

# Calling for "Contemporization" of Japanese Society: Radioactivity Issue Arises from Uncleanliness Beliefs and Fabricated Maternal Image

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## Unscientifically Based, Excessive Anxiety over Radioactivity

In the midst of the early March season of the plum blossoms traditionally held for prayers of good health of young girls, a rather shocking news story came out. According to the Kofu Regional Justice Bureau, a woman who evacuated from Fukushima Prefecture to Yamanashi Prefecture in June last year has filed for relief. Her child was refused entrance to a nursery in Yamanashi, a consequent victim of rumors associated with the nuclear power plant accident. As its reason, the nursery explained that the facility could not provide a response in the event that another parent expressed any anxiety over the nuclear incident. The woman was further requested to voluntarily abstain from letting her child play at a park near her evacuation site. The woman is now living outside of Yamanashi Prefecture as a result. (For details, please see the account in the [Yamanashi Nichinichi Shimbun](#), and tweets by Nobuko Kosuge [@nobuko\\_kosuge](#).)

June of last year was a time when daily lives were also returning to normal in the Tokyo Metro. Some mothers, however, remained hypersensitive about preventing radiation exposure to their children. Around this time, the widely talked-about [AERA article](#) "Mothers fighting the invisible enemy, protecting children from radioactivity" [trans.] described mothers giving their children homemade lunches to take to school and running around late at night in search of food items.

Lately, the worries over food products are subsiding, but some people remain excessively anxious. My memory is still fresh regarding the cancellation of an annual event where snow from Aomori is sent to the children of Okinawa, after a small group opposed. (For details, see the [Shukan Post](#), "Aomori snow rejection incident in Okinawa; many evacuees from main island among complainants" [trans].)

The inspection results found no radioactive substances adhered to the snow. Even though the risk of radiation exposure was absent, the explanation from the local government was not accepted. We can consider the Yamanashi Prefecture incident in a similar way. Radiation exposure through contact with an evacuee who was living in a space with more or less non-problematic radiation dosage levels would be scientifically impossible. Then why were the evacuee family and the snow from Aomori shunned?

## Pre-Modern Concept of "Uncleanliness" Returns

There is a children's game called *Engacho*. If a child touches something "dirty," then that child can rub the contacted area against another child and escape from the "uncleanliness." But the targeted child can yell "*Engacho!*" and invoke a defense by making a sign previously agreed to by his or her group. The game has variations by region and age group, and may be alternatively called *Empi* or Barrier. (The author is from the *Empi* generation, while the author's children have apparently not encountered the game at nursery school yet.)

According to the late historian Yoshihiko Amino, *Engacho* is a contraction of two words: *en*, meaning relationship or uncleanliness, and *chon-giru*, meaning to cut off. The childplay is harmless, and ends when the child, who is subjected to "*Engacho!*" and unable to pass off the uncleanliness, is stuck and obviously dismayed. In contrast, the earlier cases of Yamanashi and Okinawa Prefectures illustrate *Engacho* advancing to discrimination and human rights violations.

"*Kegare*" or "Uncleanliness" is a concept found in Shinto and Buddhism, and refers to an unwashed, dirty and evil condition. The condition adheres to the body particularly through death, disease, birth, menstruation, and crime. It was believed that uncleanliness enjoined disorder and peril to the community, not just the individual. Those in an unclean condition, therefore, could not participate in celebrations and were excluded from the community.

We see pre-modern psychology at work when exclusionary efforts extend beyond victims and evacuees to debris from the devastated areas and Aomori snow. The desire to maintain the cleanliness of one's own community is evident from the fear of "uncleanliness" wrought by peril—in this case, the earthquake and nuclear power plant accident.

