

Shame in Japan

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In recent years, many and significant changes have taken place within Japan. Japan is no longer the country or culture it was in days past. This is particularly true of young people. Their attitudes towards themselves and others are substantially different than their parents' or grandparents' generations. In general, I believe there has been a movement toward more of a sense of individualization than Japan has ever experienced before. The environment in which these same young people are living is also very different. As a conclusion to this article, I would like to briefly address how youth in Japan today are relating to one another and the context in which they live. One important aspect of the Japanese culture can be found in the concept of shame. Ruth Benedict is the one who deserves the credit for calling Japan a "shame society." She writes:

A society that inculcates absolute standards of morality and relies on men's developing a conscience is a guilt culture by definition.... In a culture where shame is a major sanction, people are chagrined about acts which we expect people to feel guilty about. This chagrin can be very intense and it cannot be relieved, as guilt can be, by confession and atonement.... Where shame is the major sanction, a man does not experience relief when he makes his fault public even to a confessor.

True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism.⁽¹⁾

She also states:

“If you do this, if you do that,” their elders say, “the world will laugh at you.” The rules are particularistic and situational and a great many of them concern what we should call etiquette. They require subordinating one’s own will to the ever-increasing duties to neighbors, to family and to country.⁽²⁾

Benedict made some insightful observations about post-war Japan. She saw the rich soil for the fear of ridicule and ostracism beginning early in life. She understood how a failure to follow the expected good behavior was shame (*haji*). However, she was reductionistic in calling Japan a “shame culture.” I contend that there are no shame cultures or guilt cultures, only societies that tend to emphasize one over the other. Both elements are found in a culture like Japan, as both are found in American culture.

Others have been critical of the extent of her work as well. Jean Stoetzel relates:

While praising the penetration of the great American ethnologist, the Japanese have not been sparing of criticism, and have especially taken her to task for selecting too narrow a base for her study, for paying too little attention to the population as a whole, and for relying on documents supplied by intellectuals brought up in the samurai tradition.⁽³⁾

Augsburger also sees Benedict’s terminology as a reduction of something complex to a single emotional control pattern. He writes, “Subsequent research confirms the hypothesis that anxiety, shame, and guilt are a universal developmental sequence, although they occur in varying measures and are expressed in diverse cultural patterns.”⁽⁴⁾ There is no desire on my part to move back to a point calling Japan a shame culture, but it is meaningful to recognize that Benedict did give a focus to shame and its importance to the Japanese scene.

Importance of Social Relationships in Japan

Chie Nakane, professor of social anthropology at the Institute of Oriental Culture in Tokyo wrote an informative book on the sociology of the Japanese back in the 70’s. She showed the importance of the group and roles within Japanese society. She

talks about frame and attribute. Frame may be a locality, an institution or a particular relationship which puts people into one group. Attribute means being a member of a definite group or caste. “Executive” and “janitor” refer to attribute, but “members of XYZ corporation” and “student of ABC University” refer to frame. “In group identification, a frame such as a ‘company’ or ‘association’ is of primary importance; the attribute of the individual is a secondary matter” ⁽⁵⁾

Once an individual enters a group, his or her relationship to others in that group remains the same for the duration of that relationship, whether in a family, school or business. As Nakane shares, “A Japanese finds his world clearly divided into three categories, *sempai* (seniors), *kohai* (juniors) and *doryo*. *Doryo* meaning ‘one’s colleagues’, refers only to those with the same rank.” ⁽⁶⁾ When this relationship is established even early in a person’s career, for example, it remains unchanged for life.

