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JAPANESE MOTHER-CHILD SUICIDE: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE *KIMURA* CASE

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On the cold and sunny afternoon of January 29, 1985, Fumiko Kimura, a 32-year-old Japanese woman, in despair over her marital problems, decided to kill herself. She walked slowly across the beach in Santa Monica, heading toward the ocean with her two children, a four-year-old son and an infant daughter. Two college students later found them floating in the water, and pulled them out. Only Fumiko survived. She was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and was ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment.¹

This incident elicited considerable shock among the general public, and overwhelming sympathy and support for Fumiko Kimura from the local Japanese community. What Fumiko had attempted was *oya-ko shinju* (joint parent-child suicide), a traditional Japanese form of suicide which is still an everyday occurrence in Japan. People of Western cultures think that a mother killing her own children is a hideous, unacceptable crime, one that should be punished severely. In Japan, this type of conduct is also greatly deplored. However, when an actual incident occurs, the Japanese public usually shows great sympathy and understanding toward the parent, and does not regard it as a serious crime. If a parent is unsuccessful in killing himself/herself, he or she will rarely be found guilty of a crime.² One author, Hiroshi Wagatsuma, com-

* M.A., UCLA Dept. of Sociology, 1990; M.S. in Communications, Boston University, 1982; B.A. in Art Philosophy, Doshida University, 1980.

1. Dolan, *Two Cultures Collide Over Act of Despair*, L.A. Times, Feb. 24, 1985, § 1, at 3, col. 1 (Sun. Final ed.).

2. According to the Research Committee on Female Crime in Japan, milder sentences have been imposed on female homicide. This stems from the fact that about two-thirds of the victims of these cases were the children of the accused, and the fact that the victims were the accused's own children is regarded as a mitigating circumstance in determining punishment. M. Balint, *The Final Goal of Psychoanalytic Treatment*, in *PRIMARY LOVE AND PSYCHOANALYTIC TECHNIQUE* (1952). See also M. Balint, *Critical Notes on the Theory of the Pregenital Organizations of the Libido*, in

pares child abuse in Japan with the United States, and notes that Japanese parents, especially mothers, tend to abandon or kill their children more often than they keep and abuse them.³

Why do Japanese parents tend to kill their children when they kill themselves? Why is it not considered a serious crime? What justifies a parent in killing his/her children? This paper will analyze these questions by focusing on the psychological identification of Japanese mothers with their children, as well as broader social factors that contribute to the phenomenon of joint parent-child suicide. I will then focus on the case of Fumiko Kimura: what happened, and why.

SUICIDE IN JAPAN

Suicide in Japan has been a major topic of interest for both Japanese and non-Japanese researchers. It has become evident to observers of Japanese culture that the Japanese have a peculiar attitude toward suicide. This is often illustrated by such acts as samurais' *harakiri* (self-disembowelment), pilots' *kamikaze*, or *junshi* (following one's master in death due to devotion and loyalty).⁴ Although these forms of suicide no longer exist in contemporary Japan, Japan is still considered a country of many suicides.

Japan's suicide rate was low during World War II, but hit a peak (25.2 per 100,000) in 1955, before declining until 1967.⁵ Subsequently, the rate began to rise again, to 15.3 per 100,000 in 1970, and 17.5 per 100,000 in 1974.⁶ On May 6, 1984, the *Japan Times* reported that "suicide both in Tokyo and the nation hit a record high" in 1983.⁷ The rate is especially high among "youth, females, and writers," but recently, the suicide rate of middle-aged males has also increased.⁸

Although *oya-ko shinju* accounts for only approximately two percent of all suicides⁹, a 1977 Welfare Ministry survey showed that about 17 percent of all homicide victims in Japan were children

PRIMARY LOVE AND PSYCHOANALYTIC TECHNIQUE (1952). Both are cited in Doi's *Amae: A Key Concept for Understanding Japanese Personality Structure*, in JAPANESE CULTURE AND BEHAVIOR (T.S. Lebra and W.P. Lebra ed. 1974).

3. H. Wagatsuma, *Child Abandonment and Infanticide: A Japanese Case*, in CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT 120 (J. Karbin ed. 1981).

