

# Shame Society

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A shame society is one in which the primary device for gaining control over children and maintaining control over adults is the inculcation of shame and the complementary threat of ostracism. A shame society is to be distinguished from a guilt society in which control is maintained by creating and continually reinforcing the feeling of guilt (and the expectation of punishment now or in the hereafter) for certain condemned behaviors.

## **Japan**

The society of traditional Japan was long held to be a good example of one in which shame is the primary agent of social control. The first book to cogently explain the workings of the Japanese society for the Western reader was *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. This book was produced under less than ideal circumstances since it was written during the early years of World War II in an attempt to understand the people who had become such a powerful enemy of the West. Under the conditions of war it was impossible to do field research in Japan.

Nevertheless, depending on the study of members of that culture who were available for interview and study in the West, namely war prisoners at detention centers, as well as literary and other such records pertaining to cultural features, American anthropologist and folklorist Ruth Benedict drew what some regard as a clear picture of the basic workings of Japanese society. Her study has been challenged and is not relied upon by anthropologists of Japan today.

The high rate of suicide in Japan may be linked to this societal structure, as well as in South Korea, where there is a similar shame society.

## **Western society**

Contemporary Western society uses shame as one modality of control, but its primary dependence rests on guilt, and, when that does not work, on the criminal justice system.

Paul Hiebert characterizes the shame society as follows:

Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism, an acute personal chagrin at our failure to live up to our obligations and the expectations others have of us. In true shame oriented cultures, every person has a place and a duty in the society. One maintains self-respect, not by choosing what is good rather than what is evil, but by choosing what is expected of one.

Personal desires are sunk in the collective expectation. Those who fail will often turn their aggression against themselves instead of using violence against others. By punishing themselves they maintain their self-respect before others, for shame cannot be relieved, as guilt can be, by confession and atonement. Shame is removed and honor restored only when a person does what the society expects of him or her in the situation, including committing suicide if necessary.

(Hiebert 1985, 212)

### **America as a tamer of shame societies**

Dr. David Gutmann, emeritus professor of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago, said:

There appears to be a uniquely American approach to war - one combining ruthlessness and mercy - that can lead to such unexpectedly good outcomes. Thus, as with the Germans and Japanese in WWII, we first ruthlessly firebombed and A-bombed their cities, destroyed their air forces, sank their fleets, demanded unconditional surrender, and decapitated their wartime leadership. But then, against all precedents, as victors we did not pilfer their industry, turn their men into slaves or their women into whores. Instead, in peace-time we showed a quality of mercy that could not have been predicted from our practice of total war - the mercy that a humiliated enemy would not expect from a triumphant conqueror. Thus, we sponsored the rise of hitherto suppressed moderate leaders, we helped to rebuild the enemy's shattered cities; and under the Marshall Plan we encouraged their economies to the point where the Germans and Japanese became, for awhile, our major competitors for world markets.

### **Romani**

To the Roma, though living as local minorities in mostly Christian or Islamic societies, the concept of lajav ("shame") is important, while the concept of bezax ("sin") does not have such significance. This concept probably stemmed from millennia of living on the edges of other civilizations.