



Preliminary Considerations for a Comparative Study of Women's Impurity in Nepal and Japan

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Article Info

Received: 18 Nov. 2025

Reviewed: 24 May 2026

Revised Received: 8 June 2026

Accepted: 14 June 2026

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/nsj.v2i1.97202>

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the differences in the semantic worlds of Japanese and Nepalese people and their backgrounds, examining (1) the types of concepts of impurity and their historical background, (2) the types of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, (3) the functions of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, and (4) the geographical and occupational distribution of taboos related to impurity, hypothesizing that these differences may influence the persistence of impurity. The concept of purity/impurity was introduced between the 9th and 10th centuries as the framework for the medieval class system in Japan. Around the 15th century, norms regarding menstruating, pre- and post-partum women as impure and restricting their behavior became established throughout the country. However, under the Meiji government in the late 19th century, taboos and superstitions based on the concept of purity were banned. The "Lifestyle Improvement Movement," a national movement aimed at modernizing and streamlining lifestyles both materially and spiritually, emerged during the Taisho era (around 1920), and these norms disappeared from Japan between the 1930s and 1945. Today, most Japanese people are unaware that these norms even existed. In Nepal, on the other hand, the norms are observed in daily life and rituals. Previous anthropological and folkloric research on impurity in Japan and Nepal was used as the analytical framework. Qualitative research involving secondary analysis, such as ethnography, was adopted as the research methodology.

The analysis revealed that differences in the process by which the concept of impurity is formed in the two countries result in differences in (1) whether impurities such as menstruation, childbirth, and death are conceptualized in relation to color, (2) what is considered to mediate impurity (water or fire), and (3) the scope of people affected by impurity (whether only women or families and communities are also affected) and the activities that are restricted (whether not only housework but also work outside the home is restricted).

Keywords

taboos; menstruation; childbirth; impurity; comparative study

Introduction

This study aims to conduct preliminary considerations for a comparative study of female impurity between Nepal and Japan.

In Japan, around the 15th century, beliefs derived from the "*Ketsubonkyo*" spread, deeming menstruating, pre- and post-partum women impure and establishing norms restricting their behavior from Tohoku, the northern part of Japan, to Kyushu, the southern part of Japan. However, under the Meiji government in the late 19th century, laws were enacted to abolish these norms, and they virtually disappeared from the Japanese archipelago between the 1930s and 1945. Today, most people are unaware that these norms even existed. In Nepal, on the other hand, these norms are observed in daily life and rituals.

Why did these norms disappear in Japan, leaving most people unaware of their existence? Why do so many people in Nepal still observe these norms today, or, even if they do not, why do they remain in people's minds?

As a preliminary consideration for future comparative research, this study examines local historical sources in Japan to explore (1) what kinds of impurity concepts exist, when and how they originated, (2) what kinds of impurity taboos exist related to menstruation and childbirth, and what functions they serve from an anthropological and ethnological perspective, and (3) in what regions and among what people the impurities of menstruation and childbirth were observed, and for how long they continued. These findings will be presented as the basis for a comparative study with Nepal.

Norms of Female Impurity in Japan

In Japan, there are three types of impurity: red impurity (the impurity of menstruation), white impurity (the impurity of childbirth), and black impurity (the

impurity of death). The impurity of childbirth (blood stains) is said to be stronger than the impurity of death (death stains), and there were regions where various restrictions were imposed (Miyashiro Town Local History Museum, 2016).

The concept of blood impurity is not unique to Japan; it originated from the worldview of ancient Indian Hinduism, spread to Japan via China, and was introduced as a foundation for the social hierarchy framework in the medieval period from the 9th to 10th centuries. At that time, both men and women were subject to the norms of impurity. However, around the 15th century, during the period when the traditional family system was widely established, beliefs originating from the "Blood Pond Sutra" spread, and impurity came to be applied primarily to women (impurity as a system of governance). Women who were menstruating or before or after childbirth were considered impure, and norms restricting their behavior were established from the northern part of Japan to Kyushu, the southern part of Japan.

In the Edo period (1603-1867), impurity, including childbirth, was institutionalized by the Mourning Regulations (1684) for samurai and upper-class farmers.