4. One of the most famous incidents of *junshi* is that of General Nogi and his wife, who committed suicide after Emperor Meiji died in 1912.

5. M. Iga, *Pattern of Japanese Suicide*, in THE THORN IN THE CHRYSANTHEMUM 13 (1986).

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Japan, which tracks suicide rates in the country, has quoted the most recent figure as 21.2 per 100,000 in 1986.

9. *Id.*, at 18.

killed by a parent who committed or attempted suicide.¹⁰ This phenomenon is noteworthy not only because it is happening in a uniquely Japanese cultural context, but also because it constitutes an important aspect of parent-child relationships, and provides some insight into how Japanese perceive themselves.

Most parent-child suicides are carried out by mothers of small children. Therefore, mother-child joint suicide will be the focus of this paper. In most cases, the mother kills the child first, then commits suicide immediately after the infanticide. Typically, a suicidal mother is an urban housewife aged 25 to 34 years, with marital or other problems, such as being the principal caretaker in a family burdened by a long-term illness. She is sometimes further burdened with raising children with little or no help from either her husband or his parents.¹¹ If the child is severely handicapped or has a debilitating disease which makes it difficult for the child to live a normal life, some mothers become worried and depressed about the child's future, and choose to kill the child, then commit suicide. What are the psychological and sociological implications of involving another human being in one's own suicide attempt?

A JAPANESE MOTHER'S SELF-CONCEPT

Japanese mothers kill their children when committing suicide because they do not consider it murder. They would be surprised to be accused of murder, and would respond to the accusation, "how can killing myself and a part of myself be murder?" Most mothers in all cultures feel to some extent that their children are a part of themselves. The degree of maternal identification with children depends upon the culture. However, this extremely intense identification as manifested in mother-child joint suicide may be a phenomenon found in an uniquely Japanese context.

With regard to the concept of ego extension, Rosenberg notes, "The self does not have fixed and rigid boundaries. It can take into itself more and more objects and individuals, more and more external things whose fate then becomes wrapped up in its own."¹² He further adds that ego extension is the phenomenon of introjection (defined as "the adoption of externals — persons or objects — into the self, so as to have a sense of oneness with them and to feel personally affected by what happens to them.")¹³

Japanese mothers often have an extreme form of ego extension

10. Jameson, *Japan's Parent-Child Suicide Phenomenon Blamed on Social Change*, L.A. Times, Mar. 8, 1981, § 1A, at 1, col. 1.

11. *Id.*

12. M. Rosenberg, *The Nature of the Self-Concept*, in CONCEIVING THE SELF 5, 35 (1979).

13. *Id.* at 35-36.

with respect to their children. They often lack the sense of boundaries between themselves and their children as separate individuals. Not only do they feel "personally affected by what happens to their children", but they also sometimes require that their children follow the same path they take.¹⁴ In short, Japanese mothers feel "oneness" with their children. To a Japanese mother, a child is not a separate individual, but an important component of the mother's self. When this tendency toward ego extension is intensified to an extreme longing for oneness in the midst of a crisis, it becomes a dangerous pre-condition for joint suicide. The extension of the mother-child suicide is a family suicide, which involves the parental couple, children, and sometimes the grandparents living in the same household. In the case of an entire family committing suicide, it is usually the father who takes the lead, probably because most family suicides are the result of the financial failure of the father, who is facing bankruptcy or heavy debt. In a family suicide, a whole family is one entity whose fate is also one. Each member is just a part of the "family self", which often takes precedence over an individual self.¹⁵

Double suicide by lovers has also been common in Japan. Lebra, an Anthropologist and expert in Japanese culture, explains that love suicide originated in the feudal system, where marriage based on free choice was prohibited.¹⁶ Moreover, the Buddhist belief in reincarnation perhaps encourages the lovers to abandon this life and to hope for a final union in the next life.¹⁷

In most cases of joint suicide, it is the strong desire to belong that motivates the act. For many Japanese, "sharing death appears to be the culmination of togetherness."¹⁸ Every human being is born into and leaves this life by himself. Even those in the most intimate relationships have to part with each other when one of them dies. Therefore, sharing death with someone can be the ultimate expression of oneness signifying the fusion of the two distinct self-boundaries.

