

The Cultural Significance of Taboo Expressions in Japanese Wedding Ceremonies: An Academic Exploration

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Abstract:

This article aims to analyze the taboo expressions in Japanese wedding ceremonies. Japanese people believe that some expressions/words are taboo when used in wedding ceremonies because these expressions/words are supposed to bring the wrong meaning to the ceremony. This study used descriptive qualitative research. Data was collected through literature and interview methods and analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques. The study shows that the way of thinking is based on the Kotodama belief that even a word has power, so avoid using bad words in the performance of traditional Japanese ceremonies. Phrases that are taboo in Japanese wedding ceremonies are not only words that mean separation, completion, breaking up, hate, and others but also the word reduplication, which means repeating itself. The expressions are Kiru 'to cut' - Owaru 'to finish' - Wari 'to break' - Shinu 'to die'. This is because Japanese people associate these words with a sign of separation or divorce from the bride and groom. The word reduplication is also taboo because the word is associated with repeated marriages (second or other marriages).

Keywords: Taboo words, Japanese traditional ceremonies, moral values

1 Introduction

Taboo, as an integral part of culture, is a shared phenomenon across the globe (Brown, 1987). The birth of a taboo culture in a society can be attributed to various factors, one of which is the belief in forces that transcend human understanding, shaping people's lives. For instance, natural forces are believed to possess powers beyond human comprehension and can bring about disaster. This profound belief system forms a society's bedrock of various cultural beliefs, including taboos.

Matters considered taboo in a society can be in the form of actions or words. In Japanese culture, it is taboo to stick chopsticks in rice while eating because of the association with death. Alternatively, taboos in the form of words, for example, saying the phrase ochiru 'fall,' shipper 'fail' to people who are going to take an exam in Japanese society because it is considered to bring bad omens to those who will take the exam.

Japanese society is firmly rooted in animist beliefs, so it is familiar with various natural elements believed to have supernatural powers. Belief in supernatural powers is behind Japanese society's superstitious way of thinking, including belief in the power of words (kotodama). Some rituals carried out by Japanese people, such as the ritual of saving a new house or opening a new business, strictly prohibit words that mean fire, loss, or words related to the disaster. They also have much mythology full of stories about taboo things, such as the story of Urashimataro, the goddess Izanagi and Izanami, and others. Based on this story, it can be understood that rules about whether something can be done or not have existed since ancient times.

In Japanese, the taboo expression is called *imi kotoba*. The word *imi* has two kanji, namely 忌 and 齋. Although both can be read as *imi*, the first *imi* (忌) means 'taboo because something contains dirty or bad things' (Plutschow, 1995)—for example, excretion, sex, disease, and others. Not only Japanese people but Indonesian people in several regions also have a taboo belief in saying the word menstruation carelessly. This is based on the idea that blood (especially women's blood) is a source of dirt that can bring pain or dirt to the community. So, to avoid danger, the word menstruation was changed to *datang bulan*, *lagi dapet*, or something else.

Then, the second *imi* (齋) contains the meaning 'something that is prohibited or taboo to do or say because it has the sacred or holy value' (Plutschow, 1995). For example, the traditional hunting community (*matagi*) belief in the northern region of Japan is that it is taboo to mention the word bear because it is believed that bears are sacred animals. After all, bears are the favorite animal of the mountain goddess. Using the word bear carelessly is believed to tarnish the bear's sacredness, but it is also feared that it will bring danger to hunters (Giles, 1983). So, to respond to this, *Matagi* calls bear not *Kuma*, which means 'bear' in its true meaning, but disguises it as *oyaji* 'father.'

Several other opinions regarding taboo expressions were conveyed by Laksana (2009) that language taboos are a prohibition on using certain words or expressions because they are considered to endanger one's life or defame someone's good name. This opinion is supported by concrete evidence in several regional cultures in Indonesia. Balinese people (Balinese farmers in particular) are cautious about using the word rat, so it is changed to zero *Ketut* when referring to the word rat. This is based on the belief that saying the name of a rat in vain will bring misfortune and make rats as pests even more detrimental. Then, Saville-Troike (in Kob, 2004) stated that taboo language is not something arbitrary. This phenomenon is integrally and closely related to belief, religious practice, politeness, and social control. Something made taboo by a society is not random and sudden but happens in line with the beliefs and values held by that society.

