

Jibun Ga Nai

An Exploration of the Concept of the ‘Self’ in 1970s Japan as Evidenced in Language

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In the beginning of her 1990 anthropological work “Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace,” Japanese cultural anthropologist Dorinne Kondo recalls the first time she was struck with an awareness of a key difference between the American conception of the ‘self’ and that of the Japanese. She describes her feelings of being “bound by chains of obligation,” forced to comply with requests and solicitations which she felt she could not refuse and “still be considered a decent human being.” She recounts the story of how she had one day complained bitterly to her landlady about these feelings, which she was experiencing particularly intensely because of an interaction she’d had with a local teacher who recently asked a favor of her which she felt she did not have the time to indulge. Her landlady replied that the teacher had been “happy to give of his time to help ... and by the same token he considered it natural to make requests of others, who should be equally giving of themselves, their ‘inner’ feelings notwithstanding.” The landlady continued, “‘*Jibun o taisetsu ni shinai no, ne*’ [The Japanese don’t treat themselves as important, do they?].” (Kondo 1990:22).

The Japanese, says Kondo, value the maintenance of good relations with others much more than their own feelings. “Persons seemed to be constituted in and through social relations and obligations to others. Selves and society did not seem to be separate entities; rather, the boundaries were blurred” (Kondo 1990:22). Elaborating on this idea, Kondo continues with a critique of western anthropological writing on the idea of the self:

In anthropological literature, the conventional assumptions of the presence and unity of ‘the self’ and the use of the self/society binary as a foundational point of departure are reinscribed through rhetorical strategies which emphasize the referential meaning, decontextualized examples, and totalizing narrative closure. That one can even talk of ‘a concept of the self’ divorced from specific historical, cultural, and political contexts privileges the notion of some abstract essence of selfhood we can describe by enumerating its distinctive features. The invocation of ‘culture and self,’ ‘a concept of self,’ or a notion of ‘person’ links up with static essentialized global traits where selves can be discussed as a category quite separable from power relations (Kondo 1990:36).

Kondo takes issue with anthropological writings concerning the self for the same reason that Peirce takes issue with Saussure’s conception of the dual nature of the sign. Kondo argues

for an acknowledgement of the existence and importance of Peirce's *interpretant* when considering what it means to have a self in society. Rather than affirming the existence of a self as a 'transcendent signified,' a 'thing in itself,' she sees the assumption of a divided self/society as privileging certain viewpoints as objective and 'scientific.' Western viewpoints especially, she says, assume an indivisible self which is set apart from any group affiliation. This assumption she sees as coded into anthropological literature through "rhetorical strategies," by which she means the deliberate use of language to influence the reader so that they might interpret the author's viewpoint as privileged and objective. Citing Peirce, Kondo suggests that the self cannot be assumed to be static, measurable, or indivisible. "Proper use of Japanese," says Kondo, "teaches one that a human being is always and inevitably involved in a multiplicity of social relationships. Boundaries between self and other are fluid and constantly changing, depending on context and on the social positioning people adopt in particular situations" (Kondo 1990:31).

One area where the blurred line between self and society is particularly evident is in the formation of Japanese social structures. Japanese cultural anthropologist Chie Nakane, writing in the 1970s, investigated the history of Japanese social structures in an effort to better understand them and, by extension, the culture to which they belong. The archaeological record, he says, tells us that during the Jomon period, from 15,000 to 300 BC, Japanese culture began homogenizing, becoming more uniform in its cultural expressions. During that time, and before the beginning of the historical period beginning in the fifth century A.D., the nature of social structure took its definitive form, and has, he says, remained largely unchanged at its foundation. Village occupants during those years formed self-reliant groups stratified by seniority, and fulfilled various roles and responsibilities based on the needs of the group. These needs were paramount, and village harmony depended on consensus agreements among its members. For this reason, conformity and group identity were always key aspects of Japanese culture (Nakane 1970: 141).