Buddhist philosophy forms the basis of this "blurred" sense of self-boundary among the Japanese. Indeed, Buddhist tenets hold that the ideal state is that of "muga" (no self) and that the final goal of the Buddhist is to eliminate one's own self as an autonomous being and to be "one with the universe. These principles stand in stark contrast to Western religious philosophical principles that

14. *Id.*

15. H. Minami, *Formation of a Group Self*, in *NIHONTEKI JIGA* (Japanese Self) 26 (1983).

16. T.S. Lebra, *Social Relativism as the Japanese Ethos: A Postulate and Suicide*, in *JAPANESE PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR* (1976).

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

conceive of human beings as separate, autonomous individuals who share a common faith in one absolute God. The Tibetan Buddhist Lama Anagarika Govinda's word expresses the essence of Buddhist thought:

He who wants to follow the path of Buddha must give up all thoughts of "I" and "mine". But this giving up does not make us poorer; it actually makes us richer, because what we renounce and destroy are the walls that kept us imprisoned; and what we gain is that supreme freedom, according to which every individual is essentially connected with all that exists, taking part in their deepest experience, sharing sorrow and joy.¹⁹

This concept itself cannot completely explain the phenomena of parent-child suicide or joint suicide in general in Japan. However, if "life or death" is the most crucial question in life, and is the issue which everyone ultimately must face as an individual, then sharing death together may appear to eliminate the final boundary of separate selves. This basic Buddhist principle of oneness may in fact make it easier for a Japanese person to identify and unite with others.

However, a question arises here: if a mother feels at "one" with her child, why doesn't she try to live with and for the child even when she feels hopeless about life? In fact, many Japanese mothers do. A mother who is in despair and contemplating *oya-ko shinju* may pause to look at her child, who is playing happily, innocently relying on her mother. The mother may realize that she should not take her own and her child's life, but rather, live for the sake of the child. However, the mother's consequent lifestyle of total devotion to the child creates a distorted and unhealthy relationship between herself and the child. The child becomes the mother's only reason for being.

Mothers in these distorted relationships will often unconsciously communicate their suffering and devotion to the child. The implicit message to the child is clear: the mother did not abandon the child by killing herself — she tolerated many hardships, such as a bad marriage, a violent husband, or financial difficulties, for the sake of her child. Inevitably, the child will develop a strong sense of guilt and obligation to compensate for his/her mother's sacrifices.

"The Japanese mother has perfected the technique of inducing guilt in her children by quiet suffering."²⁰ Although in clinical practice, some American mothers have overtly expressed their suffering from the bad behavior of their children, the Japanese mother

19. N.P. Jacobson, *BUDDHISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: CHANGE AND SELF CORRECTION* 84 (1983).

20. DeVos, *The Relation of Guilt Toward Parents to Achievement and Arranged Marriage Among the Japanese*, in *JAPANESE CULTURE AND BEHAVIOR* 122 (T.S. Lebra & W.P. Lebra ed. 1974).

expresses her suffering in a different way. "The Japanese mother does not to the same extent verbalize her suffering for her children, but lives it out before their eyes. She takes on the burden of responsibility for her children's — and husband's — behavior, and will often manifest self-reproach if they conduct themselves badly."²¹

However, if a mother has genuinely given up her life and devoted herself to her child's happiness, she would not try to manipulate her child with guilt feelings — she would simply wish the best for the child, and not expect a reward from the child's behavior. In fact, what happens is that the Japanese mother will often extend her self-boundary to incorporate or absorb her child's self into her own. The strong identification with the child reinforces her implicit belief that the child is a part of herself, and thus incapable of ignoring its mother's interests.

