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Amae and *Belonging*—An Encounter of the Japanese Psyche and the Waning of Belonging in America

Akira Morita

I. INTRODUCTION

The encounter between the Japanese psychological concept of *amae* and the American family law concept of *belonging* is probably best described as an inter-discipline topic. This encounter has implications for developing ideas about critical issues philosophically predicated on notions of freedom in modern law. The term *belonging*, which appears in the title of this symposium, *The Symposium on the Family and Belonging*, is a key concept refined over many years of contemplation by Professor Bruce Hafen, an opinion leader in American family law. It seems a concept essential to any discussion of American family law today. Reading through *The Belonging Heart*,¹ in which Professor Hafen discusses the concept, we come to understand how, in many instances, his concept of *belonging* is clearly defined and deepened by Dr. Takeo Doi's term *amae*. Professor Hafen's use of the concept of *amae* demonstrates a keen, philosophical insight that goes beyond a simple trans-cultural inquiry.

When Hafen first encountered *amae* in 1993, he said: "I'm overwhelmed by the concept of *amae* and new insights that I have gained from Professor Doi's argument."² He states in the foreword of his *Amae and the Longing to Belong*, an article in *The Belonging Heart*:

An understanding of *amae* articulates and clarifies some of the unspoken premises about relationship of belonging from which I have intuitively proceeded over the past several years, not only in working on our religion's "Trilogy of the Heart" but also in my professional research and writing in the field of family law.³

The only works of Takeo Doi that Hafen had read were his two

1. BRUCE C. HAFEN & MARIE K. HAFEN, *THE BELONGING HEART: THE ATONEMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD AND FAMILY* (1994).

2. Private correspondence, October 1993, on file with author.

3. HAFEN & HAFEN, *supra* note 1, at 21–22.

books that had been translated into English at the time: *The Anatomy of Dependence*⁴ from 1973, and *Anatomy of Self*⁵ from 1986. Hafen had not read Doi's numerous monographs.

What about Doi's descriptions and explanations of *amae* stirred Hafen's intellectual intuition and enriched his reflections on belonging? Was it simply a spark of intellectual curiosity in the cultural anthropological sense? In my opinion, looking deeper into this question is a key issue in discussing the future of *belonging* as a concept in American family law.

Focusing on these issues, this article will attempt a simple discussion of three themes: Doi's concept of *amae* and its implications; Hafen's reaction to the concept of *amae*; and, the philosophical significance of the encounter between *amae* and *belonging*.

II. THE DISCOVERY OF AMAE BY TAKEO DOI

Takeo Doi was a Japanese psychiatrist and philosopher.⁶ He was born in 1920 and died in 2009.⁷ Experiencing culture shock as a young man, when he first visited the United States to study, he discovered in his subsequent clinical experience that that term *amae* played a decisive role in understanding the Japanese psyche.⁸ He formulated the concept of *amae* for the first time in a paper published in 1956 titled *Japanese Language as an Expression of Japanese Psychology*.⁹ A collection of English-language articles that Doi subsequently wrote for journals published outside Japan is called *Understanding Amae: The Japanese Concept of Need-Love*.¹⁰ His *Anatomy of Dependence* has been translated into eight languages and read by many around the world. The theme for the International Psychoanalytical Association's 1999 symposium (Santiago Chile) was

4. Takeo Doi, *THE ANATOMY OF DEPENDENCE* (John Bester trans., Harper & Row, Publ'rs 1973) (1971) [hereinafter Doi DEPENDENCE].

5. Takeo Doi, *THE ANATOMY OF SELF* (Mark A. Harbison trans., Kodansha Int'l 1986) (1985) [hereinafter Doi SELF].

6. *Takeo Doi: Japanese psychiatrist who developed the concept of indulgent dependency*, THE TIMES, July 27, 2009 available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6728138.ece>.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. Takeo Doi, *Japanese Language as an Expression of Japanese Psychology*, 20 WESTERN SPEECH 90, 90-96 (1956).