Great weight was placed on a person's duration of residency and generational tenure, so that seniority tended to far outweigh things like quality of task performance. It was necessary for some group members to specialize, since the village relied almost entirely on its own residents for meeting its needs, but specialists were not usually afforded a higher status. A skilled craftsman arriving from an outside village would be met with coldness and hostility until he had 'done his time' and contributed to the village community for a considerable duration. However, he would eventually be accepted in and could count on a secure and steady advancement in rank over time. He could, then, also count on his eventual acceptance and integration within the community and an accumulation of respect and appreciation, but only with time and within that particular community (Nakane 1970:115).

Japanese society was built on the principle of locality, and individuals were ascribed value not based on inherent characteristics such as lineage or place of origin, but by their current group-affiliation and the rank accrued by extension of group affiliation. Though a tradesman may once have lived in another village and belonged comfortably to another group, he would have been extremely unlikely to be accepted warmly back into his old group after leaving and would instead likely have been met with coldness and hostility (Nakane 1970:115).

This principle of group affiliation created a Japan that was essentially an amalgamation of relatively homogenous villages in competition with one another and sustained by rigid group-affiliation. The group member could count on having their emotional and physical needs met by nature of the essential interdependence of members of their own group. It did not matter where

one had come from or what inherent characteristics they had; they were certain to receive acceptance and place among peers so long as they were willing to participate in the social system. Group membership was expected to be a life-long commitment. Entrance into the social system meant joining at the bottom but also promised advancement of rank, and thereby security and fulfilment for life in exchange for participation. This naturally entailed a considerable loss of personal autonomy.

Villages relied on consensus systems that operated on a principle of unanimous decisions, which were to be reached at any cost. Voicing opposition, then, meant risking ostracization and ejection from the group. Opposition of this kind implied immense risk to the village, as it was viewed as threatening to group stability and therefore the wellbeing of its members. Not even leaders had particularly privileged status in decision making, and one could not ever achieve high enough rank to ignore the group equilibrium or consensus system. The ultimate feeling was that, whether you were of high rank or low, your private and public life were constantly intertwined with the group (Nakane 1970:115).

As Nakane describes it, the same principles apply to 1970s Japan, though the dominant feeling of group affiliation has transferred from the village to the *uchi* (うち). “The term *uchi* describes a located perspective: the ‘in-group,’ the ‘us’ facing outward to the world. *Uchi* defines who you are, through shaping language, the use of space, and social interaction. It instantly implies the drawing of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Kondo 1990:141) (Emphasis added).

Uchi is expressed through language and shapes the identity of the addresser as well as the identity of the addressee, and it is entirely context-dependent. It informs the participants in the speech act about the nature of the interaction taking place. The identity of the interlocutors is negotiated fluidly, and “these multiple, infinitely graded layers of selfhood are often described in terms of two end points of a continuum: the *tatemaie* (建前), ‘social surface,’ that which is done to smooth social relations, and *honne* (本音), ‘real’ feeling; *omote* (表), the front, formal side, vs. *ura* (裏), the back, or intimate side; *soto* (外), outside, and *uchi*, inside” (Kondo 1990:31). The existence and popular use of these terms in the Japanese language suggests a particular sensitivity of the Japanese toward these divisions.

According to Kane, the Japanese man may express his *honne*, his ‘real feeling,’ privately with members of his *uchi* with whom he is really very close, but there may be members of his *uchi* with whom he would rather present his *tatemaie*, a surface-level presentation lacking the depth and warmth of *honne* but more suited to achieving harmony within a social situation. In formal meetings with *soto* (those felt to lie outside the *uchi*), one would be much more likely to present his *omote* (front, formal side), while back at his workplace or at the bar, among his close friends, he may feel it natural to present his *ura* (back, intimate side).

