

Alisha Romano

Community Project, Path II

Familia Bonds and *Amae* and the Role they Play in People's Lives

Family values and the importance of family in people's daily lives seem to change more with each generation. This phenomenon is not unique to one particular culture or society, though it looks different for every family and in each culture. As an American I see this change in my daily life as I see family life and roles differently than other Americans and the expectations behind these roles vary greatly between different generations in the U.S. Studying Japan and Japanese culture raises the question of what these changing roles and dynamics look like in Japan and how they might differ from those I see in the United States. I interviewed two Japanese women living in the U.S. about their families and how they see their familial bonds. Despite the fact that these women have their own families I requested that they discuss primarily their parents, grandparents, and siblings. I also interviewed two Japanese exchange students who were living in the U.S. for a year before returning to Japan. I mostly focused on the concept of *amae* which is a word unique to Japan and Japanese culture. This concept was discussed in the interviews and led me to ask the interviewees what they saw as an expression of *amae* in their lives. While conducting my interviews, I heard from each one that *amae* is more present with mothers than fathers, so I will focus mostly on relationships with mothers and how they work with the concept of *amae*.

Amae is a Japanese term that all of the Japanese people who I interviewed were very familiar with. However, this is a term that does not exist in the U.S. and a text by Dr. Doi proved to have the most in depth analysis of the concept *amae*. He discusses that the concept is first seen

in children and their relationships with their mothers which, after my interviews, seems to make the most sense with how older children see their relationship with their mothers. Doi explains while discussing a newborn, "...as its mind develops it gradually realizes that itself and its mother are independent existences, and comes to feel the mother as something indispensable to itself; it is the craving for close contact thus developed that constitutes, one might say, *amae*" (Doi, 2014). In this explanation, the relationship between mother and child is seen as a desire for closeness and a need for dependence. Though *amae* is also described as a relationship that goes both ways. The mother can have *amae* for the child; in doing so they would have expectations of the child and a desire for the child to meet these expectations without being so told. The ability to anticipate the needs of their child and for a child to anticipate the needs of their parents is an essential part of the *amae* between mothers and their children. As the child ages, the *amae* between mother and child increases, as the mother has more *amae* towards the child and the child's *amae* shifts from being based on survival to emotional support and guidance in life. I believe *amae* can most easily be summed up as a relationship, in this case between mother and child, that relies on an ability to anticipate unspoken needs and bear the emotional burden of the other person's needs.

While discussing *amae* during the interviews there was a clear distinction between the older and younger generation. The two older women who I interviewed felt that *amae* is a negative relationship, that while it may bring a closeness that it also limits people from being able to achieve their goals and in some cases can stunt the growth of the child. The two younger women believed that *amae* is a positive relationship, that the support and ability to rely on their mothers gave them the opportunity to take certain risks as their mothers will help and support

them either way. This difference in opinion on the *amae* between mother and child can be largely attributed to an age difference between the two groups. The older women discussed a time in Japan and a Japanese society that made them feel as if they could not stay. Both expressed that they had had a desire to leave Japan from a young age and that they felt their relationship with their mother was a motivating factor for this. The traditional values that their mothers had and the *amae* that was in place, one that expected that they meet these unspoken values and live a life by the standards set by these traditions, meant that they would be required to either meet this *amae* or move away from it and, by extension, leave Japan. They felt that their mother's *amae* was forced on them to such an extent that they were unable to express themselves and ultimately influenced their opinions of *amae* as a mostly negative relationship. Tomoko Ogaki discussed this as, “自分の価値観を持っている女性がいいと思っていました。だから母はいつも私に批判的だったんです” (T. Ogaki, personal communication, November 22nd, 2019). When asked if moving from Japan to the U.S. made them miss their family or want to return to Japan both stated that it did not and that they found their lives in the U.S. to be more suited to how they wanted to live.

The younger generation described a time in Japan where they had concerns about society at large but also one where they felt that they could still achieve their goals. Their ability to achieve their goals was mostly because they felt that they worked hard enough to achieve them, but underlying this was also that they felt more supported by their families. They both believed that they have a family that cares less about values or what lifestyle they may choose to live but instead simply wants them to be healthy and financially secure. Though, this was turned around by the younger women, who both expressed a desire to work hard and make money in order to

care for their parents and to be able to pay them back for the hard work that they put in raising them. Mana Kato discussed her desire to care for her parents as, “私は家族を宝物と体にしま
すで、私の両親は私を見ても気違って大切に育ててくれたので、私はその彼は彼らに対
して当事者の責任を負わなきゃいけないと思ってます。なので私が仕事に就いたが若い
のに色々な事をしてあげたいです” (M. Kato, personal communication, November 19th,
2019). In their relationships with their mother, they both discussed that they felt close to their
mothers and that they felt that they could still rely on them when they needed to. Both stated that
they spoke to their mothers frequently and missed their mothers while being in the U.S. The
younger generation did not see their mother’s *amae* as repressive but supportive and this shift in
how *amae* is being expressed created a different kind of relationship. The shift in values in
Japanese society has created a different kind of environment for the younger generation and
made theirs and the older generations experiences a clear example of how *amae* can either create
a support system that breeds closeness amongst mothers and their children or it can become
repressive and create a feeling of resentment that pushes mother and child a part.

