as Psychoanalysis in Japan

By Andrea Alvis

In my own experience, it is these innovative models that attract the most interest from non-Japanese. Therefore, following a brief introduction to the history of psychoanalysis in Japan, the core of my article is devoted to three of the most interesting theories from Japanese analysts: Kosawa Heisaku’s Ajase complex, Doi Takeo’s ideas on amae, and Kitayama’s theory of the ‘Don’t Look’ taboo.

The mainstream Kosawa School and its members aside, there are many other psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrists in Japan – owing to their lack of a medical degree and/or lack of Freudian orientation – have been excluded from the psychoanalytically oriented psychiatry, and the Japan Psychoanalytical Association. Among these are Konda Akihisa, and Sorai Kenzô, who was a clinician who founded the eclectic, psychoanalytically oriented Sannō-Mint in Tokyo.

The history of psychoanalysis proper in Japan began with psychiatrist Marui Kiyoshi and the so-called Tóhoku School, which flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. Marui’s early attraction to psychoanalysis is evident from a course on psychoanalysis he attended, probably at Tóhoku University, Sendai, in 1918. This interest deepened in the 1920s, during the course of several years of study with Alfred Meyer at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1933, as the head of a group of psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrists, Marui received approval from Freud to establish the first Japanese branch of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) in Sendai.

The ‘Kosawa School’, centred on student trained by Kosawa Heisaku, became the core of psychoanalytic activity after World War II. A student of Marui, Kosawa left to study at the Viennese Psychoanalytic Institute from 1931–35, and established a psychoanalytic practice in Tokyo upon returning to Japan. In 1933, after Marui’s death, Kosawa became head of the Japanese branch of the IPA and moved its headquarters to Tokyo. Students trained by Kosawa form the core of the present Japanese branch of the IPA, known familiarly as the ‘Japan Psychoanalytical Association.’ These psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrists, today the most famous psychoanalytic theorists I will discuss below: Doi Takeo and Okonogi Keigo. As members of the Japan Psychoanalytical Association, these prominent student trained (and their own trainees) form the mainstream of psychoanalysis in Japan.

Psychoanalytic theories from Japan

Three members of the Japanese Psychoanalytic Association have presented original theories to the international psychoanalytic community: Kosawa Heisaku, Doi Takeo, and Kitayama Osamu (trained by Okonogi Keigo). These men were inspired by Kosawa, who formulated his model of a mother-centred Ajase complex in the 1930s, all three paradigms focus on the mother (rather than the Oedipal father) as the centre of psychic life. In the interest of thematic unity, I will discuss the theories out of chronological order, beginning with Doi’s validation of positive mother-child interaction and proceeding to Kosawa’s and Kitayama’s discussions of more ambivalent mother-child bonds.

Amae

The most well-known theory of the Kosawa School is that of amae, formulated by Doi Takeo. Doi defines the concept of amae as ‘the feelings that all normal infants at the breast harbour towards the mother – dependence, the desire to be passively loved, the unwillingness to be separated from the warm mother-child circle and cast into a world of objective reality’ (1973:7). While recognizing similarities between the concept of amae and Michael Ballint’s idea of ‘passive object love’, Doi’s early work links the idea of amae to a number of other words/ concepts in Japanese culture, such as emyo (restraint), and gir ninfu (social obligation vs. human feeling).

By contrast, Kosawa’s Ajase complex shares the prototype for amae in the nursing infant’s relation to the mother and her breast. In this sense, amae could be viewed as an attempt to deny the fact of separation that is such an inescapable part of human existence and to obliterate the pain of separation. However, as Doi points out, Ajase’s symbolic function plays an indispensable role in a healthy spiritual life. If it is unrealistic to close one’s eyes completely to the fact of separation, it is equally unrealistic to be overwhelemed by it and isolate oneself in despair over the possibility of human relationships’ (1973:75). Thus amae involves a confrontation of feelings that emphasize a positive sense of connection to the mother over (a presumably painful) separation from her.

The Ajase complex

By contrast, Kosawa’s Ajase model, based on Buddhist legend, delinities more ambivalent mother-child bond.

Amae derived his theory from two Buddhist sources: the Daishō Nihonshū (Japanese Buddhist Tripitaka) and the Kanmuryōjukkyō (Sutra of the Contemplation of Infinite Life). Both stories describe how the Prince Aṣatru (‘Aṣaje’ in Japanese) in the Buddhist Jotaka Buddhist Jotaka for murders and horris, he has also drawn his weapon on his mother. Lakaika, when discovered her secretly supplying Bishusha with food. However, the two sutras emphasize very different aspects of the legend. While the Nihonshū version centres on father-son hostility, the Kanmuryōjukkyō focuses on conflict in the mother-son bond. Kosawa’s theory of the Ajase complex was inspired by the Kanmuryōjukkyō’s materially focused storyline.

Kosawa’s writings on the Ajase complex stress conflict deriving from a subject’s primary endeavour to work through unresolved Oedipal issues in the context of the mother-child bond. Firstly, he underscores the non-genital nature of mother-child relationships – specifically the Oedipal relationship (Kosawa, similar to Melanie Klein, apparently interprets Aṣaje’s sword as a tooth rather than a penis). Secondly, he places strong emphasis on the nature of the relationship with the mother, composed of both loving and hostile impulses. In the legend, it should be noted, Aṣaje’s relationship with his mother, but is dissuaded by a minister. Thirdly, Kosawa views the (re-)establishing of a positive mother-child dyad as essential to psychic health.

Beginning in the 1970s, Kosawa’s student Okonogi Keigo revised and developed the Ajase theory. Okonogi’s writings on the Ajase complex also emphasize the subject’s endeavour to work through ambivalent impulses in the mother-child bond; however, he locates the origin of mother-child conflict in maternal sexuality. For Okonogi, Ajase’s matricidal rage stems from the discovery of his or her exclusive and excluding relationship with his or her mate, and their damaging capacity in relation to the mother’s body. Several of the tales (re-)establishing of a positive mother-child dyad as essential to psychic health.

The ‘pre-Oedipal’ taboo

Kitayama’s theory of the ‘pre-Oedipal’ taboo, like the Ajase complex, focuses on the mother-child bond. In this model, however, guilt concerns fears that reproductive functions such as birth and nursing have irrevocably damaged the maternal body.

Kitayama draws on several Japanese folktales that portray relations between a human husband and non-human wife. These stories begin with an animal transforming itself into a woman and marrying a human male. The animal/wife proves to be a productive homemaker and loving spouse; however, she fords her husband to watch her as she performs a specific task, such as nursing, giving birth or weav-