However, there are doubts about how strictly ordinary people followed these prohibitions (Hayashi, 2019). A nationwide survey conducted in 1935 (hereinafter referred to as the *1935 Survey*) reported that in Kanazawa City, "few people followed the mourning regulations" when visiting the castle (Onshikai Maternal and Child Welfare Association, 1975, p. 197; Tamaya, 2025).

The Meiji government issued an edict abolishing childbirth in its funeral regulations, and it virtually disappeared from the Japanese archipelago between the 1930s and 1945: "From now on, the impurity of childbirth shall no longer be taboo" (Privy Council Proclamation No. 56, 1872). According to Omachi (1951), on Hachijojima, the magistrate had been ordering the demolition of town-owned birthing houses since the Edo period, and by the 1880s, birthing houses had disappeared (Tama, 2025, p. 21).

Today, most Japanese people are unaware that these norms even existed. While the coercive power of the new government's orders cannot be denied, why did they fade? Meanwhile, in Nepal, they are still practiced today. What is the origin of this difference? This paper begins with an interest in the structural background.

In the following section, with a view to future comparative research between Nepal and Japan, I will summarize previous research on (1) the role of impurity in anthropology and (2) the types of norms regarding female impurity in Japan.

Research Methods

We utilized databases of Japanese local historical materials, as well as ethnic and customary information. The research method relied on literature and document analysis, specifically drawing on databases of Japanese local historical documents, ethnic groups, and customs.

Findings from previous studies in the sociology of religion (Kadouma), history (Kotani; Narikiyo), and anthropology (Douglas; Namihira) were synthesized for each research question. Specific examples related to each topic were also incorporated from databases of Japanese local historical documents and *The Database of Folk Tales of Mysterious Phenomena and Yōkai (Spirits, Ghosts, and Monsters)*, maintained by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken).

Literature Review

The Function of Impurity

What theories of religious sociology (Kadouma), history (Kotani, Narikiyo), and anthropology (Douglas, Namihira) share is the assumption that impurity serves to maintain order (norms). In anthropology, it is believed that beneath the “symbol” of impurity, or prohibitions, lies a “structure (logic of universality)” that it maintains.

For example, there are assumed to be 1) impurities derived from physical conditions, 2) impurities that visualize physiological differences between men and women (impurities that maintain boundaries between groups), 3) impurities that serve as public sexual surveillance, and 4) impurities that maintain daily life.

Regarding point 1), the Impurity caused by the physical condition of bleeding helps avoid danger. This can be said to be wisdom that existed before the development of medical knowledge.

Regarding point 2), Namihira Emiko demonstrated the suitability of Douglas’s theory by comparing Tohoku-style villages with Southwestern-style villages in Japan and by using the example of Okinawa (Namihira 1984: 241-242). She noted that the view of menstruation and childbirth as impure “elevates the physiological differences between men and women to social and cultural differences and institutionalizes the corresponding and interdependent relationship between these conflicting and different men and women” (ibid.: 222).

Regarding point 3), the custom of living separately and lighting separate fires during menstruation is a customary system based on the logical concept that it helps women

regain their declining daily vitality and eliminates the decline of energy known as “*ke-kare*”(The withering of vitality) (Sakurai 1974: 224-229).

If we limit ourselves to female impurities (childbirth and menstrual impurities), they can be seen as cultural symbols of biological differences between men and women. Douglas posits that notions of female impurity clarify the boundaries between male and female obligations, roles, and status (Douglas 1969/1995: 283). She argues that in societies where both men and women are directly coerced into observing certain obligations or where this is institutionalized, notions of gender impurity tend to be weak or nonexistent (Douglas 1969/1995: 265-266). Comprehensively summarizing the perspectives of Bennett, Cameron, and Mishra, menstrual impurity is an expression of the control of women's sexuality to maintain caste groups and patriarchy, both in the symbolic aspects of honor and privilege and in the material aspects of reproductive prosperity. Conversely, according to Krygier, the duration of menstrual impurity is associated with women's autonomy.

A comparison between regions in Japan has shown that norms are stronger in regions where hunting and fishing are the means of livelihood than in regions where agriculture is the primary source of income. Previous research has not addressed the structural background to this. By focusing on the geographic context of each region and its labor conditions, we can examine the survival or disappearance of norms.

The Taboos Regarding Blood Impurity

In Japan, blood impurity is categorized by color. The impurity of menstruation is called “red impurity,” and the impurity of childbirth is called “white impurity”.

