The Kegare Concept

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Kegare (穢れ) is a Japanese concept that refers to conditions of spiritual contamination, uncleanliness, or pollution. The concept is thought to have developed in the Yayoi period of prehistoric Japan. It was written about by the Chinese in the Han and Wei chronicle and was mentioned in the Japanese Kojiki in 712 (Norbeck 1952, 269). Like many concepts associated with religious ideals and behaviors in Japan, it combines Shintoistic properties with Buddhist ones. As anthropologist Joy Hendry (2003, 119) observes, “Most Japanese people can without conflict practice both Buddhist and Shinto rites, sometimes these are even combined.” Because kegare is associated with menstruation, birth, death, and sickness, it can be frequently misunderstood as physical contamination. However, as my observations will show, the concern is not primarily over hygiene, but spiritual pollution.

The concept of pollution in Japanese society was more overt in previous eras and could even involve legal sanctions, but it has become more diluted over time. Laws originally in place regarding kegare have gradually been abolished. In 1872, for example, “the state abolished intragovernmental regulations regarding the birth kegare, a move that freed officials to go to work even if their wives or other female relatives had just given birth. Early in 1873 the council
went a step further by abolishing any and all regulations designed to prevent the transmission of kegare” (Bernstein 2006, 62-64).

My experience suggests that today kegare has become more of a social ideology than a religious doctrine, and if asked what it involves and why, Japanese people cannot often give a clear explanation. Some of this lack of clarity stems from the fact that rituals or behaviors can be kegare in some situations, and acceptable in others. As I will show, this is because one of the most polluting acts that someone can commit is “mixing realms” or acting in a way that disrupts the “normal Japanese” life cycle pattern. Although in Japanese there are other terms that refer to pollution, such as tsumi (罪), often translated as sin, I have chosen to use kegare for all pollution terms, because it is the broadest.

During my nine-month stay as an exchange student in Nagoya, Japan, I encountered customs that emphasized compartmentalizing and putting boundaries around things for purposes of maintaining “cleanliness,” even if there seemed to be little basis for this compartmentalization from the point of science—or even if the practices seemed contrary to a medical sense of hygiene. When we used exercise equipment at my host university, for example, it was expected that we would wipe down the machines with a dry washcloth. The stated reason for this was for the maintenance of hygiene, but this struck me as peculiar because no cleaning agent was used. It seemed to me that this was more of a ritual cleaning, rather than protection from bacteria. Another example supports this interpretation.

In the gymnasium, the kegare factor also regulated footwear. Unlike at many Japanese elementary and high schools, at my host university it was permissible to wear everyday shoes inside school. However, like most places in Japan, there are shoes that are designated only for gym areas, and you are not permitted to enter the gym wearing “outdoor shoes.” Although called “outdoor shoes,” the
The gym realm includes the tennis courts and the track. In the West, the distinction between gym shoes and street shoes is based on the type of shoe. The optimal shoe for places of exercise is one that supports the foot and does not harm the flooring or the gym equipment. The Western distinction is therefore about the type of shoe that should be allowed inside of a gym. In Japan, however, the stated reason is to maintain cleanliness. Yet, if students forget to bring their indoor shoes, it is permissible, at least in the case of my university, for them to enter the gym and use the equipment without shoes; they may either wear socks instead or just go barefoot. Since this seems particularly unhygienic, given the many people walking and running in these public areas and also dangerous on the exercise machines, there must be something else involved other than the cleanliness of shoes. It seems to me that this makes better sense in terms of kegare. The purpose of the shoes is to prevent the kegare of the outside world from entering the exercise area and to prevent the kegare of the exercise area from leaving.

Kegare can be seen again in the concept of bathroom shoes. In most family bathrooms, and in those of traditional Japanese hotels (ryokans), it is traditional to change out of one’s shoes and into bathroom slippers. When the tradition of removing shoes before entering into any home is also taken into account, a clear pattern can be seen of compartmentalizing each area of life and using these compartments to prevent any kegare, or uncleanliness from a polluted realm, from spilling into areas of life where it does not belong.

That there are distinctly compartmentalized domains in Japan is by no means a new discovery. In her overview of Japanese culture, for example, Joy Hendry (2003, 44) points out that “uchi and soto are associated with the clean inside of the house, and the dirty outside world, respectively. Japanese houses almost always have an entrance hall where shoes, polluted with this outside dirt, are removed and
it is one of the few inflexible rules enforced by Japanese adults that small children learn to change their shoes every time they go in and out of the house.” *Uchi* (内) is the Japanese word for inside and *soto* (外) means outside. Hendry (2003, 46) goes on to say that uchi expands into different realms, and that “even for each of these ‘inside’ groups a slightly different type of behavior will be appropriate.” There are other aspects of this that require elaboration. In my experience, there is not a set uchi, but a relative one. Depending on where someone was, or with what society they were currently associating, that became the uchi inside, and everything around them became soto. The only true soto that I found was that of being a *gaijin* (外国人), a term used for foreigner but that literally means “outside person.”