The *uchi* extends across the organization, but despite a general and strong feeling of group affiliation, interpersonal relationships within the group are organized on a one-to one basis. The individual working man feels himself a part of the group, and within the group he begins to form a close attachment with a particular higher-ranking individual. At the highest rank within his *uchi* one is likely to find a charming leader, an *oyabun* (親分), a man who finds himself in a position of authority by nature of his tenure in the organization and his ability to procure vertically stratified relationships with lower-ranking individuals, *kobun* (古文), within the organization. *Kobun* of lower rank are attracted to the charming qualities of their superior

and seek to engage in a reciprocal, but still vertically stratified, relationship. The traditional relationship between patron and client, landlord and tenant, and master and disciple, are all built on the *kobun-oyabun* principle. “Oyabun means the person with the status of *oya* (親) [parent] and kobun means with the status of *ko* (子) [child] ... The essential elements in the relationship are that the kobun receives benefits or help from his *oyabun* ... the *kobun*, in turn, is ready to offer his services whenever the *oyabun* requires them ... the *oyabun* plays the role of the father” (Nakane 1970:42) (Emphasis added).

A man who is oyabun to one may be kobun to another, and the group structure takes on the form of cascading vertical relationships, all of which link back ultimately to one individual at the top. The rank of one man within the group is readily calculated by comparison with those above and below him in the ladder of vertical relations and is made apparent through speech. The varying degrees of formality evident in all instances of speech acts between Japanese are expressed through the use of specific honorifics and morphemes. “Japanese ‘linguistic ideology’ (Silverstein 1979) directs attention to levels of hierarchy, intimacy, distance, and contextuality” (Kondo 1990:31). The use and frequency of these morphemes and honorifics within a particular speech event are indexical of the degree of distance in rank between the addresser and the addressee engaged in the act of verbal communication. A statement addressed to an inferior would be much shorter than one expressing the same information but addressed to someone of higher rank (Bergamini 2014).

The feeling of closeness that develops between an oyabun and his kobun is expressed indexically through the softening of such verbal formality. It is extremely disturbing for a Japanese person, says Nakane, to be confronted with formal language suddenly from a person who knows them quite well and with whom they thought themselves close (Nakane 1970). Between oyabun and kobun there usually develops a mutual allowance for expression of personal emotion and informality, which is not meant for public scrutiny. In formal meetings with *soto*, outsiders, a kobun will always defer to his oyabun and treat him with reverence, while the situation may be reversed at times behind closed doors. Though the kobun certainly depends on his oyabun, it is also the case that the oyabun depends on his kobun, and a sympathetic appreciation for and serious consideration of the thoughts and feelings of his underlings is expected of the kobun. Among employees of his same entry year (the only people with whom he can consider himself on equal footing) there is generally a feeling of hostility and competition for the attention and favor of the oyabun, generally masked or unexpressed for the sake of group cohesion (Nakane 1970).

The *oyabun-kobun* verticality and the competition for primacy is mirrored in the organization of ‘parent’ companies and their ‘child’ companies, which are stratified vertically by one-to-one relationships and yet constitute one collective, closed-circuit group, one *uchi*.

It is usual ... for a large business firm or industrial plant to attach to itself a considerable number of affiliated and subordinate companies, many of which are called its ‘child-companies’... It is very interesting to note that these relationships, called parent-child by the Japanese, between modern industrial enterprises are identical in structure with those between traditional agricultural households on a landowner-and-tenant basis in rural Japan (Nakane 1970:96).

It seems, then, that an organizational principle in terms of parent-child relationships constitutes the basic scheme of Japanese organization. This principle is to be found in almost every kind of institution in Japan ...” (Nakane 1970:96).