According to Omori Motoyoshi (1960), the taboos of red impurity and white impurity can be summarized as follows: a. Taboos related to the place of residence, b. Taboos related to fire, c. Taboos Related to Production, d. Rites of Mourning.

a. Taboos Related to the Place of Residence

This refers to the custom of moving pregnant women and menstruating women to specific locations inside or outside the home and isolating them from family and others.

According to *The Database of folk tales of Mysterious Phenomena and Yōkai (Spirits, Ghosts, and Monsters)*, there were “*ubuya*”, a hut built separately from the main house to isolate women during childbirth, and “*himaemina*”, a moon hut built at the base of the house to isolate menstruating women in Japan.

On Mishima Island in Yamaguchi Prefecture, after the autumn festival hearth purification ceremony, those who were menstruating, those who had given birth, and those who had experienced misfortune gathered in a separate house. There was also a custom of visiting these people to show concern and express condolences.

b. Taboos Related to Fire

Impurity was believed to be transmitted through fire, and women cooked and ate separately from their family members to prevent the home from becoming impure.

There are legends about fire-related taboos in various parts of Japan. It was believed that impurity could be transmitted to others through fire, and so the custom of separate fires was practiced. Separate fires meant that women in an auspicious condition, such as during their menstrual period or after giving birth, would cook and eat separately from the rest of the family to prevent the home fire from becoming impure.

According to a 1931 document, in Iwate Prefecture, in Japan's Tohoku region, people believed the God of fire hated impurity (Iwate Prefecture Database).

Documents from 1956 state that fire was believed to be polluted by red impurities (impurities caused by bleeding, such as general injuries or women's menstruation) and white impurities (impurities caused by childbirth), and that each family member used a different fire (The Database of folk tales).

c. Taboos Related to Productive Activities - Labor Engagement

Taboos restricting person who had come into contact with an impure person from participating in productive activities. Any man who used the same fire as a person who had become impure during childbirth was prohibited from dangerous activities such as building or repairing a house, working on civil engineering projects such as roads and bridges, or going out lumberjacking, hunting, or fishing, as well as restricting the behavior of the husband of a woman who had just given birth.

For example, building or repairing houses, civil engineering work such as roads and bridges, mountain climbing (Ono Town, Fukushima Prefecture), and fishing (Ehime Prefecture, Nagasaki Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture) were all forbidden.

According to a 1983 folklore document from Ehime Prefecture, people who are possessed by red fire (the impurity of childbirth) or black fire (the impurity of death) on a ship will be possessed by a sea monster. In such cases, it is said that the monster can be warded off by praying to the Goddess, *Konpirason*.

According to a 1942 folklore document from Nagasaki Prefecture, if a person with red impurity (the impurity of childbirth) boards a ship, they should pray to *Horidon*, who exorcises impurities, to be purified.

According to a 1956 folklore document from Miyagi Prefecture, people who eat the fire of childbirth are said to suffer a shipwreck or poor fishing.

Masuda (1970) provides examples of norms imposed on the husbands of women in labor in fishing villages (Masuda 1970:118).

Horobetsu, Hokkaido: A three-day fishing hiatus is imposed for boys and a week for girls.

Shigese Village, Iwate Prefecture: The husband of a woman in labor refrains from fishing for one week.

Takashima, Shimane Prefecture: The husband of a woman in labor refrains from fishing, but does go fishing.

Kuroshima, Kagoshima Prefecture: The entire village secludes itself during the mourning period and refrains from outdoor work.