10. Takeo Doi, *UNDERSTANDING AMAE: THE JAPANESE CONCEPT OF NEED-LOVE* (2005) [hereinafter Doi UNDERSTANDING].

“*Amae*, East and West.¹¹ *Amae* came to be regarded as an indispensable universal clinical concept. It was now a universal concept, independent of its Japanese roots. And for his work, Doi received awards from three American professional psychiatric organizations between 2005 and 2008.¹²

As the above history shows, Doi’s illustrious career makes him the preeminent *amae* scholar, and as such his own words, delivered at an academic conference in 1990, give the best overview of the concept of *amae*:

Amae is a noun form of *amaeru*, an intransitive verb meaning “to depend and presume upon another’s love or bask in another’s indulgence.” It has the same root as the word *amai*, an adjective meaning “sweet.” Thus *amae* can suggest something sweet and desirable. Perhaps what is most significant about the word *amae* is that it definitely links with the psychology of infancy, for we say about a baby that it is *amaeru*-ing when it begins to recognize the mother and seek her, that is to say, long before it begins to speak. Please note that *amae* here refers to the feeling of attachment that is observable. Later, when a child begins to speak, he or she will eventually learn that such a feeling is called *amae*. But that does not change the situation that the feeling of *amae* is something to be conveyed nonverbally.

Interestingly, the word *amae* can be predicated not only of a child, but also an adult when he or she displays a certain behavior vis-à-vis another that indicates the presence of a feeling of being emotionally close, something similar to what prevails between a baby and its mother. In other words, the assumption is that there is a continuity between children and adults so far as *amae* is concerned. Thus we may use the word *amae* to describe the relationship between lovers, friends, husband and wife, teacher and student, even employer and employee.¹³

Having thus defined *amae*, Doi develops his theme of *amae* as an emotion and need that is accompanied by a form of psychological dependency, because the person who is *amaeru*-ing always needs a person who perceives, accepts, and meets the need. Consequently *amae* is an emotion that is “vulnerable and, being susceptible to

11. Takeo Doi, *Amae* and the Western Concept of Love, in Doi UNDERSTANDING, *supra* note 10, at 185.

12. THE TIMES, *supra* note 6.

13. Takeo Doi, *On the Concept of Amae*, in Doi UNDERSTANDING, *supra* note 10, at 163, 164 [hereinafter Doi *Concept*].

frustration,” with the possible exception of young infants in their mothers’ arms, that “undergoes various transformations.”¹⁴

To summarize the distinctive qualities of Doi’s research, in his own words: “My real aim was to examine these Japanese concepts in light of ideas that originate in the West, and by doing so, to deepen them and to discover in them a universal significance.”¹⁵

I have identified three main points in Doi’s research on *amae* that are associated with belonging—our theme for this Symposium.

The first relates to Doi’s ideas on Japanese society. The Japanese language contains a diverse vocabulary centered on *amae* as a form of cultural structure and a sensibility that respects how *amae* has penetrated the Japanese social structure to form a foundation of the Japanese mentality. In Western societies, childhood dependency on parents is considered a temporary state of human development, to be subsequently rejected or repressed. In contrast, *amae* survives in Japanese society without being rejected, and constitutes a moral emotional source of the Japanese values of mutual dependency and sense of belonging to a group.

Second, there are no concepts or language to describe *amae* in Western societies, and thus a direct, word-to-word translation of *amae* is impossible. However, the *amae* need itself—the dependency-need as Hafen argues—is universal and found in people worldwide.¹⁶ John Bester, who translated Doi’s Japanese original title *Amae no Kozo*—literally, “the structure of *amae*”—as *The Anatomy of Dependence*, discusses this issue this way: “As Dr. Doi sees it, the basic human need summed up in the one Japanese word *amae* has been strangely neglected by Western psychologists.”¹⁷ Doi’s own ideas about this observation is found in his descriptions of *amae*, some of which I quoted earlier. He writes: “the feeling of *amae* is something to be conveyed nonverbally, and because of the preverbal and nonverbal nature of *amae*, certain languages like English can manage without such a vocabulary.”¹⁸

The third point concerns Doi’s ideas about psychological development. For Japanese, Doi argues, to become an adult is to control the ambivalence that arises between autonomy and dependence so that they complement each other, not to become an individual who achieves freedom and independence by emotionally cutting himself off

14. *Id.* at 165.