While the problem of mixing inside and outside things is evident enough from a Western perspective, it is also the case that mixing uchis produces *kegare*. Although many of the uchi’s have slightly different types of appropriate behavior, some have behavior that committed anywhere else would be *kegare*. The perfect examples for this are prostitution and adultery. Until 1957, prostitution was still legal in Japan (Dore and Bendix 1967, 302). In historic Japan, it was normal for a section of the city to be designated for legal prostitution. But this has to be carefully regulated to maintain proper relations within the inside boundaries. This can be seen when all prostitution in Edo (today’s Tokyo) was moved to the Yoshiwara district. “In the year 1617 … the city in general was purified, and all the libertinism in it—permitted, but regulated—was banished to one special quarter” (Chamberlain 1971, 524). Currently, prostitution is illegal in Japan, but “massage” parlors and hostess bars that offer “private sessions” can still be found throughout the country. These places are not hidden in back alleys; they are clearly seen, and advertisements for them are freely distributed on the street. Women were, and some
still are, expected to tolerate their husbands’ visits to such places or their other infidelities. As long as the husband never mixed his adulterous life with his home life and continued to maintain his household appropriately, then he was not sanctioned.

Another category of kegare is shi-e (死穢). This is kegare that pertains to death, translating into English as “death impurity” (Abe 2001, 1). Death, the sick and dying, and corpses, are thought to be kegare, and great caution is taken around death to avoid its spread. In his dissertation on impurity and death in Japan, Abe (2001, 10) describes a scene from Medieval Japan that exemplifies this: “In 1107 a corpse was transported from the country of Owari (Nagoya) to the house of a samurai lord, Hyooenojoo Iesue in Kyoto. The lord’s retainers, who were contaminated with shi-e of the corpse, walked around Kyoto and unwittingly polluted the whole city with shi-e. As a result, the government postponed sending imperial messengers to the highly sacred Ise shrine.” Thus, the pollution from a corpse was thought to be able to spread, much like germs on one’s hand.

I had a particular dramatic encounter with shi-e kegare in my experience in Japan when a fellow tenant of my apartment building committed suicide by jumping off the roof. A friend of mine discovered the still breathing man and called the police. The man died before he could be taken to a hospital, and once the body had been taken away, the focus of the police turned to disposing all evidence of the suicide, including the police tape, blood, and all police presence. The point was to make everything seem as if normal. The suicide occurred at around 3:00 a.m., but in less than two hours, by 5:00 a.m., there was no longer any sign of disturbance. Furthermore, there was no news coverage of the suicide, and the majority of the people in the building, including the owner, were not even aware of the incident. When my friend and I mentioned the death to people at our international center, we were expressly told not to mention it
again, even to our fellow exchange students. This was surprising to me since an exchange student had found the body and because it is common policy in the United States to provide a grief counselor to students whenever an incident involving a traumatic death occurs.

Besides a corpse itself being kegare, an abnormal death can also be polluting. As Lebra has noted, “Being killed or dying in a natural disaster is as sinful, in the polluting sense, as killing” (1976, 238). In an attempt to alleviate the problems associated with such an abnormal end to the course of a normal life cycle, the hanayoume ningyou ritual (花嫁人形) was created. Hanayoume ningyou is Japanese for “bride doll.” This is a marriage ritual held for the spirit of a young relative, such as a miscarried offspring or a victim of disease or war who has died before being able to marry. The ritual is called “bride doll” because if the partner is not thought of as another spirit, it is said to be a doll. Typically a doll and a photo of the deceased are encased in glass and kept so that offerings may be made regularly to it. The doll’s spirit is thought to care for and comfort the deceased as a wife would a husband. Only after some thirty years of such comfort is the deceased thought to feel satisfied enough to move on in the spirit realm (Schattschneider 2001).

While death is one of the most polluting aspects of kegare, sickness, birth, and menstruation are also defiling. In The Religions of Japan from the Dawn of History to the Era of Meiji, William Griffis (2005, 85) observes that “Disease, wounds, and death were defiling, and the feeling of disgust prevailed over that of either sympathy or pity…. Anciently there were huts built both for the mother about to give birth to a child, or for the man who was dying or sure to die of disease or wounds. After the birth of the infant or the death of the patient these houses were burned.” With modifications, this is still relevant.
In modern Japan, many medical situations are influenced by kegare. For example, a patient’s visit to a women’s clinic is organized so that there is as little direct contact with her as possible. The patient covers her face at all times, and the doctor does the examination from a separate room. There is a half door that opens into the patient’s room so that there is an impression that the doctor is in a separate room even as a vaginal exam is done. Face-to-face meetings, even ones requested by the patient, are not allowed (Nadolny 2009). When past practices regarding women are taken into consideration, it appears to me that this practice is less about patient privacy and more about protecting the doctor from the kegare of the female body.