When interacting with other people or people from different cultural backgrounds, it is essential to know the things prohibited in the culture of the person we are talking to (Ashkenazi, 2003). Even though the prohibited things seem to be things that are not very important or not logical enough, knowing these things can prevent us from doing unpleasant or impolite things. For example, you can give a set of cups containing four without feeling guilty because you do not know that the number four is taboo in Japanese society. For Japanese people, the word four is pronounced *shi*, which is similar to the pronunciation of *shinu*, which means 'death'. Giving gifts containing four items certainly will not be a problem when dealing with people from different cultures. However, this behavior based on ignorance is likely to tarnish long-standing good relationships.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Significance

In The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, also known as The Burra Charter (1999), cultural significance is defined as values that are aesthetic, historical, scientific, and/or social or spiritual values for past, present, or future generations that are implicit in the place itself, its materials, its layout, its functions, its associations, its meanings, its records, its associated places, and associated objects. Important values relating to cultural significance are outlined in the next paragraph.

Aesthetic value; encompasses aspects of sensory perception of form, scale, color, texture, material quality, smell, and sound associated with the location and use (Bond, 2016). Historical or historical value: encompasses the history of aesthetic, scientific, and societal developments that underlie most concepts of cultural significance. A place may have historical value because it has been

influenced by historical figures, events, phases, or activities of a particular time. It may also have historical value as the site or location of an important event. The significance of a place will be greater if there is evidence of surviving connections. However, some places continue to have great significance about certain events or associations, regardless of the presence or absence of such evidence.

Social or spiritual value: includes the quality of a place or location being the focus/center of spiritual, political, national, or other sentimental cultural activities for a particular community or cultural group. Spiritual value refers to the intangible values and meanings contained in or evoked by a place, which are considered important in spiritual identity, traditions, arts, and cultural practices. Scientific or scientific value refers to the information content contained in a place and its potential to reveal information about the past. The scientific value of a place will depend on the importance of the information/data involved, its rarity, quality, representativeness, and the extent to which it can contribute to providing further substantial information.

2.2 Taboo Expression

Tarigan, 1985 (in Sitaresmi and Fasya: 2011) explains that an expression is a special word or group of words to express an intention with a figurative meaning. Taboo is related to behavior or speech in a certain time context. Finnege (1997) explains that there are at least three types of taboos that exist in human life, namely taboos related to something scary, taboos related to something unpleasant, and taboos related to impropriety. These three types of taboos are found in the form of verbal expressions and taboos in the form of actions.

The type of taboo that is frightening is very dominant due to cultural influences or viewed from the cultural side, especially regarding the belief system. Belief in supernatural objects or things, belief in spirits, and karma are the reasons why taboos should not be broken. Violation of this taboo is believed to bring disaster. Meanwhile, the type of taboo related to unpleasant and inappropriate things concerning human interaction is therefore categorized in the social aspect. In this case, taboos are closely related to ethics or manners. This type of taboo is dominated by words that are classified as dysphemisms, so in responding to it, many euphemisms are used.

About taboos in Japanese society, it can be explained that taboos related to something frightening are taboos in terms of culture, especially regarding the marriage system. Taboos that are unpleasant and taboos that are related to impropriety are taboos in the social sphere, in this case, related to ethics or manners.

2.3 Japanese Wedding

Weddings in Japan are characterized by their classical and traditional nature, a practice that has been upheld since the Heian era (Shida, 1991). The Heian era occurred approximately 1200 years ago. The wedding held in Kyoto is exceptionally alluring and is considered the epitome of Japanese weddings in Japan. The reason is the presence of very suited temples and shrines, as well as captivating townscapes. The bride and groom don traditional attire, including little objects and kimono costumes, and the Japanese wedding proceeds with a series of traditional ceremonies.

A Japanese wedding consists of nine different ceremonies: Sanshin-no-Gi, Shubatsu-no-Gi, Noritosojo-no-Gi, and Sansankudo-no Hai, among others. The trade occurs. Seishisojo, Tamagushi-Hairei, and Shinzokusakazuki-no-Gi (Minami, 1986). The concluding statements. The researchers would like to present to you four ceremonies that hold significant cultural significance in Japan. Shubatsu-no-Gi, also known as expelling bad spirits through Shinto rites, involves a Shinto priest uttering words to drive away malevolent entities from the bride, groom, and attendees, while also cleansing their thoughts.