15. Doi SELF, *supra* note 5, at 12.

16. HAFEN & HAFEN, *supra* note 1, at 23.

17. Doi DEPENDENCE, *supra* note 4, at 10.

18. Doi *Concept*, *supra* note 13, at 164–65.

from others.

Doi says that for Japanese, an infantile mentality in the positive sense of the term is not something to be buried in the past and forgotten, but something familiar and easily accessible: “there is no reason why a mode of behavior developed in the early years of life should be confined to that period alone.”¹⁹

I am uncertain that I have managed to convey the impact of Doi’s work that overwhelmed Hafen with my brief and abstract introduction to *amae*. That aside, let us discuss how Professor Hafen understood and digested Doi’s ideas about *amae*.

III. BRUCE HAFEN’S IDEAS ON BELONGING AND *AMAE*

Before discussing the encounter of *belonging* and *amae*, let me briefly review Professor Hafen’s academic path up to his discovery of the theory of belonging.

Hafen states that of the two traditions that formed American law—the family tradition and the individual tradition—the family tradition belonged to the realm of “the great silence in our jurisprudence,”²⁰ because it was taken for granted and rarely articulated. However, in the mid-1960’s this great silence was broken as the philosophy of individual tradition invaded the subject of family tradition, and organic relationships within families began to crumble. American society saw a destruction of the family order that it had never experienced before. Hafen was one of the opinion leaders in this field of law—a man of his time who stood up for the family in an age of familial crisis.

Hafen’s first theme in the 1970’s was children’s rights. In his 1976 article—now considered a classic²¹—he warned that the sudden modern push for egalitarianism had caused a collision between the two traditions, which had previously been in balance.²² This collision equalized the asymmetrical parent-child relationship, but also undermined it; and as a result children’s development was at risk.²³ His warning is powerfully expressed in the phrase “it’s abandoning children to their rights.”²⁴ Here we can already see the emergence of

19. Takeo Doi, *Some Thoughts on Helplessness and the Desire to be Loved*, in Doi UNDERSTANDING, *supra* note 10, at 31–32.

20. Bruce C. Hafen, *Puberty, Privacy, and Protection: The Risks of Children’s “Rights,”* 63 A.B.A.J. 1383 (1977).

21. Bruce C. Hafen, *Children’s Liberation and New Egalitarianism: Some Reservations about Abandoning Youth to Their “Rights,”* 1976 BYU L. REV. 605 (1976).

22. *Id.* at 607–58.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 651 (citing Albert Solnit, Panel Discussion Remarks at the Child Advocacy

his relation-oriented thinking. With this assumption, in the 1980's Hafen discussed Supreme Court cases concerning families and schools using the *mediating institution* concept and stressed that the two traditions must serve a complementary, not mutually exclusive role, for maintaining social equilibrium.²⁵ Hafen's arguments gained force in the second half of the decade as he witnessed the progressive breakdown of family and organic structures and increasing individual isolation and alienation. In two articles published in 1989 and 1991, he uses the concept of belonging for the first time, expressing his diagnosis of the times in the prophetic phrase "ours is the age of the waning of belonging."²⁶

His concept of belonging, as the term suggests, is one that strongly implies the relatedness of humans, and became a keyword running consistently through his thinking thereafter. He wrote, "The deepest psychological and emotional needs of children require continuity and stability in their relationship with parents—a relationship that can be the key factor in their eventual development of mature, personal freedom. Ironically, the most ardent advocates of children's liberation gloss over the reality that prematurely cutting children's family ties can have the effect of abandoning them."²⁷

Hafen derived the relation-oriented term *belonging* from his many years of theological thought, while also elaborating the concept by applying Pitirim A. Sorokin's theory of types of interpersonal relationships.²⁸ Hafen came across Doi's ideas about *amae* in 1993, around the time he was completing the concept elaboration process.

Hafen's article *Amae and the Longing to Belong* goes beyond a description of the concept of *amae*. What strikes me in this article is that Hafen understands *amae* as a universal concept that describes a psychological process common to all people, and—having made it part of his repertoire—uses it with mastery in the analysis of contemporary American society. His usage of the term is rather accurate. I will quote from his work without going into the theoretical relationship

Conference, Madison, Wisconsin (Sept. 26, 1975)).