INDIVIDUALITY AND AMAERU

Japanese society, like many Asian societies, does not emphasize individual autonomy as a virtue, but gives priority to interdependence among people. Doi, one of Japan's most famous psychiatrists, explains this phenomenon with the concept of *amae* (a noun form of "amaeru", which means "to depend and presume upon another's benevolence".)²² From his practice as a psychiatrist for both Japanese and Americans, he came to realize that there is no English equivalent to "amaeru" (though this does not mean that the psychology of "amae" is totally alien to the people of English speaking countries). He notes that during therapy, many of his Japanese patients realized that they previously had no real concept of self, apart from a strong desire of "amaeru". Although Doi sees the patient's realization as "a step toward the emergence of a new concept of self," most Japanese never attain this realization. Moreover, Japanese society seems to operate more smoothly with the assumption of "amae" in each individual.²³

Doi credits Balint, a British psychoanalyst, with explaining "amae" in the western context.²⁴ Balint observes that a person has

21. *Id.*

22. Doi, *supra* note 2, at 145.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*, at 140. Doi explains Balint's theory of primary love. "The reasoning behind Balint's observation that primary love appears in its pure form only in the final phase of treatment is as follows: since such narcissism is part of the earliest and most primitive layer of the mind, it can be modified only in the last stage of treatment, at which time the long-repressed urge to be loved can re-emerge in its pure state. Then what shall we say about the Japanese, to whom this primary desire to be loved is always accessible? Does it mean that the Japanese have less narcissism? I think not. Rather I would say that the Japanese somehow continue to cherish the wish to be loved even after the formation of narcissism." While "narcissism" may have a negative connotation in general, here, Doi means "narcissism" as a positive love for oneself.

an infantile, instinctive wish and demand for gratification from the environment, which he termed "passive love object" or "primary love".²⁵ This primary love, found in an infant's early relationships, is a foundation from which one eventually develops narcissism (love for oneself) because this primary love is bound to be frustrated.²⁶ Doi argues, "Japanese somehow continue to cherish the wish to be loved (as a child is loved) even after the formation of narcissism. It is as though the Japanese did not want to see the reality of their basic frustration . . . , it seems that the Japanese never give up their desire to *amaeru*, thus mitigating the extent of violent emotions caused by this frustration".²⁷

This insightful observation seems to confirm the Japanese tendency to avoid strong individual selfhood, accompanied by a clear self-boundary. One who assumes he somehow always will be loved and who feels he can expect love from outside, will have less desire to establish his own concept of self. Once one establishes his concept of self, he can love himself in order to compensate for the reality that love is not always available from outside one's self. As Doi explains, "Japanese are always prepared to identify themselves with, or introject, an outside force, to the exclusion of other ways of coping with it."²⁸

There is no doubt that the mother-child relationship is the most fundamental and primary relationship of all. It seems quite possible that a mother who does not establish her own concept of self, could easily introject herself into her child, seeing the child as only an extension of herself. What has been pointed out so far may be more or less true to any parent who feels his/her child is a link to the future. However, it is undeniable that, in Japan, this tends to be more intense, and sometimes results in a pathological phenomenon such as joint-suicide.

When looking into the social factors for mother-child joint suicide, two major themes are important: motherhood as a basis of identity, and suicide as a culturally established method of communication.

THE MOTHER IDEAL

Among all human relationships, the mother-child relationship is considered the most important, beautiful, and sacred tie in Japan. Japanese society and culture place great value on motherhood as a quality which transcends other virtues. This is intertwined with the fact that a woman's status in Japanese society is still relatively low;

25. M. BALINT, *supra* note 2.

26. *Id.*

27. DOI, *supra* note 2, at 149.

28. *Id.*, at 151.

she faces fewer career opportunities, ubiquitous sex discrimination, and less freedom to choose her own lifestyle than a man. Furthermore, the concept of the mother-child tie as the closest, most idealized human relationship, has been reinforced over the centuries in various forms of literature and art. The image of the self-sacrificing, devoted mother still abounds in the media and television programs, dramas, and commercials. Because motherhood is considered the most wonderful state for a woman, the role expectations of society are enormous. Most Japanese women quit their jobs (if they have one) when they start to have children, and are expected to devote themselves to their families. Since a Japanese husband commits his life to his company or career, and thus has little time for the family, the mother's devotion is naturally concentrated on her child. Before she has a child, she might have different identities as a young woman — wife, company employee, student, volleyball player, and friend. But once she becomes a mother, at least while the child is very young, she is socially compelled to place her identity as mother in top priority — even ahead of her role as a wife.²⁹ Many couples sleep in separate bedrooms after the baby is born, so that the mother can nurse the baby any time at night.³⁰ Because the biological tie is considered extremely important and motherhood is strongly emphasized, few daycare centers and babysitters are available. Being deprived of alternative opportunities, a woman's life is centered around fulfilling her duty as a good caretaker of the family, especially her children.

