

## **Burying the Past: *Nihonjinron* and the Representation of Japanese Society in Itami's *The Funeral***

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'I want to make movies that destroy existing values. My movies have a dose of poison in them – they say that Japanese are no good. So I have to make them comedies, or the dose of poison would be too strong.'

Juzo Itami, writer/director<sup>1</sup>

JAPAN HAS long been characterised as a largely conservative, group-based society where the individual's freedom of thought and expression is positioned secondary to group obligations. Like any society, Japan is a complex, multifaceted world comprised of a vast array of interpersonal relationships and normatively sanctioned behaviour. However, throughout history, Japanese society has retained this group-focused appearance, with its population fundamentally cognisant of the intertwined notions of hierarchy, conformity, and ritual. The publication and subsequent popularity of two groundbreaking *Nihonjinron* accounts of Japanese society in the post-war period presented highly developed notions about this social structure. *Japanese Society* by Chie Nakane and *The Anatomy of Dependence* by Takeo Doi both presented analyses and claims about the "unique essence" of modern Japanese society, and they still continue to inform discourses about Japan. It is against the social frameworks depicted by writers such as Nakane and Doi that filmmaker Juzo Itami situated his own social critique. In his 1984 film, *The Funeral (Ososhiki)*, Itami employs satire and keen political comment to depict a society clearly at odds with these rigidly homogeneous and hierarchical group-based paradigms.

Before turning to the specific works of Nakane and Doi, it is informative to look briefly at Japanese society in history. Indeed, '[h]ierarchy has a long history in Japan. Philosophically it is associated with Confucianism, which arrived from China in the early fifth century. Confucius had taught that all men are morally bound to submit to elders and superiors.'<sup>2</sup> Within this tradition, rank is held to be fundamental: Fathers outrank mothers, elders outrank juniors, and boys outrank girls. Moreover, the freezing of the class structure during the Tokugawa Dynasty created a four-tiered class structure (*shi no ko sho*) that clearly and firmly ranked these four groups – samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants – in descending class order. In turn, these classes generated five relationships where relative status was important – ruler and subject; father and son; husband and wife; older and younger brother; and friend and friend. Little if any movement was possible between classes, and generational transference of profession and social status resulted.<sup>3</sup> Nowhere was this rigid system of ranking more acutely felt than the social group known as *eta* or *hinin* that constituted Japan's "subhuman" underclass, a fifth strata of society whose

professions fell afoul of established Shinto beliefs (which emphasise 'ritual purity and abhorrence of death') and Buddhist beliefs (which forbid 'killing or eating four-legged animals').<sup>4</sup> Thus, concerns about hierarchy and status have existed as intrinsic elements of Japanese society throughout history.

Likewise, fundamental to understanding Japanese society in terms of the group dynamic is the key concept of the *ie* ("house" or "family") system, which declined in the period leading up to World War Two. Under the *ie* system, there was a strong localised focus on one's immediate surroundings/residence and the people with whom one associated. Within the broader village or neighbourhood group, rules and traditions governed people's behaviour; such external forces shaped an individual's conduct. For example, in the *mura* (villages) of rural Japan, people who stood opposed to the collective unit were threatened with *mura hachibu* (ostracism), a regulatory measure entirely separate from the law of the land. Some claim that the "group" itself had its genesis in these very *mura*, where collective rice farming necessitated irrigation and drainage ditches to be maintained by all the villagers, so that there would be enough food to eat.<sup>5</sup> However, with the rise in urbanisation and factors associated with modernisation following World War Two, the *ie* system at least superficially came to be replaced by a trend towards the nuclear family, comprised of a smaller, less communally-focused family unit.

Thus, it was against this backdrop of established social conventions that Chie Nakane published *Tate-shakai no Ningen Kankei (Personal Relations in a Vertical Society)* in 1967, which appeared in English as *Japanese Society* in 1970. Nakane presented a consolidated and holistic account of Japanese society as uniquely different from other societies. Nakane's thesis is that Japanese society is best viewed as a vertical society based on frame (an immediate social context or circumstance) in which a clear hierarchical order enables ranking and a series of superior-inferior relationships. Groups are thus formed based on a temporally continuous circumstance or presence at a location, for instance workers from a particular company, whose ranking is deemed to promote internal stability. This opposes India's attribute-based Hindu society, where attributes like caste or the bonds of kinship inform the social structure.