Noritosojo-no-Gi refers to the act of reciting Norito, which are prayers performed at Shinto rituals. Norito refers to the verbal expressions used to communicate with deities (Yanagita, 1990). The

Shinto priest invokes the gods by reciting Norito, informing them of the couple's marriage, and offering prayers for their prosperous union. Sansankudo-no Hai refers to the traditional Japanese wedding ritual where the bride and groom exchange cups of sake. The bride and groom consume the three glasses of Omiki, a sacred sake, in alternating fashion. (Each cup is of varying sizes, including a large, medium, and tiny one.) This ritual signifies the eternal exchange of marriage vows (Shida, 1991).

Tamagushi-Hairei refers to the act of presenting Tamagushi to God. Tamagushi is a custom when the couple expresses gratitude to God for the successful wedding ceremony by offering a branch from a sacred tree. Tamagushi is said to serve as a metaphorical link connecting the bride and groom. Japanese weddings are captivating due to their elaborate aesthetics and the profound symbolism behind the rites and intricate details, making them truly fascinating. In contrast to Western wedding ceremonies, in this particular ceremony, you have the opportunity to save evidence of the marriage in a calm and dignified setting.

3 Methodology/Materials

The method used in this research is the literature method. Therefore, in collecting data, the author reviews the literature, such as books, literature, and notes that discuss or explain the value of taboos in Japanese society, (traditional) culture, and taboo expressions in marriage in Japanese culture. Data collection was also continued by conducting interviews with informants, namely Japanese people living in Indonesia, and taking information from the perspective of Indonesians who have lived in Japan for a long time to get more accurate information. Data were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Moleong, 1994). The discussion will be described descriptively. The data was then verified with several Japanese speakers for validity. The data regarding taboo expressions analyzed this time are expressions that are taboo to be said during Japanese wedding ceremonies.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Phrase is a language element that tends to be standardized and frozen in structure and meaning. The element is passed down from generation to generation with the same structure and meaning. Phrases are language elements that can describe the culture of a society. According to (Nadar: 2009) defines value and culture. Value can be defined as something valuable, a property (thing) that is important or useful for humanity, or something that can perfect humans according to their nature. Theodorsan (in Pelly: 1994) adds that value is something abstract, which becomes a guide and reference for a person in acting or behaving in his community (in a society).

Before defining cultural values, it is good to look for definitions of each word that makes it up, namely values and culture (Geertz, 1973). Value can be defined as something valuable, characteristics (things) that are important or useful for humanity, or something that perfects humans according to their essence. Theodorsan (in Pelly: 1994) added that values are abstract and become a guide and reference for someone acting or behaving in their community (in a society).

Culture is defined as the mind, common sense, and customs that have developed and have become a habit that is difficult to change. Therefore, cultural values can be defined as an abstract concept regarding something valuable in society and used as a reference for behaving or acting in society at an ideal level. This was also added by Koentjaraningrat (1983), who said that cultural values consist of conceptions that exist in the human mind which are considered very noble. Related to this

research, the values valued by Japanese society are explored in the taboo expressions on marriage in Japanese society.

Based on the literature review that researchers have carried out, it is found that Japanese society generally recognizes four types of wedding ceremonies. These are wedding ceremonies held in churches (kiristokyou kekkon shiki), wedding ceremonies held at civil registry offices (hitomae kekkon shiki), wedding ceremonies held by Buddhism (butsuzen kekkon shiki), and wedding ceremonies held by Shinto beliefs (Shinzen kekkon shiki). Modern young Japanese people tend to hold their wedding ceremonies in a Western-style, held in church wearing dresses even though they are not Christians. The reception ceremony is usually held at a hotel with a formal banquet. The invitees must confirm their arrival at the reception.

There are four kinds of wedding ceremonies/kekkon shiki in Japanese society. The 4 types of ceremonies in Japanese society are 1) Kiristokyou kekkon shiki, which takes place in a church. 2) Hitomae kekkon shiki, which takes place at the registry office, 3) Butsuzen, held by Buddhism 4) Shinzen kekkon shiki, held by Shintoism.

Although many young Japanese people have no religion, it has been observed that they often perform wedding ceremonies in churches, butsuzen, Shinto, etc. during the wedding ceremony. There are rules and regulations about what you can or cannot do during these weddings, even if they are not written down.

The rules of what can or cannot be done are clearly defined at the wedding reception, even though they are not written down. For example, the invitees should not dress more than the bride and groom; during the reception, they should not say unwritten taboo words in Japanese society. The taboo words at the reception were primarily words that meant parting wakareru, shine 'died', owaru 'finished', and others. Although not all Japanese people believe in taboos because they consider the causes and effects illogical, they obey these taboo rules for politeness.