In order to be accepted and effective in a group, an individual needs to go along with the decisions of the group. If one opposes the decision of the group, he/she will be opposed. “Indeed, it often happens that, once a man has been labelled as one whose opinions run contrary to those of the group, he will find himself opposed on any issue and ruled out by majority opinion. No one will defend him in any circumstances.” ⁽⁷⁾ This kind of control helps to regulate in-group behavior but it also limits the free expression of thoughts and ideas. In fact there is frequent use of “should” and “must” words in the Japanese group. “The feeling that ‘I must do this because A and B also do it or they will laugh at me unless I do such-and-such’ rules the life of the individual with greater force than any other consideration and thus has a deep effect on decision making.” ⁽⁸⁾

This understanding of relationships leads to an either/or situation where one is either in the group completely or not at all. Nakane writes:

With group-consciousness so highly developed there is almost no social life outside the particular group which an individual’s major economic life depends. The individual’s every problem must be solved within the frame.” ⁽⁹⁾

Also, the behavior of one individual effects the entire group. If one person does

something embarrassing it also reflects on the groups he/she is a member.

Historically in Japan, there seems to have been a need for social harmony over individual aspirations. The strong emphasis on harmony has a secondary effect. It makes people sensitive to the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of others, which also opens the door for shame to enter. Befu touches upon this subject:

It is often said that Japanese lack a sense of individualism, self-identity, or the concept of self, implying that one's decision is heavily affected or colored by considerations of how others socially around him might feel about his decision and its consequences. Decisions a Japanese man makes are affected by these considerations because his anticipation of how the others will feel in turn affects his own emotional state of mind. Thus an ethical decision tends not to be made strictly on the basis of abstract or universalistic principles, but rather on the basis of his anticipation of the feelings of others.⁽¹⁰⁾

This is confirmed by the way the Japanese speak. "In conversation the speaker often does not complete a sentence but leaves it open-ended in such a way that the listener will complete the sentence before the speaker clearly expresses his will or opinion. There is much mind reading and implicitness in the Japanese context. Looking more closely at the Japanese language will verify this.

For example, number is often not made explicit in Japanese. Singular and plural can be meant by the same word. Hajime Nakamura writes, "This clearly evidences the Japanese trait to think of things in terms of human relationships rather than as separately existing facts in the objective world."⁽¹¹⁾ Nakamura also writes:

The first person or the second person is often omitted as the subject in a Japanese sentence. Generally, in such a case the subject is implied in the whole sentence-structure, but frequently a sentence may completely lack the subject. The subject can be determined according to the context. The Japanese do not want to express explicitly the subject of an action, unless necessary. This indicates that the Japanese do not think it always necessary to mention the individual

or an independent performer of actions as an objective being.⁽¹²⁾

The ambiguity of the Japanese language is also shown in their use of the interrogative. To the question “Aren’t you going?” the Japanese would reply “Yes, I am not.” In English we would say “No, I am not.” Nakamura states, “The Japanese reply refers to the opinion and intention of the interrogator, whereas the Western reply refers to the objective fact involved in the interrogation. In short, a Japanese replies to his interrogator, not to the fact involved. This points to the importance of relationships. If possible the Japanese will try to communicate implicitly rather than verbally. As Christopher relates, “Japanese religiously shun explicit, carefully reasoned statements in favor of indirect and ambiguous ones basically designed not to communicate ideas but to feel out the other person’s mood and attitudes.”⁽¹³⁾

There are two other sets of two words each that relate to this use of language. *Omote* (front) and *ura* (back) is one set. They are not separate but one term implies the other. They suggest a unity. Takeo Doi, a leading Japanese psychiatrist and professor of mental health at the University of Tokyo suggests that these two words correspond to the distinction between *soto* (outside) and *uchi* (inside) that is often prominent in the Japanese consciousness of human relations. He writes:

For it is possible to say that words are *omote*, that they conceal/express and express/conceal the mind (*kokoro*), which is *ura*.