For Nakane, the traditional *ie* system represents the essential element of social organisation in Japan – 'The essence of this firmly rooted, latent group consciousness in Japanese society is expressed in the traditional and ubiquitous concept of *ie*, the household, a concept which penetrates every nook and cranny of Japanese society.'<sup>6</sup> She argues that despite the reduced post-war role of the *ie* (with its perceived "evil" link to Japan's feudal antebellum past) modernisation did not destroy the *ie* concept, but instead institutional bodies such as the school and the corporation grew to replace it as centres of group belonging both for the individual, and his or her family. Thus, with the continuation of hierarchical constructs from the Tokugawa and Meiji periods, '...modernization has been carried out not by changing the traditional structure but by utilizing it.'<sup>7</sup> The employee and his family would thus become so involved in the extended world of the *kaisha* (company) as to be enveloped completely (*marukagae*).<sup>8</sup> Nakane claims that the relations formed within these localised institutions are personal, rather than contractual, in nature, such is the loyalty expected from the individual towards the *kaisha*. The group thus takes on the form of *uchi* (home), with its attendant connotation of "inside" in direct opposition to

*soto*, those “outside” and from another group; in this manner the individual is able to find identity through the group.

The exclusivity of group membership is also stressed: ‘a single loyalty stands uppermost and firm’ and ‘no man can serve two masters’.<sup>9</sup> The seniority system is presented as an example of the functioning of the ranking system, where age and time spent within a company are held to be more important than individual merit. Roles of senior (*sempai*) and junior (*kouhai*), with their expected codes of conduct are paramount throughout all areas of Japanese society, where ‘[b]ehaviour and language are intimately interwoven.’<sup>10</sup> Within this ranking system, there is a perceived stability through the imbalance of powers held by people of “upper” and “lower” status.<sup>11</sup>

Another prominent *Nihonjin* writer who sought to explain the structure of Japanese society drew on his training as a psychiatrist to present a particular aspect of the “psyche of the Japanese” as fundamental in the construction of social hierarchies in Japan. Dr Takeo Doi, an American trained psychiatrist, first published *Amae no Kouzo (The Anatomy of Dependence)* in 1971, which appeared in English in 1973. Doi focuses on the concept of dependence (*amae*) in Japanese society and claims it functions as the cultural foundation of Japanese social relationships, in which pleasure, comfort, and acceptance are generated in hierarchical relationships. Although acknowledging the existence of *amae*-based relationships in other cultures and societies, Doi sees that the fact that the Japanese language has a specific word for the construct ‘...shows not only how especially familiar the psychology in question is to the Japanese but also that the Japanese social structure is formed in such a way as to permit expression of that psychology.’<sup>12</sup>

As Nakane drew on Japanese language as indicative of the central role of vertical relationships in Japanese society, so Doi draws upon *keigo* (honorific language) as a key social custom supporting the pervasive ideology of *amae*. He claims that it is ‘...evidence...of the persistence of a childlike attitude in Japanese adults.’<sup>13</sup> As William Nester succinctly states, ‘[a]mae is the lubricant for a society in which hierarchy, inequality, and conformity rather than equality, liberty, and individuality are considered natural and just.’<sup>14</sup> Doi refers to *amae* and its verb form *amaeru* variously as the situation where one assumes he has the other’s goodwill; to presume on the benevolence of another; the desire to be indulged by someone; the desire to be a passive love object<sup>15</sup>; and to seek to be spoiled. Language use figures centrally in Doi’s analysis: He believes that language goes further than just revealing emotion, to reveal the inherent human psychology beneath it.

Doi claims the original site of *amae* as the infant’s longing for the mother’s breast, and charts its continuance into and throughout the years of an adult’s life, where a lack of *amae* in early childhood is seen to produce psychological problems in adult life. Doi claims that the result of *amae* is the formation of intense emotional attachments between partners in these hierarchical relationships, which in turn generate a sense of obligation or duty (*on*) as well as interdependence between these partners, highlighting the fundamentally reciprocal nature of *amae*. Like Nakane’s analysis, the family is presented as the paradigm of such relations with work, school, and the wider community as locations for analogous relationships. Indeed, the specific familial relationship is held to be paramount – ‘...basically the Japanese

idealize the kind of relationship of oneness typically embodied in the parent-child relationship.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Doi parallels *amae* as a social practice with Nakane's emphasis on the vertical nature of relationships in Japanese society, suggesting that the tendency of Japanese to *amae* may in fact be viewed as the cause of such vertical relationships.<sup>17</sup> Like Nakane, Doi analyses the mutual exclusivity of groups formed within society, and how these "inner" and "outer" worlds created by the individual strengthen their attachment to their group. In making the claim that *amae* has existed throughout Japan's history, Doi analyses how the concept underlies the key ethical and social concepts of *giri* (social obligation) and *ninjou* (human feeling) in Japanese society. Rather than positioning the two as mutually exclusive, as Doi claims Benedict and others have done in the past, Doi states that *giri* and *ninjou* work in tandem, where '...*ninjou* welcomes dependence whereas *giri* binds human beings in a dependent relationship.'<sup>18</sup>