Wagatsuma, a renowned scholar of Japanese society and culture, admits that motherhood is still the source of greatest gratification for Japanese women; "being a dedicated mother of intellectually achieving and socially successful children, preferably sons," is most important.³¹ However, in a society where a woman's central identity, if it is other than that of mother, is unwelcome, a woman can express herself only through her children. Therefore, it is a question whether a Japanese woman spontaneously chooses this lifestyle, or whether she has to find gratification from motherhood because there is no other choice available. For some mothers, a child could be a vehicle to carry out her unfulfilled potential by vicarious experience. It is easy to understand how she may feel in-

29. S. Stryker, *Identity Salience and Role Performance: The Relevance of Symbolic Interaction Theory for Family Research*, in *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF THE SELF* (Rosenberg & Kaplan ed. 1982).

30. Claudill & Plath, *Who Sleeps by Whom? Parent-Child Involvement in Urban Japanese Families*, in *JAPANESE CULTURE AND BEHAVIOR* (T.S. Lebra & W.P. Lebra ed. 1974). The study of parent-child sleeping arrangements in Japanese families revealed patterns which blur distinctions between generations and between sexes, resulting in an emphasis on interdependence rather than individuality.

31. H. Wagatsuma, *Child Abandonment and Infanticide: A Japanese Case*, in *CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT* (J. Karbin ed. 1981).

separable from her children. It is an interesting and fascinating fact that women who manage to keep careers outside of the home rarely commit suicide with their children. One who maintains a strong identity apart from motherhood may feel less desperate when she encounters a crisis in her family. When her concept of self is not firmly established as an independent human being, and when her identity as mother takes over her concept of self, she may feel justified in doing anything for, or to, her child.

Although the role of mother is the most important one and takes precedence over everything else, it may appear that a mother who attempts *oya-ko shinju* is ignoring the moral principle against taking the life of another human being. However, a mother who commits joint suicide may justify her act by the fact that she would be considered very cruel if she left young children behind. One commentator, Parker, observes, "If the mother had chosen to leave her children behind, it would have been evident that her attachment to her children was not as strong as it should have been, and thus, the woman was not a good mother."³² In his discussion of the Kimura case with his Japanese students, the students also agreed that the mother's initial decision to kill herself was an irresponsible decision for a mother of two small children to make. However, they acknowledged that leaving the children behind would have been ample evidence of her unfitness as a mother.³³

Another rationale for the mother's decision is that the Japanese social system makes it more difficult for an orphan or a child with only one parent to live a normal, happy life. There are fewer daycare facilities and institutions for orphans in Japan. Furthermore, a child with only one parent is more likely to have problems when he/she seeks a good match for marriage in the future. Step-parenting and adoption are uncommon. These ties are regarded as undesirable, and never as good as biological ties. Therefore, the mother can easily convince herself that, if she leaves the children, there will be no one left to take care of them. Even if there is such a person, she will never be as good as the biological mother, and the children will have hopeless, miserable lives.

Parker also compares the American and the Japanese concepts of self, and finds that the Japanese stress role identity over the "essential self" as a human being. He believes that the priority of the American concept of self is on moral requirements, and that of the Japanese concept of self is on role requirements.³⁴ For Americans, the mother's role must be subordinated to the more fundamental

32. R. Parker, *Law and Language in Japan and in the United States*, 34 OSAKA U. L. REV. 47, 73 (1987).

33. *Id.*, at 57.

