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Author(s)	Seki, Kiyohide
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The Circle of *On, Giri,* and *Ninjo*

—Sociologist's Point of View—

Kiyohide SEKI

Hokkaido University
Sapporo, Japan

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I Introduction

As to the culture of a society, we can study from various points of view according to our special interests. As a sociologist, I would like to interpret Japanese culture in terms of human relationship.

The basic idea of the Japanese on human relationship can be shown in the Japanese language. The Japanese have an honorific, what is called a 'respect language'. To use precisely the honorific is troublesome enough even for the Japanese themselves. The Japanese language is discriminative for speaker and addressee. Even in the daily conversation, the addressee is always considered higher or superior than the speaker. "Give me an apple", for instance, is translated "Ringo wo kudasai" which etymologically means "Give an apple *down* to me." On the contrary, "I will give you an apple," is translated "Ringo wo agemasu," which literally means "I will hold an apple *up* to you." In the same way, "I will go *up* to you," "Please

you come *down* to me," and so on. I shall take up another example : the way of greeting of the Japanese is to make a bow. The polite manner is to bow lower and more than the other. It is a Japanese way of life to depreciate himself and regard others as superior.

In Japanese behavior the stress has been laid on cooperation, or conformity with others rather than independence or freedom of the individual. The goal of life of the Japanese was to make a good family, to make a good community and to make a good state. Self-control or self-sacrifice for the family, for the community and for the nation was the most admirable virtue. According to the traditional discipline of training girls in Japan, the most important was the virtue of "three obediences", namely, obedience to the father before marriage, obedience to the husband after marriage, and obedience to the eldest son after the husband's death. Self-sacrifice for her husband, her children, and her parents-in-law was an important virtue of the Japanese woman. In the Japanese idea, great things can only be achieved through self-restraint. Through this self-restraint, sometimes even through voluntary death for others, they can make their selves (or ego) more valuable. Strength of character is shown in conforming, not in rebelling. Westerners are likely to feel it is a sign of strength to rebel against conventions and seize happiness in spite of obstacles. But the strong, according to traditional Japanese opinion, are those who disregard personal happiness and fulfill good human relationship. In contrast with the Japanese culture and personality, a certain American family sociologist has pointed out the feature of the American culture as follows : "With us

(Americans) the goals of life are defined in terms of the pursuit of 'good', and 'good' is conceived in the two fold manner as the opposite of evil and as the source of personal gratification." (Robert F. Winch, *Selected Studies in Marriage and the Family*, New York : Henry Holt and Co., 1953, p.57.)

In comparing Japanese culture with Western culture, many American scholars have done research on Japanese culture and written books and articles. Among them, the most systematic and distinguished is Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. It is amazing that she has so keen sightedly pointed out *on* and *giri* as the traits of Japanese behavior pattern, despite she had never been in Japan. Although her book is highly appreciated by Japanese scholars, there are several criticisms in Japan. Those are summarized by John Bennett in *American Anthropologist*, (vol.55, No.3). In short, the crucial point is on Benedict's over-generalization, or over-schematic interpretation. The most debatable ground is that she pays little attention to the problem of sub-structure within Japanese society. As the result, she is apt to apply a local data, or a feature which is characteristic of only a specific subgroup, to the Japanese culture as a whole.

Benedict refered to *on* and *giri* particularly in Japanese, but she did not do so as to *ninjo*. Presumably she might misinterpret the significance of *ninjo*.

From the sociological point of view, we can divide the human relationship into three types.

Type A : "give and give" relationship

Type B : "give and take" relationship

Type C : "take and take" relationship

The type of "give and give" relationship is an ideal of the human relationship. They do not expect return from others. Type B might be an ordinary reciprocal human relationship. Type C is a standpoint of exhaustive egoism. This relationship will break down within not so long time. We keep these three types in mind and then, by this scale, we shall measure the human relationship expressed in *on*, *giri* and *ninjo* of the Japanese.

II *On* relationship

According to Benedict, *on* and *giri* are obligations or debts which should be paid limitlessly. She compared this relationship with financial transactions in the United States. Probably this is her misinterpretation. In the Japanese mind, *on* is different from obligation or debt in terms of Western thought. The Japanese have three major *on*s, namely *on* from Emperor, *on* from parents and *on* from teacher. In feudal period *on* from lord was also important, but it became minor after the Meiji Restoration. We say neither *on* from the Prime Minister nor *on* from the president of the company. In modern bureaucracy or modern economic organization, there exists no more *on* relationship.