Thus, accounts of social hierarchies by Nakane and Doi played a key role in "explaining" Japanese society to foreigners and to Japanese alike. As such, they are also highly revealing of the period in which they were written. The post-war era, with Japan's rapid economic growth and industrialisation, and staging of international events like the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, was a time when global attention was directed at Japan and there was a universal desire to determine what lay at the heart of this perceived "Japaneseness". This prompted the emergence of *Nihonjinron* writers like Nakane and Doi who sought to explain Japanese society and interpersonal relationships within this society as "unique" and stronger than in other societies. These authors employed a process of definition by differentiation, where an oversimplified and exaggerated Japan was defined against comparisons with the "West" and other Asian societies. The contemporary popularity of such writers revealed that many Japanese did in fact come to view themselves and their society as "unique". Mikiso Hane notes the wide readership of *Amae no Kouzo* amongst students during the 1970s, characterised notably as a '...generation [that] read books that addressed social and political concerns.'<sup>19</sup>

It is this paradigm of rigid social structures characterising Japanese society put forward by Nakane and Doi that filmmaker Juzo Itami tackles in his 1984 film, *The Funeral (Ososhiki)* in order to highlight how changing values have informed and modified contemporary society. In *The Funeral*, Wabisuke and Chizuko, a young middle-class couple, are forced to deal with elements of tradition that are rapidly fading from modern Japan. Itami claims that '[m]ost Japanese today have no choice but to follow the ritual blindly because it's a tradition, without knowing its significance or history. So funerals are where the old Japan crosses with the modern Japan.'<sup>20</sup> Hierarchy, social practice, and tradition as manifest in 1980s Japan are lampooned through satire as Itami revisits the same issue of "what it means to be Japanese" upon which the *Nihonjinron* authors of the 1960s and 1970s focused. Indeed, Itami himself has claimed to be an exponent of *Nihonjinron*.<sup>21</sup> Itami demonstrated the *Nihonjinron* approach of comparison to establish uniqueness when he stated that Americans, "...because of their ethnic, economic, and educational differences, share far less in the way of common experience than do the Japanese. Living in Japan is like living in a nation of twins." Donald Richie claims that '[t]his

presupposes more similarity than difference and supports a perceived need for a tradition to guide.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas authors like Nakane and Doi stress the uniformity and homogeneity of Japanese society and its tendency to form hierarchical group associations, Itami locates the individually-specific agency of real human beings. One of the elements that comes across most clearly in *The Funeral* is a real sense of the individual at odds with society; how these personal and social elements often clash. Itami's work appears to gel with three of Nakane's critics, Befu and Mouer & Sugimoto, who, rather than focusing on *identity*, instead stress *conflict* between the individual and the group as fundamental to Japanese society. 'Groupism, to them, is but an ideology pressed by the elite and only nominally accepted by most people, whose inner motivation remains the pursuit of private interests.'<sup>23</sup> *The Funeral* highlights the balancing act required of *honne* (private face/back-stage) and *tatemae* (public face/front-stage) that thus confronts the individual.

Moreover, when placed in a historical context, the film – as with any work – is also clearly influenced by the time in which it was made. Japan's vast economic wealth of the early 1980s during the so-called "bubble economy" contributed strongly to an increased emphasis on the individual and his or her wants, needs, and concerns in an age of prolific consumption. This led to conflicting allegiances to the same "group" identity that so dominated the writing of the earlier *Nihonjinron* authors. Many Japanese became enamoured of what Juzo Itami refers to disparagingly as 'the pleasure principle'.<sup>24</sup>