34. *Id.*

moral principle that one must not take another human life. However, "the Japanese do not place much importance on a general morality controlling relations between 'persons' abstracted away from the actual social rules."³⁵

This view would seem to Japanese to be a purely Western idea. Many researchers of Japanese culture have indicated that the Japanese do not have the concept of an absolute god, and this tendency leads them to "situational", "contextual" or "relativistic" patterns of behavior.³⁶ However, a Japanese mother usually does not suffer conflict between a sense of morality and the social role expectation of being a mother. She is unaware of the different value systems, so her choice should not be viewed as giving greater priority to her emotional attachment to her child, whom she thinks of as property or a part of herself. Since she does not possess a clear-cut concept of self as an independent being, it is not that her role as mother takes over, but rather, her role identity itself is her concept of self. This happens to many Japanese who possess an extremely strong sense of role identity. While the result is a commitment to performing the role well, it may also lead to destructive tendencies. If one fails in performing his role, he fails in his concept of self.

SUICIDE AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION AND MANIPULATION

Another sociological explanation lies in the fact that, in Japan, suicide has been a traditionally established method of expressing oneself. This is closely connected with Buddhist notions of reincarnation and the survival of the soul. Thus, the real significance of suicide or joint-suicide may extend far beyond self-destruction. Perhaps more interesting, is the fact that joint suicide can be used as an ultimate tool to manipulate guilt among family members.

Harakiri was a last resort for a samurai to salvage his honor when confronting a shameful punishment. Kamikaze pilots were used by Japan not only as a desperate weapon against her enemies, but also as a sacred symbol of ultimate patriotism. Today, distressed company executives who have committed serious errors in business, apologize to the company by committing suicide. A Japanese girl studying in England, who was suspected of stealing in a dormitory, committed suicide in order to prove that she was innocent.³⁷ Double suicide represents the purest form of "oneness" between lovers, mother-child, and a family. Apart from viewing the death as deplorable, there exists a touch of admiration and envy for

35. *Id.*

36. T.S. Lebra, *Social Relativism as the Japanese Ethos: A Postulate and Suicide in JAPANESE PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR* (1976).

37. S. Saito, *IKIKATA GA UMAKU NARU HON* 26 (1987).

the strong attachment the dying have to one other. With this kind of romanticism and glorification of death, the Japanese have created a peculiar culture and language of suicide.

Inamura, a professor at Tsukuba University, points out that Japan is not the only country where murder-suicides occur. Western countries simply lack the appropriate terminology to identify the phenomenon, and newspapers often do not report murder-suicides.³⁸ According to Picken, a professor at International Christian University in Topeka, no other society uses a special word for double or multiple suicide (*shinju*). Of 58 different phrases relating to suicide, the Japanese have created a special vocabulary about *shinju* by adding terms to distinguish mother-child, father-child, and whole family *shinju*.³⁹

The extreme case of using suicide as a form of expressing one's feelings can be seen in the guilt manipulation often seen in parent-child interaction. It is not surprising in Japan to hear a story about a mother who is devastated by her son's misbehavior (such as juvenile delinquency, crime, alcoholism, or political radicalism). She commits suicide in order to make him realize what he has done and to repent and change his life. Her sense of great shame in relation to the public may also be another explanation for her inability to continue living. This strategy often works, and the child will continue life with great feelings of guilt, constantly reminded by society of the great sacrifice his mother had to make to improve his life.

DeVos also admits, "Punishing or retaliating against someone by killing or injuring oneself has often actually been done in Japan in both political and social arenas."⁴⁰ This type of self-injury or death was an accepted pattern of behavior when open protest was not permitted for the suppressed classes during the feudal era. However, even today, in an intimate relationship such as between parent and child, this concept still remains and emerges at extremely stressful moments. DeVos writes, "Suffering whatever the child does, being hurt constantly, subtly assuming an attitude of 'look what you have done to me,' the Japanese mother often gains by such devices a strong control over her child, . . . Parent's dying is not only the punishment of a child, but also more often is the final control over the child, breaking his resistance to obeying the parental plans."⁴¹

With such a cultural pattern internalized in an individual, it would be difficult to tell if that individual were truly self-destructive, or happened to use a well-recognized method of solving the

38. JAMESON, *supra* note 10.

39. *Id.*

40. DEVOS, *supra* note 20.

41. *Id.*

situation. Because suicide is a somewhat culturally accepted way of coping, a Japanese person would more easily turn to this method than would people of other cultures. If one grows up in a culture where suicide or joint-suicide is rarely heard of or reported, it would be difficult for one to relate his/her stressful circumstances to the idea of killing him/herself. In other words, regarding suicide, there seem to be greater "vocabularies of motives" in Japan.⁴² One can commit suicide not only for self-destruction or self-hatred, but also from such motivations as punishing others, saving face, expressing apology, or loving another with such strong attachment that taking that person's life with one's own is necessary.