In this way, words conceal the mind even as they express it, but this act of concealment is by no means limited to deliberate concealment. Every time we say something, we also conceal, in the instant we put it into words, everything outside it, by choosing not to put it into words.⁽¹⁴⁾

A second, but related set of words is *honne* (one’s real intention and motive), in contrast to *tatemae* (public or official stance). Again these are words are a unit with the existence of each word implying the other. Doi sees *tatemae* as a product of socialization and *honne* as an expression of self-consciousness. He argues with the help of George Mead’s “self” and “I.” Doi writes, “Mead’s concept of ‘self’ corresponds

to *tatema*, and his ‘to become an object to one’s self’ is related to the formation of *tatema*. His ‘I’ is similarly related to *honne*.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Beside language, more active forms of shaming can also be found. Many forms of shaming can be seen, but performance expectations, overprotecting and overinvolvement are frequent. The push for performance expectations is primarily found in the area of education. One of the ideals of the Japanese is a high level of skill, competence and performance which leads to achievement and success. Roland shares how this is nurtured by the mother:

Japanese mothers in particular inculcate expectations for high levels of performance.... The ego-ideal is fueled in good part by the internalization of maternal expectations, with deep feelings of gratitude and obligation to a mother who has been overwhelmingly devoted and sacrificing to her children, and with profound feelings of guilt and shame when not fulfilling maternal values. The mother in turn derives much of her own sense of esteem from her children’s performance and success.⁽¹⁶⁾

The intimate tie between mother and child is evident. It is almost a symbiotic relationship. Devos and others report on a Thematic Apperception Test done to compare Japanese and Chinese. They state:

The Japanese mother evaluates success in her own life through the success of her children. Their success is her success; their failure is her failure. Children are especially sensitive to her sacrifice and suffering.... Themes of control and concern over correct (idealized) action by the individual are dominant in the Japanese stories.... The seeking of autonomy on the part of a child is the single most important source of conflict depicted in the Japanese stories.⁽¹⁷⁾

Many of these pressures to do well are used to “save face” with the rest of the community. Gorer also saw a relationship between being laughed at and losing face.

In all societies, being laughed at is felt to be unpleasant; in Japan, however, it is the most drastic sanction of all, more dreaded by most than the greatest physical pain and deprivation.

The very unpleasant feeling of fearing mockery, of bashfulness, is called *hazukashii* ; and the fear of being mocked, and thereby “losing face” is a major motivation of Japanese behavior.⁽¹⁸⁾

Not losing face is a powerful motivator in Japan. One of the major ways of avoiding this is to avoid behavior or situations that may cause shame. A unique Japanese psychopathology that comes about from conflict is called *shinkeishitsu*. Roland succinctly states what this is:

This kind of personality and psychopathology is characterized by powerful perfectionistic ideals, various compulsive rituals, and considerable social shyness and fear of others, with a strong tendency toward withdrawal.... In other words, the person with a *shinkeishitsu* personality unconsciously fears that the other will sense and strongly disapprove of his intense inner competitiveness, as he unconsciously does himself from that other part of his ego-ideal that so emphasized sensitivity and harmony with others.... These analysts also note that the majority of patients with a *shinkeishitsu* syndrome have been either the inheriting oldest sons or only sons, for whom family expectations for responsibility and achievement are the strongest.⁽¹⁹⁾

Many elements of shame are found in the above quote. Another area that has already been linked to shame is dependency. Dependency is something found early on in the life of a Japanese. The Japanese term for this is *amae*.

Doi has done substantial work with *amae*. He defines the word:

Amae is the noun form of “*amaeru*,” an intransitive verb that means “to depend and presume upon another’s benevolence.” This word has the same root as *amai*, an adjective that means “sweet.” Thus *amaeru* has a distinct

feeling of sweetness and is generally used to describe a child's attitude or behavior toward his parents, particularly his mother.⁽²⁰⁾

Doi sees *amaeru* as an affirmative attitude towards dependency. He found an English equivalent while reading Michael Balint's Primary Love and Psychoanalytic Technique. Balint used the terminology "passive object love."⁽²¹⁾ Doi saw this as *amae*.

He contends that *amae* is a key concept to understanding not only the psychology of the individual Japanese but Japanese society as a whole. He views the infant's desire to be close to its mother as a prototype of *amae*. Ultimately it is a psychological attempt to deny the fact of separation from the mother.