## **Fabricated Maternal Image Takes Center Stage with Changes in the "Household"**

Why did such a pre-modern mindset manifest itself so acutely in the present time? The author sees a possible connection in the societal shift experienced during the 1920s (late Taisho and early Showa periods). The traditional Japanese view of a household was close to a private business. Family was defined as the members who engaged in the family business. Originally, blood ties were not necessarily emphasized. Children with no blood relations were frequently adopted and raised, and, in a practice not so rare, parents would throw away a child that they could not support.

During the 1920s, however, urbanization and dismantling of village communities led to smaller families, and reinforced a blood-tie supremacy trend (i.e., family constituted exclusively by blood relations). The Showa depression followed, and farming villages were devastated. The household system faced a survival crisis, and was subsequently altered dramatically with the removal of men, who were drafted during the wartime period between the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War.

During this process, the role of women gained prominent expectations amidst the anticipated all-out battle at the War's end, and a new tradition of maternalism to support the household became necessary. (Consequently, the child-rearing burden of mothers increased in the 1920s, and mother-child suicides skyrocketed among pressured mothers. The folklorist Kunio Yanagida issued a warning on this trend. Refer to author's book *Modern Japanese Literature of Weakness and Resistance: Yanagida Kunio, Yasuda Yojuro, and Origuchi Nobuo during the Wartime Period* [trans.] (Kodansha).)

## **Fabricated Maternal Image During Wartime and Post-War Society in Japan**

Programs and customs prescribing this maternalism were established during the period. In 1931, the birthday of the Empress, March 6, was established as Mother's Day. The birth of the Crown Prince (current Emperor) in 1933 provided a perfect opportunity for a publicity campaign of Mother's Day. Glorification of maternalism was reinforced as the war conditions worsened.

During the wartime period, the expression "women who are mothers" was unreservedly used, and family operations, particularly raising children, were fully entrusted to women. This maternalism converged into nationalist maternalism, and a woman's life became restricted to maternalism. The inescapable rice shortage during the War led to advocacy of alternate meals with local ingredients or brown rice, and the "housewife" was held responsible for the nutritional intake and health promotion of the family.

Under the conditions at hand, young women's education included "motherhood education" steadfast to national policy, and cultivated womanly virtues, chastity, decorum, and maternalism. In addition to the national government, chiefly the women's magazines among the media sanctified and enforced the mother-child bond. The belief that the mother's duty is to be responsible for food and health of the family, particularly children, was a product of the wartime period.

In the 1940s, heavy chemical industries were emphasized under the all-out war organization, and the family model uniting the "salary man" under life-long employment and long workhours and the full-time housewife was established. The era of Japan's economic miracle rapidly advanced the "standard family" of husband, wife and two children. Under the long recessionary period of recent times, we now see the disruption of this model.

## **Radioactivity Panic and Restlessness of Successful Mothers**

As described, the author finds a peculiar link between pre-modern beliefs of uncleanliness and modern concepts of family and maternalism. In particular, the mothers purchasing expensive foods according to their production origin and even willing to evacuate in fear of radiation exposure to their children mean that such mothers belong to successful families with sufficient economic and temporal freedom. At this point in contemporary times, the standard family is well to do. The mindset that wants no incursion into a well-to-do existence seems to be directed towards the shunning of potentially disruptive uncleanliness.

The author has no intention of blaming just the mothers who fell into a panic over radioactivity. In fact, society and government need the standard family to cut welfare costs, while the fathers, if not men in general, appear to keep forcing motherhood excessively on the mothers.

Resolving the radiation issue requires the "contemporization" of the mother and the family, by making calm decisions based on contemporary scientific knowledge and findings, and by departing from pre-modern concepts of uncleanliness and from modern family values and maternalism. These steps should lead to supporting the earthquake recovery effort, and to re-examining calmly, by all citizens, an attitude of the nation and society in step with the times.

The form of this "contemporization" remains unclear; each one of us is groping for an answer. Probably, the establishment of the individual, released from the baggage of government and society, will be questioned again, along with the relationship between the individual and community—just like the repeated inquiries made throughout the modern Japanese history of thought.

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