THE KIMURA CASE: A MANIFESTATION OF JAPANESE SOCIAL VALUES

We have to consider the factors mentioned above when we look at Fumiko Kimura's case. Fumiko came to the United States in 1971 and studied for two years at Glendale Community College. In 1980, she met Itsuroku, who was in the restaurant business, and they later married. The couple had a son (4 years old) and a daughter (6 months old.) After learning that her husband had a mistress, she became depressed. A L.A. Times article recounts what happened after her attempted suicide:⁴³

Behind a glass panel in the Los Angeles County Jail, she said she resented her rescue. " 'I wanted to be with my children,' she wept She said . . . she did not want to leave them behind," Santa Monica Police Detective Ray Cooper wrote in his report. "She felt they would be hurt like she was if they were left alive and that she did not want anybody else to get her children. She told me she did not think about the criminal aspect of killing her children."⁴⁴

It is evident that her act was not performed out of a purely destructive intention, but out of a genuine love and concern for her children. However, from an individualistic standpoint, her act appears selfish. It was, rather, the best possible "constructive solution" she could think of to enable herself and her children to leave this unhappy life, and to be together forever. Even her husband's reaction was typical of Japanese attitudes toward *shinju*.

Kimura's husband, Itsuroku, 40, a restaurateur, was surprised when asked if he forgave his wife for killing his children. "Of

42. See generally Mills, *Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive*, AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW 904 (1940).

43. I have not personally spoken to Ms. Kimura or her family. My primary sources are from newspaper articles and other media coverage. Although these sources are limited, an analysis of the reports of Ms. Kimura's behavior reveal that she was a typical Japanese woman who took a typical solution from her upbringing in Japanese society.

44. DOLAN, *supra*, note 1, at 3.

course," he replied. He said he was "envious" his wife had such a strong bond with her children that she could hold onto them while she herself was drowning.⁴⁵

It is as if he feels "absent" from this strong unity of the family as an entity sharing the same fate. He himself deviated from this unity, though, by having a mistress for three years. Indeed, it is rare that a husband or a spouse surviving the joint suicide projects any kind of hatred toward the spouse who committed suicide together with their children. Rather, what happens is realization of the seriousness of the situation or sympathy for the other's pain. It also arouses enormous guilt feelings on the part of a spouse responsible for the situation.

As mentioned in the earlier discussion, suicide is not only a culturally established method of communication which is internalized more or less in all Japanese, but also an effective method of guilt manipulation and a last resort for controlling others. It is interesting to note that the husband's mistress also threatened suicide before this incident, and even the husband himself threatened it after Fumiko's attempt.

About 10 days after the drownings, a Japanese woman in her early 30's contacted Fumiko, identified herself as her husband's mistress and arranged to visit the Kimura home. When the woman arrived, Itsuroku was also there and the husband's mistress sent a messenger to the Kimura home with a note apologizing and offering to take her own life.⁴⁶

If it had been the mistress who committed suicide, it would have had a great impact on the Kimuras. It would surely have planted strong guilt feelings in Itsuroku and probably also in Fumiko to a degree that might have destroyed their marriage. If Itsuroku committed suicide, it may have been considered an indication of how much he repented, and he may have been forgiven for what he caused. But it was Fumiko who proceeded to commit suicide, even killing their two children. Nothing could have been more effective in conveying the gravity of her situation and in appealing to the husband's guilt feelings. A recent report suggests the Kimuras had "a strong marriage since she and her husband reconciled while she was in jail awaiting trial"; her suicide attempt may have been successful in mending the marital problems in existence at that time, but with enormous sacrifice.⁴⁷

I do not attempt to minimize Fumiko Kimura's seriously diminished psychological condition at the time of the suicide attempt. The report indicates that she was extremely hurt, and completely neurotic. However, the action she took reflected deep cultural im-

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.*

47. McGarry, *Postscript*, L.A. Times, Jun. 14, 1988, at B-3, col. 1.

plications which were internalized, even though she had been far away from Japan for quite some time.