Especially for those of us in the West, dependency is natural in infancy, but is seen as unhealthy in later life. But Doi was finding this concept alive and well in many of the clients he dealt with. He writes:

I have observed that during the course of psychotherapy the patient's *toraware* (to be bound or caught) can easily turn into hypersensitivity in his relationship with the therapist. This hypersensitivity is best described by the Japanese word *kodawari*. *Kodawari* is the noun form of *kodawaru*, an intransitive verb meaning "to be sensitive to minor things," "to be inwardly disturbed over one's personal relationships." In the state of *kodawari* one feels that he is not accepted by others, which suggests that *kodawari* results from the unsatisfied desire to *amaeru*.⁽²²⁾

Doi describes how many patients confessed they had not "possessed their self," or appreciated the importance of their existence, apart from their desire to *amaeru*. He saw this as a step towards a new consciousness of self, in contrast to the previous state of "no self." Doi also saw the relationship between dependency and shame. He quotes the Renaissance Scholar Juan Luis Vives who wrote "Passive love, that is, the tendency to be the recipient of love, produces gratitude; and gratitude is always mixed with shame. Shame would naturally interfere with the sense of gratitude."⁽²³⁾ This would corroborate the findings of Fossum and Mason, that there is a high correlation

between shame and dependency in families.

Shame and the Japanese Sense of Self

The subject of private and public self within the Japanese context is of importance especially as it relates to shame. Their understanding of self is vastly different from the thinking of a Westerner. In fact, historically the Japanese were taught to have no self, but to live in service for others. Hiroshi Minami writes about the Tokugawa period (1603-1867):

Books of *shingaku* (popular ethics), which taught a philosophy of life to the masses of the Tokugawa period, always encouraged the people to have no self. The purport of the term is not to act as one pleased, forgetting who one is, but to serve one's superiors dutifully.... Whether one realizes it or not, the concept of no self is identical with the spirit of service above self, where every spontaneous impulse is rejected as selfishness.⁽²⁴⁾

This sense of no self can still be seen to some degree in Japan today. In Japan, self-orientation or individualism connotes selfishness and non-social behavior. The collective aspect of society is more important than the personal. This is manifested in Japanese who have no sense of who they are. Roland tells how some Japanese therapists have referred to their clients as onions:

When you peel all the layers off, you get down to nothing. What they mean is that many patients are brought up to be closely in touch with others' feelings, needs, and moods while being completely out of touch with their own. Simply to ask what they are feeling usually elicits no response.⁽²⁵⁾

Wagatsuma has seen this sense of no self developing early in childhood. He states:

Sensitivity to appreciation and vulnerability to feeling depreciated, slighted, degraded, or ignored is strongly developed in Japanese socialization, especially

in males. Japanese social control relies heavily on sensitivity to shaming. Japanese children are sanctioned to sense they are being observed by outsiders. Few Japanese achieve a sense of self, that is, independent of the attitudes of others.⁽²⁶⁾

The shaming that takes place when a Japanese is concerned about him/herself leads to this idea of no self. However, it is not entirely true to say the Japanese have no self. They do have a self but it is highly private self. It may not even be expressed to one's own family members. I discovered that many Japanese keep a personal diary in which they will record their most intimate, private and revealing thoughts and opinions. Things could be expressed and communicated in this form that would never be said to others. Roland comments that the Japanese sense of private self with its various feelings and thoughts is kept quite hidden, and is communicated only indirectly and through subtle nonverbal means."⁽²⁷⁾

The Japanese tend to have a much larger public self than a private self. This is the side that is accepted and encouraged in society. Barnlund did a fascinating study where Japanese listed their own personal characteristics. Some of his results:

Under the heading, "What I am Like in Interpersonal Relations," they commented along the following lines: "I try to behave according to my role and circumstances," "I try to be as polite as possible," "I pretend to be calm and cool, even when I am not," "I rarely show my true self," "I don't say all of what I think," "I try to keep the conversation happy and pleasant," "I use words that won't hurt anybody," "I try not to disagree," "I escape difficult questions," "I always smile when I talk," "I try to agree, even when I don't."⁽²⁸⁾

What is evident here is that the Japanese will present a false self or an image to the rest of the world. They try to accommodate themselves to the expectations of their family, friends and society as a whole.