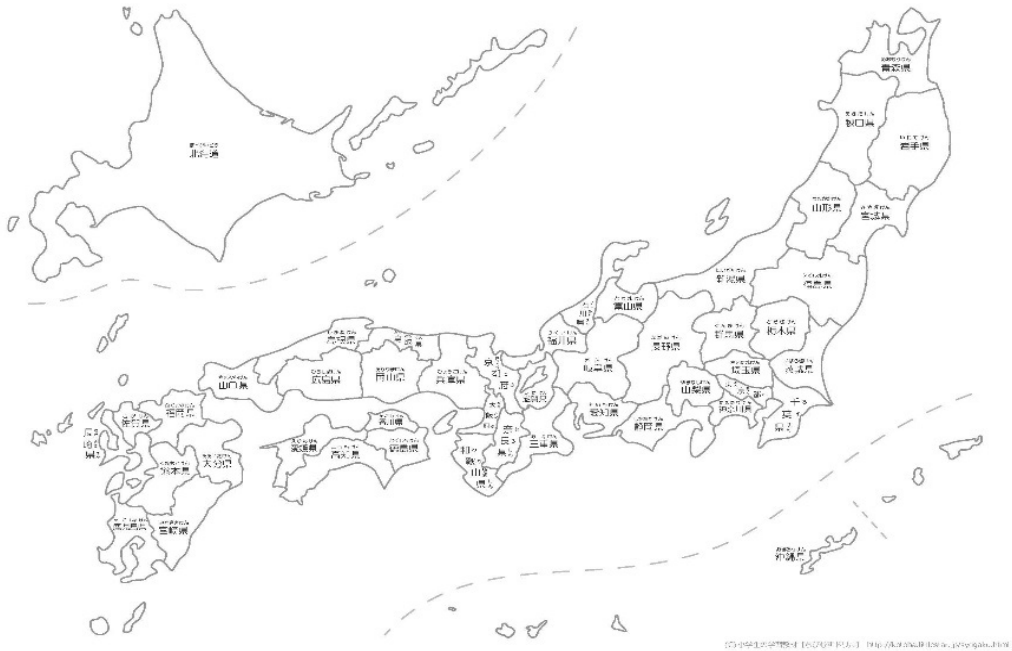
d. A Ritual to Purify Impurities

The custom of performing a ritual in which women who have finished menstruating purify themselves in the sea or river to purify themselves of impurity. After this ritual, they return to their daily lives.

When the menstrual period ended, and women left the Himaya, in coastal areas such as Uojima Village, they would purify themselves by entering the sea in a ritual called Agari. In inland areas such as Katsura and Tamagawa Town, this was done in the rivers. Furthermore, the wastewater from the Himayadalai used during menstruation was dumped into a hole next to the toilet, which was then covered with a wooden lid (Higashinokawa, Saijo City, etc.).

Figure 1

Locations of areas where cases have been reported in this paper



Communities with strong customs related to ritual impurity are found in fishing villages and mountain villages, with fewer examples in inland agricultural villages. These customs were prevalent among those whose livelihoods involved hunting, fishing, charcoal making, and logging. In particular, strong characteristics of these customs are seen in the coastal areas of central and southwestern Japan (Oomori, 1960: 75). Itabashi, who studied birth houses, showed that they were sparse in inland and northeastern areas but concentrated along the coast and in the Seto Inland Sea region.

Items for comparison with Nepal derived from previous research on Japanese impurity

By reviewing previous research, we were able to derive the following points for comparing Japan and Nepal:

- (1) What types of taboos regarding female impurity exist?
- (2) What range of people are affected by each taboo?
- (3) What role do they play?
- (4) What is the actual state of norms by geographical location?

Table 1*Points for comparing Japan and Nepal*

Types of Taboos	Objects of Taboo and range	Functions of Taboo	Regional Geographical Characteristics
Taboos related to residence Women during menstruation/ postpartum	Menstruation/ postpartum female	Avoiding danger	Coastal areas of central and southwestern
b. Taboos related to fire	Men involved	Maintaining boundaries between groups	Fishing and mountain villages where people make their living by hunting, fishing, charcoal burning, and logging
Taboos related to productive activities		Public control of sexuality	
Taboos related to rites of Mourning	Menstruation/ postpartum female	Restoring energy	

Conclusion

This study, as a preliminary consideration for a comparative study of female impurity between Nepal and Japan, aims to compare Japan and Nepal and identify commonalities and differences in the following areas: (1) types of impurity concepts and historical background, (2) types of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, (3) anthropological and ethnological interpretations of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, and (4) the geographical distribution of red impurity taboos.

In Japan, red impurity taboos were introduced as the framework for the medieval class system between the 9th and 10th centuries. Around the 15th century, beliefs derived from the Blood Bowl Sutra spread among the general public, and norms regarding menstrual, pre- and post-partum women as impure and restricting their behavior became established from Tohoku to Kyushu. However, in the late 19th century, laws were enacted under the Meiji government to eliminate these norms, and in the Taisho era (around 1920), the "Lifestyle Improvement Movement" emerged, a national movement aimed at modernizing and streamlining lifestyles both materially and spiritually, and between the 1930s and 1940s, these norms almost completely disappeared from the Japanese archipelago. Today, most people are unaware that these norms even existed. In Nepal, on the other hand, the norms are observed in everyday life and in ceremonies. Why have the norms disappeared in Japan to the point where the majority of people are unaware of their existence, while in Nepal, so many people still observe them today?