According to the classification above, *on* relationship belongs to Type A. The giver of *on* does not expect the return to his *on*. He always gives and gives. But the receiver of *on* thinks about the return to the giver. He always returns and returns, from another aspect, he gives and gives. In the Japanese mind, this is an ideal type of *on* relationship. Thus, *on* relationship is, in any sense, neither an obligation nor a repayment of

debts. *On* relationship is limitless both for the giver and for the receiver as well. The Japanese have said, "*on* from Emperor is immeasurable," or "*on* from parents is higher than mountain and deeper than sea." And they also have said, "don't step in your teacher's shade, follow after him keeping three feet distance."

On relationship seems limitless. But, as mentioned, the giver does not expect return. If the receiver can do nothing to return, he may do so. *On* is not an obligation. But the receiver himself should keep it in his mind and he should return *on* to the giver 'according to his station,' whenever he can do so. I used the term "should." However, this "should" is not a compulsion from the outside but it is that which the receiver spontaneously imposes on himself. Accordingly, *on* is not a financial transaction, not a contract. *On* is not such a thing that someone received *on* so and so, therefore he is able completely to repay *on* by doing so and so for the giver. Thus we can say, the human relationship in the ideal type had been considered as very strong and very deep by the Japanese. Sometimes it seems compulsive and it is often misunderstood even by the Japanese themselves and misconducted. The context is expressed clearer in the relationship of *giri*.

III *Giri* relationship

Benedict has written as follows : *Giri*, runs the Japanese saying, is 'hardest to bear.' A person must repay *giri* as he must repay *gimu*, but it is a series of obligations of a different color. These is no possible English equivalent and of all the strange categories of moral obligations which anthropologists

find in the culture of the world, it is one of the most curious. It is specifically Japanese ——it is a Japanese category and it is not possible to understand their courses of action taking it into account. ··· To an Occidental, *giri* includes a most heterogeneous list of obligations ranging from gratitude for an old kindness to the duty of revenge. It is no wonder that the Japanese have not tried to expound *giri* to Westerners ; their own all-Japanese dictionaries can hardly define it. One of these renders it —I translate : — 'righteous way ; the road human beings should follow ; something one does unwillingly to forestall apology to the world.' This does not give a Westerner much idea of it —. (Benedict, *ibid.*, pp. 133—134).

It seems to me that in her book as a whole, she has mixed up *on*, *giri* and *gimu* as obligations or duties. But *giri* in true sense is not an obligation. It is, as the dictionary renders, righteous way or the road human beings should follow. We have an good example. According to *Documents of Iriki*, and Benedict also refered to it, when in the twelfth century a Minamoto Shogun demanded of one of the daimyo the surrender of an enemy lord he was sheltering, the daimyo wrote back a letter which is still preserved. He was deeply resentful of the imputation upon his *giri* and he refused to offend against *giri* even in the name of *chu*. 'Public affairs', he wrote, '(are a thing) over which I have little personal control, but *giri* between men of honor is an eternal verity' which transcended the Shogun's authority. He refused 'to commit a faithless act against his honored friends.' (*Op. cit.*, pp. 137—138) In old Japan, *giri* was often considered as a greater and dearer virtue even than *chu* to the Shogun.

Another example; the Japanese had a common saying about *giri* as follows: "A loyal woman will not remarry as a loyal samurai will not serve two lords." In the Japanese old custom, when a husband dies, his wife will often cut her hair short, and the cut part will be put into his coffin with his remains. She will thus pledge her chastity to her husband, in most cases, to remain single and die single.

One of the oldest books in Japan, *Konjaku-Monogatari* (*Tales, New and Old*) which was written in around 1070, has a famous story about a woman who remained single after the death of her husband: Once there lived an old couple in the province of Yamashiro near Kyoto. They had a daughter, for whom they selected a mate. But he died soon after marriage. They selected a second mate, but daughter refused to remarry, saying: "My husband died soon after our marriage. I might be predestined to a single life. If so, my second husband would die as soon after marriage." Her parents tried to persuade her because of their old age. Then she said: "A couple of swallows have their nest under the eaves of our house. Please, capture the male and let the female alone. If it comes back next year bringing another male, I will marry again" The parents did as she told them, by marking the female red. In the following year, the female came back by itself with the red mark on its head. The swallow made no nest but went away again. The daughter then said: "Even a bird maintains its chastity. How should I, a woman, marry again?" She remained single and died single. This is a story of *giri* concerning devotion of the Japanese woman to her husband.