25. Bruce C. Hafen, *Developing Student Expression Through Institutional Authority: Public School as Mediating Structure*, 48 OHIO ST. L.J. 663, 696–702 (1987); Bruce C. Hafen, *Hazelwood School District and the Role of First Amendment Institutions*, 1988 DUKE L.J. 685, 688–91, 700–05 (1988).

26. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Family as an Entity*, 22 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 865, 905 (1989); Bruce C. Hafen, *Individualism and Autonomy in Family Law: The Waning of Belonging*, 1991 BYU L. REV. 1, 32–42 (1991) [hereinafter Hafen *The Waning of Belonging*].

27. Hafen *The Waning of Belonging*, *supra* note 26, at 33.

28. PITIRIM A. SOROKIN, *SOCIETY, CULTURE, PERSONALITY: THEIR STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS* (1962).

between *amae* and belonging.

Hafen starts with a definition of *amae*:

“*Amae* is a noun; its verb form is *amaeru*. It is an emotion or sense of longing, reflected in an attitude of trust that a specific other person will nurture and fulfill one’s basic need for security and love.”²⁹

Then he goes on to argue:

As freedom in the Western mind has come to mean personal liberation from political bondage, with its profound skepticism toward authority, the Western mind has been relatively closed to the values of *amae*. For example, Americans “have always looked down on the type of emotional dependency” inherent in *amae*. Moreover, their fear of oppression and their fierce commitment to self-reliance has made Americans innately cautious about trusting or depending on others—attitudes that are prerequisite to *amae*.³⁰

As a result of these tendencies, Western skepticism has created serious barriers to relationships of belonging and loving interdependence—even to the point of defining freedom as the rejection of dependency on others, which may mean freedom as the rejection of *amae*. In other words, our Western sense of freedom seeks to avoid belonging.³¹

As a result, American law now, literally like the proverbial bull in the china closet, powerfully invades the sacred domain of *amae*, where *Freiheit in Geborgenheit* (freedom and security) intertwine in a productive paradox.

American law now assigns its highest priority to “the right to be let alone,” and the emotional nightmare of a legally enforced *amae*-less society is beginning to come true.³²

An exquisite spiritual and psychological freedom flows from fulfilling our inborn *yearning to belong*—our *amae*—a literal “freedom through belonging,” *Freiheit in Geborgenheit*.³³

I’d like to note here that the German *Freiheit in Geborgenheit* quite accurately reflects the essential meaning of *amae*, and it is used

29. HAFEN & HAFEN, *supra* note 1, at 23.

30. *Id.* at 33.

31. *Id.* at 34.

32. *Id.* at 39.

33. *Id.* at 62.

in the title of the German translation of *The Anatomy of Dependence*.

Thus, the substance of what Hafen attempted to define by the framework of belonging was a psychological structure of interpersonal relationships in which freedom and protection complement each other and intertwine. I would go as far as to say this figurative framework and terminology needed to be reinforced by some kind of psychological dynamic. Doi's description of the dynamic of *amae* was precisely what Hafen was looking for. Hafen acknowledges that *amae* is a concept originating in Japan in that it emerged via the prism of Japanese culture. Yet it is obvious from the passages I have quoted from his work that for Hafen *amae* is a universal concept common to all people, not simply a cultural anthropological concept.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ENCOUNTER OF *AMAE* AND BELONGING

Hafen's concept of belonging, as he wrote in many articles, was the product of many years of theological thought. In this sense, it differs from Doi's concept of *amae*, which is limited to the empirical dimension. Doi's *amae* does not encompass the metaphysical aspects of Hafen's belonging; yet how did the encounter of these two concepts cause such a brilliant spark?

First, it is likely that essentially there was a big overlap between the psychological substance captured in the concepts of belonging and *amae*. Doi argues that *amae* is "something to be conveyed nonverbally."³⁴ Hafen's Renaissance-like sensibility must have been effective in instantly grasping that "something."

Second, we can see that Doi and Hafen had arrived at very close points in terms of a philosophical understanding of freedom in modern society, which became clear as a result of exploring these two concepts in depth.