While conducting these interviews I found that listening for values was difficult mostly
when I was listening to the older generations interviews. Part of this was I felt rude for asking
them to discuss their family life because both of these women are professors. When I had
questions about certain relationships and why there was such negativity between them and their
mothers I felt presumptive and wanted to be careful not to overstep my bounds. However, when
discussing these same ideas with the younger generation, the relationship was much more equal
and comfortable so it was easier to ask my questions without feeling like I was being rude. I also
had more questions for the older generation as certain aspects of life are different than currently,

such as how they might communicate with their parents and how often would have been considered often or not. With technology today everyday communication is easy and more expected. I also was unsure of how traditional some of their families' opinions are and what that would look like, especially as I am not from Japan and do not have the same context as I would in the U.S. Overall, listening for values was easier than I expected as they each had interesting stories and responses and listening to what they had to say was very helpful in developing this project further. Much of what they expressed made me develop a deeper understanding of *amae* and the importance of mother and child relationships in the *amae* concept. As I did each interview I had an increasingly more precise idea of what kind of answers to expect and what kinds of values may come up. I also was able to expect certain responses as I had previous interactions with three of the four interviewees and had a more basic understanding of their values.

The interviews expressed a deep importance of caring for family. Even the two women from the older generation expressed that they would go back to Japan, or at least take care of the family that is in Japan, despite the fact that they do not feel that they have a close relationship. Professor Russell had actually stated that she makes it more routine than she used to in order to care for her parents as they have begun to age and she still feels responsible to them. Professor Ogaki also discussed going back to care for family even though it was not always a positive experience. She states that, “私はアメリカに来て、で、日本に帰るときに私は両親が私が日本に帰ってくれて嬉しいだろうって言うふうにちょっとアスームしていたけどちょっと迷惑に思うこともたまにあったので、まあ、そういうところはちょっとお互いの距離をキープしないといけないなあーって最近思うのかなあー” (T. Ogaki, personal

communication, November 22nd, 2019). The same was expressed by the younger generation, as they felt that they needed to take care of their family members and were still responsible to them. The idea of caring for family, even if they may not be someone you feel that you are particularly close to, is seen in some Japanese literature. The novel *Masks* by Fumiko Enchi discusses the relationship between a young woman and her mother-in-law following the death of her husband, the mother-in-law's son. During one of the interactions the mother-in-law cares for the young woman as another way to convince her that she is acting in her best interest. This is described as, “The gesture had the awkward uncertainty of a young mother dealing with an obstreperous child. As if moved by her mother-in-law’s apparent distress, Yasuko held herself perfectly still, then, as Mieko’s pleasing fragrance began to sink once again into Yasuko’s body, easing the tiredness in her joints...” (Enchi, 1983). This interaction highlights that their relationship is based on reliance on their family member and that they have a mother/daughter relationship. In Meiko’s attempts to care for Yasuko she receives *amae* from Yasuko who calms down and begins to care for her mother-in-law. This is a theme that is discussed by Dr. Doi who mentions that oftentimes people seek out caring for another as a way to perform *amae* and to *amaeru*. He states, “...in such cases the one who does the spoiling is, in reality, “seeking to be spoiled” (*amaeru*)” (Doi, 2014). These expressions of *amae* as a back and forth relationship, where a child tries to care for mother as a way to also receive care from their mother. This relationship pattern shows that the value of caring for family members despite the relationship is a way to express *amae* as well as receive *amae*.

My own values did influence how I heard the stories being told and how I interpreted them. I have a very close relationship to my own mother and feel a deep responsibility towards

caring for my family members. I feel that family is an essential part of my happiness and success and I also feel a desire to work hard in order to be able to support my family in the ways that they have supported me in my life. These are all themes that I connected with while listening to my interviewees tell their stories and felt that it was interesting that responsibility towards family is a uniting factor in everyone's stories. I would say that American culture also sees caring for family as an important aspect of growing up and many of the people I grew up with had a deep connection to their family and wanted to support them in the way that they had been supported. Though there was little difference in how the interviewees and my culture sees family and the importance of caring for them, the connection to mothers is not as seen in the U.S., it seems that that only occurs in single family households.

I would agree with the quote "Your values are your current estimations of truth. They represent your answer to the question of how to live" by Steve Pavlina. This is true because what we care about will always be seen as the truth and the only way forward. In this instance, the value of caring for family no matter what illuminates how to live and becomes the truth. No matter what may occur, caring for family becomes the truth to live by and that is how those of us who hold that value will choose to live. This can be seen in the older generations interviews where despite describing a less than ideal relationship with their mothers they still expressed a desire to care for them in their old age and felt that there was a responsibility to do so, regardless of what else has occurred. For the younger generation, caring for family is a matter of showing respect for the hard work that the family did in order to raise them. This has become a truth that they all hold and are putting in the work daily to achieve the goal of caring for their family.

Bibliography

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