The Japanese movie "Gate of Hell" is concerning almost the

same story. The heroine laid down her own life for her husband. Most of my American friends could not understand the motive of her death. To the American eyes, the heroine's behavior might be unreasonable, but Japanese audiences can understand her very well and weep for her.

We have many such stories and movies of *giri* as to the devotion of the samurai to his lord. For the Japanese, these are good stories and good models for their behavior. Because, as stated, for the Japanese, the ideal type of human behavior is "give and give" relationship. And *giri* relationship is just as such one. If the Japanese condemns the other person because "he does not know *giri*," it means that he is a man who does not know the righteous way of the human relationship, namely the "give and give" relationship, in other words, that he is a man who does not know the sincerity or the depth of the human relationship.

Ⅳ *Ninjo* relationship

In the old Japanese mind, an idol of the man in the street is the one who knows both *giri* and *ninjo*, or who "gets the taste" of life. It is very difficult to translate *ninjo* into English. Probably there is no equivalent in English just as with the term *giri*. In a Japanese dictionary *ninjo* is translated as "the heart or feelings common to man; human affections; humanity; kindness;" and *fu-ninjo* (without *ninjo*) is translated as "cold-hearted; hard-hearted; inhuman; unsympathetic." Benedict does not use the term *ninjo* in Japanese, despite she uses *on* and *giri* in the original word. She uses the term mostly "human feeling" and sometimes "personal desire." Presumably these are the transla-

tion of *ninjo*.

Then, what is *ninjo*? Taking up some examples, I shall explain it.

In the age of the civil war around the middle of sixteenth century, Kenshin Uesugi (1539－1578), feudal lord of Echigo Province (now Niigata Prefecture), and Shingen Takeda (1520－1573), lord of Kai Province (now Yamanashi Prefecture), were good rivals who desired to get the position of Shogun in Kyoto. They fought for several years.

At one time, the people of Kai Province suffered greatly from the shortage of salt, because Lord Hojo, another rival of Shingen, cut off the supply of salt to Kai Province. Kai is not self-sufficient in salt, as it is in the mountain area. "We have fairly fought thus far," Kenshin wrote to Shingen when he heard the situation. "We shall fight as samurai, not doing foul play. I have plenty of salt in my province and I will supply you as much as your people may need." And Kenshin sent salt to Shingen.

Later, when Kenshin heard of the death of Shingen, he was taking breakfast. He dropped down his chopsticks, put all food out of his mouth, and offered a silent prayer for his good rival. This is a famous story of *ninjo* and is a favorite one for the old Japanese.

Another example: In Japanese history, there was a big battle between the families of Minamoto and Taira, which took place in the twelfth century and is called the battle of the red and white flags. Toward the end of the battle, Naozane Kumagai, samurai of Minamoto family, found an enemy at the beach who was about to run away into the sea. He called back the enemy

who was Atsumori Taira, young scion of the Taira family. They fought each other. Naozane won. He was struck when he noticed that his enemy looked so young. Naozane asked Atsumori his age. Atsumori was 16 years of age. Naozane had a son of the same age, who also fought in this battle. Naozane was at a loss. As a samurai he had to kill Atsumori, but as a father of a son he did not want to kill him. At last he wanted to set the lad free. Atsumori, however, asked Naozane to kill him samurai-like and he handed a fine flute to Naozane to send it to Mrs. Taira, his mother. The flute was his favorite one, which his mother had given him. Later, Naozane sent the flute to the Taira family as Atsumori had requested. Afterwards he resigned samurai and became a monk. He devoted the rest of his life to Buddhism, praying for the bliss of dead Atsumori. This is also famous story of being tangled with *giri* and *ninjo*.