Modern Western thought from the sixteenth century onward upheld freedom and autonomy as glorious human ideals and pushed ahead with creating a modern society. At the same time as glorifying these ideals, this school of thought devalued human dependence and considered it something to be overcome and eliminated once children became adults. Dependence, which became synonymous with inferiority, was conceptually divorced from autonomy as a concept and often repressed and buried in the subconscious. The rampant ideology of individualism of the second half of the twentieth century

34. Doi, *Concept*, *supra* note 13, at 164.

was the consequence of splitting off dependence from autonomy.

Doi, a Japanese man with a deep knowledge and understanding of Christianity and Buddhism, wrote: “Since the modern age, people of the West valued autonomy and independence. After the Second World War, Japanese people followed their example and began to despise dependence on others. Yet totally eliminating feelings of *amae* would surely mean that we would not even be able to pray.”³⁵

And when Hafen made public his diagnosis of what ails us today—“ours is the age of waning of belonging”—we can say that he was witnessing the ideology of autonomy and independence running out of control in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. It would be fair to say that the ideas of these two men went beyond freedom, autonomy, and independence—whose ties to dependence had been severed and which were being elevated to ultimate objectives in their own rights—and sought to recover the organic and living correlations between autonomy and dependence that lie at the heart of human existence.

V. CONCLUSION

Doi was an avid reader of the novels of Iris Murdoch, one of the leading twentieth century authors of English literature, and was one of her intimate correspondents.³⁶ Murdoch had read with interest Doi’s work *The Anatomy of Dependence*. Murdoch died in 1999 after battling with Alzheimer’s Disease. Her husband, John Bayley, who later published memoirs of their married life as *Elegy for Iris*, contributed a short essay on marriage to *The Times*³⁷ shortly before her passing. Doi wrote shortly afterwards:

I was shocked to see the bold headline ‘Marriage means taking for granted’ when a friend sent me his article in the *Times*, because taking someone for granted is directly linked to *amae*. My understanding was that Americans disliked this expression for that reason, but on the contrary, Bayley argues that it is the very essence of marriage. Bayley uses the phrase often in *Elegy for Iris*. His relationship with Iris must have been full of *amae*. It reminded me why *The Anatomy of Dependence* resonated with this married couple.³⁸

35. Takeo Doi, *SHINKO TO AMAE (FAITH AND AMAE)*, at 216 (1992).

36. John Bayley, *IRIS: A MEMOIR OF IRIS MURDOCH* 189 (Duckworth 1998).

37. John Bayley, *Taking Marriage for Granted is the Essential Thing: Growing Old Together*, *TIMES*, Apr. 22, 1997, at T20.

38. Takeo Doi, *Iris Murdoch ni tsuite (ON IRIS MURDOCH)*, in *ISSATSU NO HON (A*

In an earlier essay discussing the relationship between “take for granted” and *amae*, Doi observed: “I secretly wonder whether Western couples who have a truly successful marriage in fact take each other for granted, although they are not allowed to say so.”³⁹

Having read Doi’s comment about Bayley’s article, by chance I remembered the closing lines of one of Hafen’s article of *The Familistic Life: Status and Contract in Modern America*:

The status-based familistic life is not a myth. It is very hard to capture and maintain, so it often eludes us. But it is not a myth. . . . We have both found here a surprising blend of “discipline with freedom.” We have found here the fulfillment of our *amae*—our *Freiheit in Geborgenheit*. . . . We have learned that we are not two solos but two parts of a duet. And from three decades together, we know now that a duet is far richer than two solos.⁴⁰

While these are the closing lines of an academic paper, they are also an elegant testimony by Hafen and his wife. Hafen does not use the phrase “taking for granted” like Bayley did, but his expression “a duet” clearly means what Doi described as “a couple who have a truly successful marriage.”⁴¹ My understanding is that the meeting of *amae* and belonging is not merely a cross-cultural discourse, but two parts of a duet that plays the same music about the truth of human relatedness.

BOOK) 17 (2002).

39. Takeo Doi, *Nihonteki na mono mittsu (Three Quintessentially Japanese Things)*, in *AMAE ZAKKO (MISCELLANEOUS PAPERS ON AMAE)* 135 (1975).

40. Bruce C. Hafen & Marie K. Hafen, *THE BELONGING HEART: THE ATONEMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD AND FAMILY*, 264–65 (1994).

41. Doi, *Nihonteki na mono mittsu*, *supra* note 39, at 135.