4.2 Discussion

In Japanese society, a wedding is an essential moment for the couple and an event that connects the family and society (Haugh et al., 2011). From traditional ceremonies to modern trends, weddings in Japan reflect a rich cultural touch, from manners to spiritual aspects. This discussion provides a window into a deeper understanding of how weddings are a reflection of the values upheld in Japanese culture, as well as how the dynamics of social and cultural change affect the views and practices of marriage today.

The words forbidden in wedding ceremonies (kekkon shiki) in Japan are Kiru 'cut,' Owaru 'finish,' Wari 'break,' and Shinu 'die'. The following is data related to taboo expressions in Japanese wedding ceremonies:

The expression 'kiru' in the wedding ceremony or cake-cutting session cannot be used because it has a harmful effect. For Japanese beliefs, it can bring bad influence where their marriage age will not be sustainable but will separate or break up, just as it is expressed.

Example:

ウェディングのお菓子を切るので、進路新婦 おお立ちください

Wedding no okashi wo **kiru** no de, shinroshinpu o Itachi kudasai

'Since we will cut the bride and groom's wedding cake, please stand up.'

新郎新婦がウエディングケーキを**カット**し、両親にプレゼントします。

Shinrō shinpu ga uedingukēki o **katto** shi, ryōshin ni purezento shimasu.

'the bride and groom cut the wedding cake and give it to the parents'

Notes: The words kuru in the example sentence one and katto in the example sentence two, which are bolded, mean the same thing in Indonesian, namely "cutting."

The expression of the word 'owaru' which means finished in the wedding ceremony in the welcome session or greeting for the bride ending her speech the expression of the word 'owaru' is forbidden to be said because based on Japanese beliefs the meaning of the word expressed will hurt her marriage.

Example:

これが新郎新婦へのメッセージです。おめでとうございます。これで私の挨拶を終わります。

Kore ga shinrō shinpu e no messēji desu. Omedetōgozaimasu. Kore de watashi no aisatsu o owarimasu.

'I conclude my remarks with a message to the bride and groom.'

結婚式も終わりましたが、新郎新婦が幸せでありますように

Kekkonshiki mo owarimashitaga, shinrō shinpu ga shiawasedearimasu yō ni

'The wedding has ended; may the bride and groom be happy.'

The word 'wari,' which means 'broken,' is forbidden in the wedding ceremony, breaking the cover of the sake barrel where the sake will be served at the wedding. When using the expression 'kagami wari' based on Japanese culture, the meaning is broken, and the marriage will have dire consequences where it will happen according to the meaning the marriage will be scattered/fall apart.

続いて新郎新婦による甕割りが行われます。

Tsudzuite shinrō shinpu ni yoru kamewari ga okonawa remasu.

'Then the sake guchi will be broken by the bride and groom.'

新郎新婦が酒壺を割ってしまいました、乾杯しましょう

Shinrō shinpu ga shuko o watte shimaimashita, kanpai shimashou

'The sake the bride and groom have broken vessel, let us make a toast'.

The expression 'Shinu' which means death, death is forbidden in Japanese wedding ceremonies. Since it means separation forever, it is not a good idea to say shinu during a wedding reception.

死が二人を分かちまで、新郎新婦の幸せを祈ります

Shi ga futari o wakatsu made, shinrō shinpu no shiawase o inorimasu

'I wish for the bride and groom to be happy until death does them part.'

新郎新婦はいつも幸せ、死が二人を引き離すことはできない

Shinrō shinpu wa itsumo shiawase, shi ga futari o hikihanasu koto wa dekinai

'The bride and groom are always happy. Death cannot separate'

5 Conclusion

Phrases that are taboo in Japanese wedding ceremonies are not only words that have the meaning of separation, completion, breaking up, hate, and others but also the word reduplication, which has a repetitive meaning. This is because Japanese people associate these words with a sign of separation or divorce from the bride and groom. The word reduplication is also taboo because the word is associated with repeated marriages (second or other marriages).

The cultural value contained in these taboo expressions is the Japanese people's belief in the power of a word (kotodama). Other words related to the taboo expressions in Japanese weddings are kuru 'to cut', owaru 'to finish', wari 'to break', and shinu 'to die'. For Japanese people, words also have power; therefore, at a wedding ceremony, which is a happy event, it is best not to use words with sinister meanings. It is believed that this can also bring bad things. Therefore, words with terrible meanings for wedding ceremonies are replaced with words with opposite meanings or can represent the meaning of the words they replace.

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