Nakane suggests that social structures in Japan are built on sociological principles, and not, as one might assume, economic ones. The group fulfils the emotional, physical, and psychological needs of its *uchi*, and its economic survival is understood to depend on the success of the provision of these needs. A westerner, Nakane says, is often perplexed by the lengths a company will go to in order to provide for the needs of its members and their families. That is why it is charming and sympathetic leaders in top positions at Japanese companies and not, usually, extremely skilled and specialized workers. As in the villages described by Nakane, specialization is still necessary for some within the modern Japanese organization, but for most, the vagueness of roles required of a given employee stands in stark contrast to the rigidity of the ranking system. Most employees will fulfil a large number of jobs in their tenure at the organization. It is accepted that everyone in the group will do what they can to meet the requests of their superiors to the best of their ability, and that is enough. The result of these expectations and arrangements is that, just as in the village, a strong but rigid group identification is formed, built on systems of mutual interdependence, rank, and mandatory consensus.

The group achieves a harmonious independence from other groups, having established its own norms, meanings, and values upon which to operate and which all members will subscribe to and enact or else risk expulsion from the ‘closed world.’ Since rank is based on seniority and individual merit is of little concern, even a top executive who has left one company will almost always find himself having to enter at the very bottom of the social hierarchy of his new institution. As a result, expulsion from the group is dreaded, and membership is, as mentioned earlier, expected to be lifelong. “In virtue of the sense of unity fostered by the activities and emotions of the group, each member is shaped to more or less the same mould, and forced to undergo the kneading effects of group interaction whether he likes it or not ... Even if individuality is not entirely submerged, at the very least the chances of cultivating it are very strictly limited” (Nakane 1970:131).

Inside the *uchi*, for the price of a stifling individuality, the employee’s needs are valued and provided for, but “there is no necessity for positive relations with other groups; instead, relationships tend to be competitive or hostile. ... The entire society is a sort of aggregation of numerous independent competing groups which of themselves can make no links with each other: they lack a sociological framework on which to build a complete integrated society” (Nakane 1970:102). The average worker’s social contacts do not extend past their place of work.

In 1973, Japanese psychologist Takeo Doi proposed a three-tiered model of the social world of a Japanese person, consisting of three concentric circles. In the inner-most ring he places the individual and their closest friends, colleagues, and relatives, people they could express their *honne* to. This inner ring is very similar to what we have so far referred to as the *uchi*. In the second circle, he places people with whom one has relationships built on *giri* (義理), socially contracted interdependence; these are people such as neighbors, coworkers to whom one is not familiar, individuals on whom one has relied for help and so incurred some kind of implied debt, and *soto* from other companies with whom one must interact for the benefit of one’s own organization. In this second ring, one has to exercise *enryo* (遠慮), or ‘social constraint.’ In the

outermost circle are placed the *tannin* (担任), strangers with whom one does not have any business. One need not exercise enryo with tannin, because good graces of tannin are totally irrelevant to the success and proper functioning of the uchi. The gauge for judging whether someone is dealing with an insider or outsider, for Doi, is the degree of enryo on displayed in an interaction.

Within both the innermost circle, the uchi, and the outermost circle, the tannin, one would not be likely to exercise a high degree of enryo. Enryo is essentially the withholding of informality, sincerity, and sympathy. It is the distance deliberately maintained through the use of honorifics and special morphemes between two individuals engaged in vertical dialogue with one another, individuals performing their omote, the reverse of the familiarity that is desired between oyabun and kobun. There isn't really a western equivalent for the word enryo, and Doi, citing Whorf, suggests that this is evidence of a particular sensitivity of the Japanese toward the concept expressed by it. "The forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systemizations of his own language—shown readily enough by a candid comparison and contrast with other languages, especially those of a different linguistic family. His thinking itself is in a language—in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the House of his consciousness" (Whorf 1956:252).

Doi's exploration of *amae* (甘え) was shaped less on the practices and ideas of western psychologists and more on the writings of Edward Sapir, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Benjamin Whorf, and his exploration of enryo comes as part of a larger exploration of what he called 'the vocabulary of *amae*,' a Japanese word denoting an emotion that he suggests is common to all of humanity but absent from the vocabularies of Westerners.