What is also striking in this case is that Fumiko was a typical, devoted mother who perceived her identity as more important than anything else. Furthermore, her life was very much secluded from American influences, in spite of her 14 years of residence in the United States:

Fumiko was a protective mother, obsessed with the children's safety and care. She had gotten rid of most furniture, including her piano, because she was afraid the children might fall and hurt themselves. She washed her children's clothes by hand, hanging them to dry on a line strung low on her balcony. She kept a written schedule of each day's activities, allotting specific times for cleaning, cooking and playing with her son. While nursing her daughter, Fumiko would get up in the middle of the night to eat soup, concerned that she was properly nourishing her baby.⁴⁸

Fumiko's almost obsessive behaviors with her identity as a mother are even more intensified by her other traits and lifestyle. She was a submissive wife who would bathe her husband's feet when he came home, who didn't drive, who knew nothing of her husband's finances or business, who had no hobbies or close friends outside the family. Without any support group, which she probably would have had in her home country, she lived a totally isolated existence from the American environment, secluded in her little Japanese world consisting mainly of her children. It is easy to imagine how devastating it was for this woman, who already was once divorced, to realize that her trust in her husband and her second marriage was collapsing. The gap between her desired self and reality was too much to bear, so she took a step which was widely recognized in the culture she was from. Perhaps this would not have happened if she were living in Japan. She would have had more friends and family support to prevent her from committing suicide. Moreover, the Japanese environment might have provided her with more information about other solutions.

Los Angeles is not a difficult place for a Japanese immigrant to live, compared to other cities in the United States. Los Angeles has a large Japanese community, Japanese language media, and large networks of services in the Japanese language. However, one can easily isolate oneself from the society unless he/she actively seeks out information. In Japan, where cities are much more crowded, the wealth of information is easily accessible, and comes to you whether you want it or not. During Fumiko's 14 years in the United States, she lived in a kind of "frozen time frame" which shut out outside incentives which could have gradually made her more

48. DOLAN, *supra*, note 1, at 3.

assimilated into the American society. Not being able to communicate well in English, she had to retreat to her small world, and stay there. Just as the *issei* (first generation Japanese immigrants) sometimes seem more Japanese than the people of the same age in Japan, having one's ethnic identity endangered by a foreign environment may sometimes reinforce one's ethnic identity as a defense mechanism. If Fumiko were in Japan, she may have been able to see other Japanese women's lifestyles, which are gradually changing in Japan. Or she may have been more accepting of western influence, which is constantly entering Japan through the mass media. These factors might have enabled Fumiko, had she been in Japan, to choose other alternative solutions for her crisis. Although this case may ultimately be interpreted as an individual person's action, Fumiko Kimura's case provides a number of significant suggestions about Japanese mother-child relationships, self-concept and the internalization of cultural values in an individual wherever he/she lives.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Mother-child joint suicide is a phenomenon found in a uniquely Japanese context. The mother who kills her child does not consider the act to be a murder because she believes the child to be a part of herself. It is based on her strong desire to maintain unity or to realize unity with the child, incorporating the child's self into hers. The Japanese seem to have a stronger sense of ego extension than other cultures. The ego extension of a mother towards her child is often an extreme case, in which there is a risk of such conduct developing into joint suicide or other types of unhealthy phenomenon such as guilt manipulation of the child. Society's great expectations of the mother's role also reinforces her almost obsessive identification with her child. This also leads to her conviction that she should take her child along in suicide, since she believes the child cannot be happy without her. Recognizing suicide as an established form of expressing oneself in a Japanese culture would also motivate her, perhaps subconsciously, to take this step. *Oya-ko shinju* is an effective way of conveying a desperate cry, as well as causing another to feel guilty. *Oya-ko shinju* is a way of being together forever with someone the mother loves deeply.