord. However in this period there was no trace of class hostility. In fact the lower class people looked to the others as examples and role models. In the fourteenth century, Japan found itself in chaos. There were several reasons why war erupted in the fourteenth century. First of all there arose a succession conflict among two royal lineages, the Daikakuji and Jimyoin. The Kumakura Bakafu decided that the two lineages would take the throne in successive order. One king from one tribe would take control then later the King from the other tribe. Hearing the solution, the citizens, both from the lower and upper classes immediately began to take sides and the country was divided into two groups. This occurred in the year 1331. The Kamakura bakafu, started being hated by both centres of power for coming up with the succession solution. An emperor from the Daikaku lineage rejected the proposal and overthrew the Bakufu. This was in 1333 and the action led to war. The warriors saw how weak each political party was therefore they were unable to respect and obey their masters. The act of war did not lead to punishment. The way war was regarded at that time is different from the way it is regarded now. The fact that lives were lost did not escape them however despite their divergent

view. The one who succeeded in a feud and killed the other was regarded as a hero. The state tried to condemn the feuds however when the civil war broke out, they could not control the people anymore and actually started to mediate the feuds. The state ceased as there arose powerful wealthy people with great personal interests. Once the war erupted, the regimes had to get warriors to fight on their side. Invitations were sent to the warriors and they had a partial obligation to be loyal to their commanders. Before the war, the warriors had been wealthy, owning a lot of land and operated independently. The war changed this causing them to be dependent on the regional leaders. . The warriors, in fighting for their status, lost their autonomy due to the costs of war. They lost most of their wealth. The warriors at the beginning, made a mistake in modelling their behaviour to the twelfth century warriors while fighting in the battlefield. The battlefield became tough for them. There was also an interesting culture that used to be practised in the twelfth century where the warriors laughed in battle and maintained a farce. At that time there had been an aspect of playfulness in the war. The fourteenth century warriors laughed at the reality of lost lives trying to emulate the twelfth century warriors but eventually they discarded this practice. There were no armies as such and the fighting groups would split after a battle. If there were no rewards or land to conquer the warriors lacked motivation to fight. Society changed in that a person's status was now determined by his wealth rather than appointment by authority. The state also had no power any more to engage in coercive violence solely. After the war, fighting was integrated into the political and judicial system. Violence became the norm rather than the exception. It was part of everyday life. There were different

political viewpoints at this time. Daigo had the belief all power came from the leader. There were those on the other hand who believed that the people had political rights. The war continued for three centuries and affected the state and society greatly.

The warriors were no longer autonomous although they were able to secure a degree of political independence. The regional lords had great authority that previously had been concentrated at the centre.

In the war there were archers on foot or horses and there were also warriors. Long swords were used to attack the enemies and also break the legs of horses. The two intense periods of the war were between 1333-1338 and 1350-1355(Conlan, 2007). There are certain myths that Thomas seeks to address in his book. First of all it is the myth that people fought the war without a desire for personal glory or gain. In movies and books today, the current portrayal of the samurai is that he was a soldier who was bound to his master by great loyalty. This is a fallacy since at the time there was no loyalty demanded as the warriors had no lords who they had to follow to death. In fact the warriors could die for anyone and any who did so was regarded as a hero. The regional wealthy were able to impose a tax system and control small armies. The warriors demanded for some level of compensation for their acts. In fact the warriors submitted petitions to their commanders after a battle.

The warriors would state clearly what happened in the battle even where they had fled due to innumerable casualties. Boasting was also common where they had been great victory. The petitions were analysed very

thoroughly. The generals would sign the petition papers which the warriors would use to claim for remuneration. The warriors would leave a commander and go to the rival where they felt the compensation given was not adequate.

Another interesting aspect of the war in the fourteenth century was the way the warriors would cut off the heads of people during the war as proof of winning the battle. There were orders by generals to the warriors not to cut the heads. Once there were witnesses to prove the other party was dead that was enough.

Despite the orders the practice had already taken root and it continued to be done. Though the act right now may be deemed to be barbaric, it became the custom. The warriors took the heads of anyone in the battle. In the later years the act became a subject of ridicule and in the sixteenth century mutilating the dead was considered a criminal offence. There was also a superstition that heads could be used to curse people as they had supernatural power. The divine was highly considered by the society and used to explain why certain things happened. The divine impacted the political and social lives of people. Events such as dreams, omens and occurrence of star constellations were recorded as it could be having a certain meaning or important clues. Religion was so crucial it was part of the political and social system. Furthermore the priests at that time petitioned for rewards. They could either mutter curses or fight in the war. Both acts were considered to be comparable and equal. As time went on though there arose Zen Monks who criticized the curses uttered by other priests.

Conclusion

In studying how war was carried out in a society one understands the people and the societal transformations that took place. War was what changed everything in the Japanese culture and politics. At the time, the war was everything and nothing existed outside the war. The war transformed how things were carried out. There were new attitudes and a ways of thinking that arose at that time.

Works Cited

Conlan, Thomas. "The State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth Century Japan". Michigan University: Centre for Japanese Studies. 2003. Print.