

The Diversity of Love Journal

Attitudes toward Cleanliness and Wastefulness in Bicultural Marriages in Japan

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Couples in bicultural marriages face numerous challenges when trying to sustain love. Some practical issues, such as attitudes toward cleanliness and wastefulness, can play a very important role in bicultural marriages in Japan.

In one of my previous articles, I discussed the [main issues that Japanese and American married partners encounter](#) in this pursuit. I examined cases of *third-culture marriage* in Japan by observing and interviewing people about these themes. In an attempt to resolve any misunderstandings concerning the cultural values and attitudes in bicultural marriages, I rely on *kotowaza*.

Kotowaza are Japanese sayings and proverbs expressing cultural values, wisdom, and typical behaviors of people in Japan. This wisdom allows us to better understand how people interact with each other.

When people in a third-culture marriage talk about each other's core values, they can better understand why each other does the things they do. As they get to know each other better, their relationship improves.

Takashiro and I discussed in depth the eight main features of third-culture marriage in our chapter in the *International Handbook of Love*

(Clarke & Takashiro, 2021). We described interactions that occur when spouses try to form a cross-cultural union.

In earlier blog posts, I talked about the general rules for how Japanese and American couples can stay in love in mixed-culture marriages.

Specifically, I examined

- the role of [hesitation and assertion in preserving love in Japanese bicultural marriages](#),
- the cultural specifics of [intimacy and touch in these marriages](#),
- the importance of [humility and sensitivity in bicultural marriages](#).

One more piece of advice is about the Japanese cultural value of cleanliness and attitudes toward wastefulness in bicultural marriages in Japan.

A Japanese Cultural Value of Cleanliness

Various norms and values of each culture's interpretation of cleanliness and perfection can create real issues, especially in housekeeping roles. We find that 'common sense', '*jōshiki*', is not at all universal. Around the world, Japan is renowned for its cleanliness (Koffman, 2019).

The [Shinto](#) faith encourages the practice of purification of the body and of the natural environment. The Buddhist monks are always cleaning their temples. The Japanese custom of taking off shoes before entering the home and other sacred places suggests a strongly felt need for cleanliness in the home.

The [Buddhist](#) faith encourages the practice of meditation in order to clean the mind of thoughts, particularly of one's desires. The tea ceremony room is swept clean of every speck of dust, and students clean their public classrooms daily.

The Japanese amazed the world's soccer/football fans recently by thoroughly cleaning the stadium seats and the players' dressing rooms. The absence of trashcans where they 'should be' (an American perspective) suggests that Japanese carry any trash they have around with them until they can find one.

Understanding the Japanese Cleanliness Value in Bicultural Marriages

In bicultural marriages, American husbands may see their Japanese wives as obsessively committed to home cleanliness in every room, including checking every dish for water drops after washing them or vacuuming the house a couple of times a week.

Alternatively, the Japanese wives may perceive their American husbands as uncouth at best or barbarian at worst. Such observations that are made regularly highlight the different standards and are often conveyed as "common sense" standards that clearly differ across these two cultures, for example, on the meaning of wastefulness ([Siniawer, 2014](#)).

From the U.S. point of view, flexibility is a highly valued characteristic, so one's perception of his wife's 'obsession' with cleanliness may be a perception that lacks flexibility. From a Japanese point of view, flexibility is also valued but varies according to 'time, place, and occasion' (TPO). These contexts or conditions often determine the relative appropriateness of certain speech or behaviors. The status of the other person also determines one's flexibility.

Take note of the *kotowaza* proverb, *isogaba maware*: 'When in a hurry, make a detour.' It implies that understanding each other may require a

flexible approach. After all, he will benefit from living in a super-clean home.

Therefore, for both partners, the attitude of adapting to the other's common sense, *jōshiki*, is a topic that requires discussion between couples for clarifying standards and expectations. This would be needed in the context of the couple's issue about role responsibilities in the home. Much has been written about this subject, but the articles primarily represent statistics about the numbers of people in Japan who want this or that style of gender role in marriages when searching for marriage partners. However, intercultural marriages usually modify prior expectations when the issue is discussed interactively with mutual respect in a way that allows for flexibility and mutual adaptations that enable a level of satisfaction in the relationship for both partners.

Cultural Perspectives on Wastefulness

Cultures vary in their perceptions of standards regarding wastefulness, which can lead to tension within the household ([Siniawer, 2014](#)).

Japan has one of the world's most noted standards for recycling everything, and Americans barely participate in such activity. Therefore, we can anticipate differences in the urgency and standards of what constitutes waste and what does not.

In Japan, leaving food on one's plate is traditionally taboo; however, most restaurants participate in throwing away food that might be left over every night before closing. Grocery stores do the same with expired food.

However, efforts are underway to change that system to avoid wastefulness. Nevertheless, between married couples, it often becomes

an issue that requires clarification from both marriage partners because one could perpetually be criticized for continuous wastefulness in the home, i.e., over what temperature is best for the heater or cooler or for the length of time the water is allowed to run when brushing teeth or showering. Here again, there are usually some differences advised for *uchi* (“inside the home”) and *soto* (“outside the home”) environments, depending on time, place, and occasion.

See other articles on related topics in the rubrics of [communication of emotions](#), [cultural values](#), [how to love](#), [intercultural relationships](#), [Japanese love](#), [marital love](#), [marriages in cultural contexts](#).