Another example: The famous story of *Double Suicide, Tenno-amishima* written by Chikamatsu (1653—1724) at Edo-period. This is a masterpiece of Chikamatsu and one of the most famous Kabuki drama, which mostly presents a conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*. The story is as follows: There was a couple who loved each other. The name of the husband was Jihei and the name of the wife was Osan. Jihei was acquainted with another woman, Koharu, who was courtesan in a brothel. Osan, the wife, wrote to Koharu asking her to give up Jihei. Being moved by Osan's true heart, Koharu made up her mind to give up Jihei, purposely abused him, and told him that she loved him no more. Broken-hearted Jihei looked gloomy day and night. Meanwhile, Koharu was to be bought out by another man. Osan was told that, according to her letter, Koharu had abused

Jihei purposely and was about to be redeemed by another man. And so Osan told Jihei that she had written to Koharu, and she advised him to redeem Koharu. As an uncle of Osan knew the situation, he was very angry and decided to let her divorce from Jihei. The uncle took Osan away from Jihei's house, while Koharu and Jihei committed double-suicide at Daichoji-temple. In the contrast of a housewife with a courtesan, Osan and Koharu were described as typical models of the Japanese woman in the feudal period. Being impressed by Osan's letter, Koharu gave up her love, and also being moved by Koharu's warm heart, Osan gave up her love, too. Between these two tender women, Jihei could not help putting an end to his own life for the solution of the trouble. There is a common characteristic in their mind and behavior. It is a devotion to the other. Considering Osan's situation, Koharu gave up her love, and Osan, considering her husband's mind and Koharu's situation, gave up her love. They devoted their love and even their own life to the other. This is a most famous story of being tangled with *giri* and *ninjo*.

Ninjo of the Japanese is often applied even to the nature. The traditional esprit of the Japanese literature is called "Mono-no-aware." It is closely concerned with *ninjo*. I shall point out one example. We have a famous "haiku" of Kaga-no-Chiyo, who lived in eighteenth century and an excellent poetess in the history of the Japapese literature. The meaning of her "haiku" is as follows: "Early morning, I went to the draw well for washing. Around the well, morning-glories were in full bloom. I admired the beautiful scene. Then I noticed that one of them got coiled round the well-bucket. So I went to my neighbor and got water."

Because of the delicacy of her heart, she could not cut off the vines of the morning-glory. This is a mind of the poetess. *Ninjo* of the Japanese is directed not only toward human beings, but also toward the nature, even toward the inanimate beings.

Ninjo is not mere "human feeling," not plain "personal desire." When the Japanese say, "he is a man of *ninjo*," it means that he is true to his friend, he is of a cordial nature, or he is warm-hearted, and, moreover, he is a man who does not forget *on*. From the sociological point of view, it means that he is a man who knows the significance of the human relationship, in other words, he is a man who understands the ideal type of human relationship as a Japanese, namely "give and give" relationship.

V Conclusion

Some American sociologist has written: "Individualism is at the heart of the American ethos and is the *leitmotif* of the American dream. To the American, the goal of life is to "make something of himself," and this is generally understood to mean that he should strive to improve the socioeconomic status inherited from his parents by performing well and obtaining rewards in the occupational system" (Winch, *ibid.*, p.62)

On the contrary, as I stated, the ideal type of human behavior of the Japanese is to fulfill the "give and give" relationship. This is a Japanese view of life. The Japanese has been trained in always considering the situation of others and respecting others' standpoint. The purpose of self-discipline of the Japanese is self-control and self-sacrifice, or service to others. As Benedict has pointed out, in Japan every adult's reference to his own home is phrased as 'my wretched house' and to his

neighbor's as 'your august house' ; every reference to his family, as 'my miserable family,' and to his neighbor's as 'your honarable family.' (Benedict, *ibid.*, p. 270)

In this connection, furthermore she has refered: The specific Japanese problem, as they see it, is that they have been brought up to trust in a security which depends on others' recognition of the nuances of their observance of a code. When foreigners are oblivious of all these proprieties, the Japanese are at a loss. They cast about to find similar meticulous proprieties according to which Westerners live and when they do not find them, some speak of the anger they feel and some of how frightened they are. (*Op.cit.*, p. 225)

This is a distinctive difference between the Western and the Japanese way of life. However, with an increase of contact with Western civilization, the traditional way of life of the Japanese has changed. Through the eyes of Western rationalism, the "give and give" relationship appears absurd and unfavorable, and the "give and take" relationship seems better and desirable. They gradually begin to achieve the virtues of *on*, *giri* and *ninjo* unwillingly. Such a moral code becomes compulsive to the people influenced by the Western thought. This is a serious dilemma to modern Japan, especially after the war. It is a conflict of the traditional Japanese against the modern Western value system. Any moral codes in any society are regarded more or less as compulsiveness by a certain kind of people. However, in this paper, I, as a sociolgist, described the ideal type of the human relationship of the Japanese, namely the basic principle of the Japanese behavior pattern; because, I believe, without understanding the basic pattern of human behavior, one

cannot understand the culture of different society.

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