While the disappearance of the concept of red impurity in Japan can be attributed to the enactment of laws during the Meiji period to dispel superstitions, such as those

regarding impurity, this study hypothesizes that differences between Japan and Nepal in (1) the types of impurity concepts and their historical background, (2) the types of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, (3) the functions of taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, and (4) the geographic and occupational distribution of red impurity taboos influence their continued existence today. It then analyzes the differences in the semantic worlds of people in Japan and Nepal, along with the underlying factors behind them. The research method employed qualitative research methods, including secondary analysis such as ethnography.

The data indicated that the historical background to the concept of impurity differs between Japan and Nepal. The concept of blood impurity did not exist in Japan, and the Hindu worldview was introduced via China, where it was established as the basis for the medieval class system (the introduction of impurity as a governing device). Additionally, around the 15th century, when the traditional family system was becoming widely established, the Blood Bowl Sutra was introduced from China. Because impurity fit the patriarchal logic of controlling women's sexuality, it came to be applied primarily to women (the introduction of impurity as a device of patriarchal control).

The differences between the two countries in the process of conceptualization of impurity can be hypothesized to be manifested in (1) the idea of expressing the impurities of menstruation, childbirth, and death in terms of color, (2) the fire taboo as a type of taboo related to blood impurity, and (3) the existence of norms regulating the productive activities of not only women but also their families and communities. (2) and (3) can be considered in relation to Shinto, a uniquely Japanese religion. Shinto is a faith born of reverence for nature, holding that eight million gods reside throughout the universe. For example, the fire taboo can be interpreted as a prohibition against impure women using fire because the fire god, Fudo Myo-o, was believed to abhor impurity. Furthermore, given the geographical distribution of blood-shunning customs—mostly found in fishing and mountain villages, but rarely in farming villages far from the coast—we suggest the possibility that they may have persisted in this region as a result of their connection to the Shinto concept of purity, which arose from the Japanese people's long-standing interactions with nature through farming and fishing.

In Shinto, impurity symbolizes a state of diminished vitality, while its opposite, purity, refers to a state of youthful vitality and vitality. Therefore, it can be inferred that the impurity taboo in this case functioned to restore a state of enervation, restricting those in that state from engaging in productive activities. Therefore, with the rise of lifestyle improvement movements aimed at modernization and rationalization,

taboos aimed at restoring energy were replaced by others. One example is Ibuki Island, off the coast of Kannonji City, Kagawa Prefecture. The “*debeya*” (room for women in labor), where women were living together, was remodeled into a modern building in 1930, becoming the modern birthing facility “Ibuki Maternity Hospital,” with construction funds donated by the Keifukukai Imperial Gift Foundation for the “protection of pregnant and postpartum women.”

Meanwhile, along with the Blood Bon Sutra, the norms of impurity governing women's sexuality gradually disappeared from everyday life amid the rise of the lifestyle improvement movement aimed at modernization and rationalization, population concentration in the three major metropolitan areas (urbanization) that began to rise around 1910 and continued until the early 1940s, when World War II intensified, and the rise of nuclear families. They were limited to sumo rings, certain sacred mountains, temples, shrines, and festival sites, and eventually disappeared altogether. According to the first national census in 1920 (Taisho 9), the nuclear family rate at the time was 58.8% (NIPSSR, n.d.).

Preliminary Considerations for Future Research

A comparison between regions in Japan has shown that norms are stronger in regions where hunting and fishing are the means of livelihood than in regions where agriculture is the primary source of income. Previous research has not addressed the structural background to this. By focusing on the geographic context of each region and its labor conditions, we can examine the survival or disappearance of norms.

Ethnography has pointed out that “dense settlements” and “communal production” are distinctive features of regions where hunting and fishing are the means of subsistence. Meanwhile, in rural areas, production has shifted from animal-powered to human-powered, labor-intensive production. Tanimoto points out that in rural areas, agriculture was conducted as a small-scale family business run by a single couple and their immediate family, and that the labor input of farm women in household work contributed to the rise in material consumption levels (Tanimoto, 2011: 18).

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