In an important article written about post-war Japan called “Pollution and Taboo in Contemporary Japan,” Edward Norbeck (1952) wrote about how menstruating women took meals separately from other family members to avoid polluting them. The women would also carefully avoid any shrines and temples, and the hearth fire at the home had to be changed after the last day of her cycle. The kegare of childbirth also lasted 32 days, and during this time the new mother could not leave the house through any of the rooms that held a household shrine. For the first 15 days, the mother must do no cooking, and if she went outside, she must cover her head in order to avoid defiling the sun (Norbeck 1952, 272-273). During the Heian period “women were considered creatures of deep sin, destined in death to be thrown into the pond of [their own menstrual] blood in hell” (Wakita 2006, 31). Today in Japan, menstruating females are allowed to enter shrines but are encouraged to enter by going around the shrine gate to avoid defiling the structure (Nishiwaki 2010).

The purity of food is of great importance to the Japanese. Historically, so-called unclean people, called the eta (穢多) (the kanji can be translated to mean an abundance of kegare), were not allowed to grow rice or live near areas where rice was cultivated. Today great
care goes into the packaging of foods into “pure” packages. An example is a package of cookies. Each cookie is wrapped separately in plastic, and then these cookies are placed into a plastic tray, and then this is wrapped in packaging identical to that found in the United States. In some bars that I have encountered, peanuts are placed in a bowl but are wrapped individually. This seems to contradict the stringent recycling laws that are found throughout Japan. While one could explain this packaging diligence as being there to avoid germs, food and drink is freely shared among friends, and in my experience there is no stigma between two friends, or even acquaintances, biting from the same sandwich or drinking from the same cup. Thus, it seems to make more sense as a manifestation of kegare.

Japan is a country that has traditionally had a rigid status system that some have likened to a caste system. It not only involved politics and economics but also regulated how one spoke. As Hendry notes, “Japanese language has quite clear speech levels, which are chosen according to the relationship between the people involved in a conversation, as well as the context in which they find themselves” (2006, 46).

At the bottom of the caste system were the eta people, now called Burakumin, who traditionally handled anything spiritually polluting. “The pariahs’ main occupations were leather work, bamboo craft, itinerant entertainment, peddling, gardening and unskilled labor, such as animal slaughter and removing sewage. Work dealing with animals was considered not lowly but extremely defiling” (Shimahara 1948, 340). Although originally defined by job, the condition of being Burakumin was hereditary and was also thought to be able to spread by contact. Although the government outlawed the caste system after World War II, discrimination against the Burakumin continues. Discovering Burakumin heritage can stop an engagement, and the Burakumin people still live in mass in designated
neighborhoods of old. In the family registries, although the term *eta* has been eliminated, the Burakumin people are now listed as “new people,” making recognition simple (Haruna 2009). Traditionally these people were not allowed to interact with Japanese society, except in their designated unclean roles. “They were scavengers, buriers of the executed, skinners of animals and tanners of hides. They were Japan’s untouchables, or more exactly, their uncountables, for even the mileage of roads through their villages went uncounted as if the land and the inhabitants of the area did not exist at all. They were desperately poor, and though guaranteed the exercise of their trades, they were outside the formal structure” (Benedict 1954 [1946], 61).

Even the act of wearing a popular hairstyle was forbidden to the Burakumin during the Tokugawa period. This was to prevent the hairstyle from becoming kegare and pollution spreading to the wider Japanese population (Shimahara 1948, 341).

Before I left for my stay in Japan, I read the quintessential anthropological study on Japan, Ruth Benedict’s book from the World War II era, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. While surprised at the number of similarities between Benedict’s Japan and the Japan I was seeing, I was interested that she never mentioned the term *kegare* in her work or talked about how pollution and cleanliness affected Japanese society. Her work focused on social patterns in Japanese society, especially those relating to honor, duty, and shame. Even the Burakumin people only received a brief mention in her book, far less than one page. Although not mentioned by name, I was able to find evidence of kegare in her book when Benedict talked about the soldiers who, when taken as prisoners of war, completely abandoned all ideas of returning to their family and focused on living their new lives in America. These people, by standards of Japanese definition, had become kegare. Instead of dying in battle, they had become “damaged goods” and had no hope of returning to their home country.
with honor. Even the wounded in battle were treated as damaged and were given little medical attention (Benedict 1954 [1946], 36-38). My explanation for the lack of mention of kegare and pollution in her book was that it was not described to her. Of course, when talking about Shinto rituals, cleanliness and pollution must be mentioned, but the far-reaching aspects of the related concepts themselves are rarely acknowledged. This might have had to do with the stigma associated with mentioning kegare. “Distancing itself from folk belief in kegare also contributed to the official effort to prove to the European and American powers, and to the emperor’s subjects, that Japan was on track to becoming a modern, progressive nation devoted to ‘civilization and enlightenment’” (Bernstein 2006, 65).

By way of conclusion, a brief discussion of the anthropology of purity and pollution is appropriate. In her classic analysis, Mary Douglas (2008 [1966], 489) found that there are four types of social pollution. “The first is danger pressing on external boundaries; the second, danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system; the third, danger in the margins of the lines. The fourth is danger from internal contradiction, when some of the basic postulates are denied by other basic postulates, so that at certain points the system seems to be at war with itself.” In my time living in Japan, I found kegare to be a mix of the second and fourth definitions. Transgressing the internal lines of the system causes internal contradiction. Japanese society is so compartmentalized that the concepts of right and wrong are purely situational. When the standards of one uchi muddy the standards of another, kegare is born.
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