

Impurity and Death

A Japanese Perspective

Personal impurity caused by childbirth, menstrual blood or death is an issue of concern prevalent in many cultures. In Japan, the generic term for these kinds of impurities is kegere and death impurity, a sub-type of kegere, is known as shi-e. The major topic of this book is death impurity. The definition and genesis of shi-e are explained. In addition, details of the influence shi-e had on ancient Japanese society as well as its continuing influence on modern Japanese society are given. Three hypotheses are stated and supported: (1) the shi-e concept began in Japan during the Yayoi period (300 BC - 300 AD) rather than at a later date as previously hypothesized; (2) the basis for the aversion to dead bodies, i.e. shi-e, is that corpses remind people of the fact that they will soon die; (3) Buddhism and Shintoism merged in Japan because of the impact of shi-e on Shintoism. This book concludes with some comments on the relevance of knowledge of the death impurity for students of Japanese history, culture and society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chikara Abe was born in Japan and moved to the United States in 1996. He is a graduate of both the Tokyo Institute of Technology and San Francisco State University. He has a longstanding interest in Japanese history, culture and society including the influence of ancient concepts in today's Japan. He is also interested in how various customs are found in different forms in many cultures. The concept of impurity associated with death as well as blood impurity had a profound effect on ancient Japanese society as it did in other cultures. Even today, these concepts are relevant to various aspects of daily life. At present, Mr. Abe teaches the Japanese language to high school students in San Francisco. As he teaches his native language, he also teaches his students about Japanese culture and society.



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