This raises the question of what kind of self the Japanese have. An appropriate term is a "we-self," coined by Dr. Al Collins, a psychologist and Dr. Prakash Desai,

a psychiatrist.⁽²⁹⁾ It refers to a self that is highly relational in different social contexts. This we-self leads to dependency and interdependency as Roland points out:

Child rearing in India and Japan foster capacities for intense dependence and interdependence; for an unusually high degree of empathy to others and receptivity to the norms of any given situation; for a we-self that is highly emotionally enmeshed with others but maintains a very private self; for unusually strong we-self esteem that must be constantly enhanced through ongoing mirroring and idealizing relationships throughout life; and a conscience that is particularly attuned to reciprocities in varying contexts, and the containment of ambivalences and anger.⁽³⁰⁾

Roland sees a major dimension of Japanese self-esteem being the attempt to reflect well on the family and other groups by high performance as a way of gaining respect and enhancing we-self regard. The we-self extends from the family to school or work and even to society as a whole.

In contemporary Japan with the many social changes taking place, young people find themselves caught in the tension between the old ways of seeing the self as a “we-self” and the more recent emphasis on the “self” as more independent. There is a desire to change but a fear of what that change might mean.

Youth of contemporary Japan may be under greater tension than youths of previous periods to find an equilibrium between the individual self and the need to accommodate themselves to the social environment.

Dynamics of Shame in the Education System

In Japan getting a good education is still considered by many as the most important thing an individual can do. This kind of thinking makes it imperative for a family to get their children through school successfully. Because education is so important, parents and others will do whatever is needed to accomplish that. Since shaming is such a potent and effective means of motivating, it is often used to “encourage” young people to do well in school. But this overemphasis on education may be one of the

major soils for shame to grow.

The education system also has considerable social implications. As Nakane shares, “Indeed, society in general regards educational background as one of the most important yardsticks of ability and social significance, and there is little regard for what a man has done outside school education.”⁽³¹⁾ Within school the way to decide whether someone is a success or a failure is by academic performance. Grades have become a substitute for education. Many students say that there is a great deal of pressure from various sources including parents, school teachers, administrators, peers, and the government to get good grades.

Part of the pressure put upon even small children is the pressure to conform to the system. There is a “right way to do things” and if it isn’t done that way it is wrong. Early in the education system this kind of thinking is inculcated. The “right way to do things” changes each time the student changes schools. For example, insecurity easily sets in when children enter in to a new environment. This happens soon after children first enter pre-school or kindergarten. For the first few years the Japanese child experiences nearly unconditional love for what he or she is, rather than what he or she does. However as the child approaches school age there is a need for that child to represent the family to the outside world. Because of this there is a shift to emphasizing the child’s obligation.

The child experiences this again upon entering elementary school, junior high school and high school. Statistically, first year high school students and first year junior high school students have more relational problems. They feel that others make a group and they can’t enter into that group. White confirms this in the movement to junior high:

The young person approaching exams or decisions affecting his future is no longer a member of a relatively undifferentiated and supportive group. He is now to be measured and selected as an individual, and, however well the moment of selection is buffered by the continuing nurturant relationship with family and teachers, the experience is strikingly different from what the young person has earlier known.⁽³²⁾

Recent Japan

Many of Japan's youth are out for thrills, avoiding the more stuffy and uniformed life of their parents. They are creating their own style, a more unfocused commitment to doing whatever they want, an attitude that may distress many of their parents. They dye their hair and pierce their bodies in places their parents may not have ever shown in public. They are often considered rude and on the trains and are often seen eating, drinking and putting on make-up. Younger and greater numbers of juveniles are committing crimes, many of which are violent in nature. It is reported that in 1996, 85% of the 16-to-18-year-olds surveyed said they had the freedom to rebel against their parents.