Doi suggests that the absence of a word equivalent to *amae* corresponds with a lack of cultural sensitivity to its meaning in Western countries. The concept evoked by *amae*, he says, to those with knowledge of its meaning and a familiarity with the Japanese language, can help to understand the shape of Japanese social structures as outlined to this point. "The emphasis on vertical relationships that social anthropologist Nakane Chie recently stipulated as characteristic of the Japanese-type social structure could also be seen as an emphasis on *amae*" (Doi 1973:28) (Emphasis added).

To understand what Doi is getting at, it is important to understand the role of women in 1970s Japan, which was also heavily influenced by traditional gender roles. The expected life-trajectory for a woman in Japan is to end in marriage to a good organization man, with whom one would raise children. The focus of this essay to this point on the organization man and his involvement with his group was done in part to illustrate a lack of involvement in the home. Nakane says that the married Japanese woman was happy to have her husband out of the house. Doi writes that at one time in Japanese history, "husband and wife were basically *tannin* [strangers]" (1973:36). Thus, the typical role adopted by the married Japanese woman was that of mother to her child rather than wife to her husband. "This is the traditional pattern, little affected by post-war change. The core of the Japanese family, ancient and modern," just like the core of Japanese social structures, "is the parent-child relationship" (Nakane 1970).

Married working men in Japan are described by Nakane as being much closer with their coworkers than with their wives or children. Of the considerable popularity of bars in Japan for organization men, Nakane says that “Japanese men enjoy informal talks with friends in bars or restaurants rather than at home ... A bar has a function of its own, which cannot be replaced by home or mistress. ... Conversation over drinks has a significant function for Japanese men, who are rather slow to speak out on formal occasions and feel considerable pressure from the rigid vertical system ... here they can find complete relaxation and can talk and laugh from the heart” (Nakane 1970:125). According to Nakane, it is understood that in Japan, what is said when drinking among friends is not to leave the bar, that is, not to be brought up or held against a person later on.

Throughout their workdays the organization men must keep personal opinions, thoughts, and emotions tightly suppressed, and as a result they must exercise a constant, delicate sensitivity to the needs, feelings, and ranking of others. The popularity of bars reflects the feeling among Japanese organization men that these are the places to soothe the nerves by opening up to close friends or bar maidens with whom one does not feel they must exercise taxing enryo, social constraint. The home is seen as a place for rest, and not a place for connection of this kind (Nakane 1970:126).

Now we can begin to understand why Nakane says that “in society the wife tends to be shut out from any social activities and her attention is directed to her own children. The mother’s excessive care for her children is often found fault with by social critics; but this phenomenon is closely linked with the situation facing women in the newly established and developing communities where most organization men make their home. The wives and mothers lack access to any means of extending their social activities; they live far away from parents, brothers and sisters, and schoolfriends” (Nakane 1970:127).

Bereft of other channels through which to form a traditional uchi, Doi suggests that the mother naturally forms a one-to-one vertical relationship with her child, just as her husband does with his organization, an uchi complete with the surprising tolerance, closeness, involvement, support, and sympathy from the oyabun (the one with the status of parent), and the reverence, deference, and mutual support from the kobun (the one with the status of child).

Reflecting on his return home from time spent in the United States, recalling that he “came back to Japan with a new sensibility,” he writes that “from then on the chief characteristic of the Japanese in my eyes was something that ... could best be described as *amae*” (Doi 1973:15). *Amae* is nothing other than the act of relating to another on the basis of an expectation of deference, sensitivity to one’s needs, appreciation, sympathy, indulgence, and care, the likes of which one hopes to receive as a child from one’s caregiver. Where Nakane says that “the *oyabun* plays the role of the father” (Nakane 1970:42), Doi might suggest, rather, that the *oyabun* plays the role of the mother, given the comparatively limited role of the father in the Japanese child’s life. He characterizes *amae* as the opposite of *enryo*, the taxing social restraint exhibited by the Japanese in formal situations and evidenced in their careful use of indexical language. “The word *amae* itself is far from being an isolated expression of the *amae* psychology in the Japanese language. A large number of other words give expression to the same psychology” (Doi 1973:28). Below I have included a list of some of these Japanese words for which English equivalents do not exist.