This emphasis on the individual's desires instead of the requirements of the group is shown throughout *The Funeral*. Itami himself has stated that he has an aversion to appearances of homogeneity, and that he is '...wary when the Japanese all seem to espouse the same values and cry for the same things...that is what I am pointing out in my films.'<sup>25</sup> Individuality abounds in *The Funeral*: For instance, Wabisuke's mistress Saito chooses to visit Wabisuke during the funeral preparations, forcing Wabisuke to have sex with her at a thoroughly inappropriate time. Similarly, the man whom Wabisuke sends to the hospital can barely contain his greedy delight upon learning that there is a huge disparity between the amount Wabisuke has given him to pay for the deceased's care (Y200000) and its actual cost (Y33560). Likewise, the deceased's brother mopes around during the course of the three-day period, and is 'a stingy tycoon who mourns for himself in mourning for his younger brother.'<sup>26</sup> The "cremation lunch" sold at the crematorium at the end of the film also reflects the fact that no area of life – or death – is beyond the scope of someone making money. Wabisuke's grumbling desire to be anywhere but at the funeral, expressed from the outset when he admits his lack of funereal experience, as well as his annoyance and nervousness at having to give a speech, clearly reflects his own individual desires in conflict with his socially-expected role as supportive son-in-law. Itami has spoken critically of Japanese in terms that echo Doi's concept of *amae*: "'It seems that the Japanese...just don't like thinking at all. They're like suckling babies. Infants feel only pleasure and displeasure according to fulfilment or denial at their mother's breast.'<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, an extension of the individual's pursuit of their own desires is shown by satire of hierarchy in *The Funeral*. The clearest depiction of this in the film is embodied by the Buddhist priest character, who arrives in a white Rolls Royce and

cons Wabisuke out of expensive French tiles as part-payment for his religious services. The cultural dislocation of modern Japanese is shown as easy prey for elements in Japanese society who are able to sell "tradition": the '...revered institutions disguising material greed as pietism and ceremony.'<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the deceased's older brother continually forces the other family members to delay the ceremony, as he wonders if they are following the correct procedure, such as the order of putting the body in the coffin and its transportation, and the exact direction of north in which the coffin is required to face. Throughout these scenes, Wabisuke's annoyance at having to tolerate the more senior man's delays becomes increasingly visible. These scenes also reveal the blind desire of all involved to act according to a perceived notion of "ritual, with the resultant confusion about "correct" traditional process that thus arises, a key aspect that will be analysed in further detail.

In addition, established notions of gender hierarchy are also lampooned in *The Funeral*, and present a weakened view of Japanese men in a society where male dominance has been traditionally inculcated. This is set up from the outset, for when Wabisuke and Chizuko are acting in the television commercial, Wabisuke's character is quite literally dwarfed by Chizuko's *geisha* character. Also, Chizuko is able to settle into the role expected of her throughout the funeral period. Conversely, Wabisuke gets weak at the knees at the prospect of having to give a speech, and is unable to fend off the amorous demands of his mistress. It is the bereaved's wife who at the end is able to give emotional resonance to the funeral ceremony. Indeed, Itami himself claims that '...Japanese men have always been weak...Japanese culture is not one in which men are strong.'<sup>29</sup>

Another key aspect of social convention in *The Funeral* is the socially-expected appearance of following tradition. The tendency of Japanese to consult a manual at times of ignorance, to learn everything through a pre-packaged system of learning, is satirised. In this instance it is *The ABC of Funerals*, an instructional video about funeral procedure, that is poured over by Wabisuke and Chizuko in a bid to learn an aspect of their culture that modern society has blurred for them. The disparity between their own lack of emotion, and that of the video actors, is manifestly apparent. Similarly, the reliance on the funeral director as instructor of established conduct reveals this need to at least appear to be doing "the right thing".

This element of constructed reality or performance in *The Funeral* is analysed in detail by Beth Hoel, who raises interesting points about cultural action and the role of the individual in Japan.<sup>30</sup> She claims that through the performance of ceremony in the film, 'Itami makes statements about the emptiness of many cultural practices when their meaning has been lost to the actors.' Hoel highlights the roles of Wabisuke and Chizuko as actors, and how the two view the funeral as a performance, such that they employ their manager to oversee the arrangements for the funeral. The fact that so much of the process needs to be learned questions the nature of "Japaneseness": That these elements are not diegetic, or socially ingrained but rather externally produced, highlights in Hoel's view the emptiness of meaning of these actions because they are just performed rather than lived. Hoel sees the tendency of the family to accept Aoki's filming of the funeral, and the constructed nature of the family photographs around the deceased's coffin ("get closer to the coffin – look sad") as signs that the participants themselves are cognisant of their own performances. Likewise, the objective, detached viewing of the deceased's

cremation by everyone except the deceased's wife appears as a performance, linking to this theme of emptiness of action. Thus, Hoel takes the funeral and its attached social and cultural elements as emblematic of a broader social framework in which the individual's agency is questioned.