In Japanese, there is a term for juveniles who suddenly, and violently, go crazy: *kireru*, which literally means snapping. When they are angry, they don't have words to express their feelings. They often just react violently. The unexpected nature of this snapping behavior alarms many older Japanese. This is far removed from the ordered and predictable working of a society that has valued the group ethic over individuality in the past. "I'll never work at a company," he swears. "I can never be restricted like that again. I just want some freedom. In school, I lived in this society where everybody had to follow the rules and I never could seem to adapt."³³

Many young college graduates are refusing to work in a company and instead are getting income by taking only various part-times jobs. Many are becoming *freetas*: a newly invented word that combines the English-language "free" and *arbeiter*, the German word for worker. If they cannot find satisfactory employment, they will happily work at many different part-time jobs even if the pay is not as good. In this way they are able to make enough to get by but still have the freedom their parents never enjoyed.

In many ways, the younger generation is experimenting with a new form of individualism. You can see more forms of individual expression in action, appearance and the interaction between young people. I wonder to what degree this passionate generation will be able to transform Japan. I think it is still true that as young people graduate and seek employment, many of the ideals and issues they held dear in younger days, tend to be compromised in order to secure an adequate standard of living. With this in mind, I believe that the deep interest in individualism will be tempered somewhat

as youth age. However there still will be some impact on society as a whole. Their groups are much less committed to each other. Getting along is much more important than getting involved.

In the past the Japanese were willing to endure hardships for a long time. Of course this attitude surfaced after the war, and was the main way of thinking by the majority of Japanese for decades after the war. Now instant gratification and enjoyment is what is needed to sustain the attention of many youth.

Issues and circumstances that may have been painful or shameful for those now in their 50s, 60s and 70s, are not interpreted in the same way any longer by those in their teens and 20s. Using the language of Nakane as seen above, the importance of “frame,” or group identification in human relationships has been weakened and the aspect of “attribute,” or that of the individual has become more important with youth. I believe that shame is still experienced by young people. Shame is inherent in all individuals regardless of nationality or age. However the shame more be more localized or particular than in the past. By that I mean, the actions or situations of an individual in the past would bring shame upon a family or even society as a whole. That may no longer be true with youth. An individual may not experience shame in regard to the larger context of society or family but still experience the emotion of shame in regard to important peer relationships.

Put into different terms, the depth and breadth of the term “we-self” alluded to earlier has become shallower and narrower. Shame still exists and will continue to influence the Japanese, just as it will influence people of other cultures. The situations and issues that evoke a sense of shame has changed over time.

Summary

In the Japanese context, the importance of dependency and the understanding of a “we-self” became evident. In comparing the dynamics and function of shame as they exist in Japan, one can draw many parallels with the dynamics and function of shame in the West. If there are any differences, they are to be found more in form than content. By that I mean the origins of shame, the defenses against shame, and the discrepancies between private and public self are found both in the East and the

West. However, in Japan greater emphasis is placed on social relationships. Since peace and harmony are major goals within Japanese society, the Japanese are very sensitive to the reaction of others. The sense of self in Japan is primarily defined in reference to relationships to other significant individuals and groups.

Due to the priority of the community over the self in Japan, one still finds a rather vague, undefined and ambiguous sense of self, but over time that is slowly evolving. I believe that the use of the term “we-self” has been very helpful in grasping the significance of relationships in Japan. It pointed out not only the importance of community, but helped explain the emphasis on interdependency. It also gave insight into the presence of a highly private self. However, now the we self is becoming more and more just a self. It will be fascinating to observe youth in the years to come.

Reference

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- (31) Nakane, 115-16.
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- (33) Time Magazine, May3-May 20, 1999, p.22