Amae: Presumed indulgence.

Amaeru: To assume the good will of others; to depend and presume upon another's benevolence.

Giri: Socially contracted obligation.

Hohitsu: To assist, with an implication of shouldering all actual responsibility while conceding all apparent authority.

Moshiwake nai: "I have no excuse;" an expression of a desire to be forgiven even though the relationship is not one where amae would normally apply.

Sumanai: An expression of guilt (generally incurred by the feeling that one has betrayed the group) with the implication that one has not done everything one should have done. Sumanai is most often associated with relationships of giri. ("Sumanai is used as a means of holding onto the other's good will.")

On: Incurred kindness which establishes giri.

Nakamauchi: "Circle of friends or colleagues." (Generally referring to the group to which one belongs.)

Shinyu: Close friend with whom one need not exercise much enryo and on whom one can presume amae.

(Doi 1973)

In all these words, one can see reflections of the social structures described by Nakane and the ideology which had shaped them. What should also be clear by now is the preoccupation with maintenance of good relationships with others, described by Kondo as far outweighing what is experienced as the individual's 'true' feelings, and its relationship with the concept of the 'self' apart from society in the West. Doi, too, describes a close connection between amae and the awareness of 'self' expressed by the Japanese word *jibun* (自分), used by Kondo's landlady in her musings about the lack of care exhibited by the Japanese for their 'true' feelings. Doi describes the word *jibun* as being rich in implications, "quite different from the abstract feel of words such as *jiga* (自画) and *jiko* (事故) that are used to translate the Western concepts of 'self' and 'ego.' It is this that makes possible phrases such as *jibun ga aru* (he has a self), and *jibun ga nai* (he has no self)."

Returning to the statement of Kondo's landlady at the beginning of this essay, "*Jibun o taisetsu ni shinai no, ne*" [The Japanese don't treat themselves as important, do they?] (That is, they spend time doing things for the sake of maintaining good relationships, regardless of their 'inner' feelings)" (Kondo 1990:22), we can begin to understand why it is that Doi later says that his patients who reportedly "did not *amaeru* much," could not engage in reciprocal, vertical relationships characterized by the expectation of mutual deference, sensitivity to one's needs, appreciation, sympathy, and care, and often experienced a diminished capacity for a coherent sense of self.

The development of a sense of self, a *jibun*, in Japan is dependent on the capacity of the individual to engage in relationships built on amae, presumed indulgence (Doi 1973). Since before the beginning of Japan's historical period in the fifth century A.D., it was precisely this

type of relationship which was promised to the individual willing to commit to a lifelong group-affiliation in which the line between self and society was blurred (Nakane 1970). When Kondo takes issue with the assumption at the heart of the Western anthropological preoccupation with the concept of the 'self' as a 'transcendental signified,' she does so for the reason that it assumes the universality of a culture-bound and language-bound framework for understanding the human experience. It is through the Japanese lexicon, through common terms like those expounded upon in this essay, that one can begin to understand the workings of Japanese culture at a micro and macro scale. "The [Japanese] language comprises everything which is intrinsic to the soul of [the] nation" (Doi 1973:15). Recalling a conversation with one patient's mother, Doi recalls the moment the English woman suddenly switched from English to Japanese to say "*kono ko wa amari amaemasen deshita*" [she did not amaeru much], "she kept to herself, never 'made up to' her parents, never behaved childishly in the confident assumption that her parents would indulge her." When he asked her why she had switched to Japanese for that single sentence, she replied, "There's no way of expressing it in English" (Doi 1973:28).

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