What Hoel does not acknowledge, though, is how this detachment from the reality of experience in *The Funeral* is also influenced by the specific feelings of the bereaved towards the deceased. That the deceased is constructed at best as something of a rogue, or at worst, a bitter old paedophile, makes it abundantly clear that his passing does not generate wide sorrow. To view the "mourners'" actions and reactions as entirely performance is to deny the individually-specific feelings and attitudes of these people. Likewise, Hoel does not analyse the importance of the ending of the film, which reveals the emotional outlet that exists within the funeral custom. The deceased's wife makes a genuine, heart-felt speech about the nature of her grief, thanking everyone for their contributions to the funeral ceremony. What Hoel has categorised as empty customs or rituals are revealed to have greater importance in the broader framework of bringing the family closer together; the end justifies the means.

So, Chie Nakane and Takeo Doi had a profound influence on the way Japanese saw their own society, and also in the construction of that society to the outside world. Through frameworks that posited Japan and its peoples as a unique, socially homogeneous society based on a complex series of dependent hierarchical relationships, such authors sought to define "what it meant to be Japanese". It was against precisely this dominant paradigm of representation that filmmaker Juzo Itami sought to locate his own concept of "Japaneseness" in the mid-1980s, with his first film, *The Funeral*. With his story of a modern middle-class family profoundly ignorant of Japanese tradition, Itami satirised established notions of hierarchy, conformity, and ritual in a film that took the subject of death and used it as the basis for a keen analysis of life.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Mark Schilling, 'Interview: Juzo Itami', in Mark Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, New York, 1999, p.82.
- <sup>2</sup> Jared Taylor, *Shadows of the Rising Sun: A Critical View of the "Japanese Miracle"*, Tokyo, 1983, p.42.
- <sup>3</sup> Although it is acknowledged that peasants occupied a key role in the economy through their production of rice, the staple diet. Likewise, merchants, though positioned lowest in status, generated wealth through the various transactions in which they were involved, and were thus able to purchase militias, thereby obtaining political status.
- <sup>4</sup> Taylor, p.43.
- <sup>5</sup> Taylor, pp.67-8.
- <sup>6</sup> Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society*, revised edn, Middlesex and Victoria, 1970, p.4.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.
- <sup>12</sup> Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, revised edn, trans. John Bester, Tokyo, New York and San Francisco, 1981, p.28.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.
- <sup>14</sup> William Nester, 'Rules of Engagement: Psychological and Diplomatic Dynamics of American-Japanese Relations', *Asian Survey*, 35, 4, April 1995, p.327.
- <sup>15</sup> Doi refers to British psychoanalyst Michael Balint's coining of this term as the closest "Western" thought has come to the idea behind *amae*.
- <sup>16</sup> Doi, p.39.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.
- <sup>19</sup> Mikiso Hane, *Eastern Phoenix: Japan Since 1945*, Boulder, 1996, p.181.
- <sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Sipe, 'Death & Taxes: A Profile of Juzo Itami', *Sight and Sound*, 58, 3, Summer 1989, p.186.
- <sup>21</sup> Nick Bornoff, 'The King of Comedy', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 May 1989, p.60.
- <sup>22</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Juzo Itami', *The New York Times Magazine*, June 18, 1989, cited in Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History, with a Selective Guide to Videos and DVDs*, Tokyo & New York, 2001, p.218.
- <sup>23</sup> William W. Kelly, 'Directions in the Anthropology of Contemporary Japan', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 20, 1991, p.399. (Various references cited within work)
- <sup>24</sup> Schilling, p.80.
- <sup>25</sup> Sipe, p.188.
- <sup>26</sup> Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*, October 23, 1987, C14:3, online, n.d., available at: <http://www.stanford.edu/~brucey/AL75.00/funrev.html> (16 July 2002)
- <sup>27</sup> Bornoff, p.61.
- <sup>28</sup> Bornoff, p.60.
- <sup>29</sup> Schilling, p.75.
- <sup>30</sup> Beth Hoel, *The Funeral*, online, 1 May 1998, available at: <http://students.haverford.edu/east/east260/projects/funeral.html> (16 July 2002)