

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

In the shadows of gratitude: On mooded spaces of vulnerability and care

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Abstract

Gratitude is a ubiquitous phenomenon in everyday social interactions, yet it has received relatively little attention within anthropology. Past approaches to gratitude have focused on its practical expressions within exchange relationships. In contrast, this article considers the phenomenology of gratitude as a moral mood. Drawing on ethnographic episodes of gratitude between older care-recipients and their unpaid family carers in Japan, I argue that gratitude generates an aesthetic atmosphere that attunes carer and cared-for to each other. I explore this through the Japanese notion “*kage*,” or the “shadow,” an atmosphere of shared interdependence and vulnerability that is not reducible to darkness or light, pain, or comfort. In the context of informal care of older people, this ambiguity provides space for sharing complex relational experiences and easing the weight of emotional strain. This Japanese example provides a model of new ways to engage with gratitude ethnographically, particularly in situations involving close care.

KEYWORDS

aging in Japan, care, gratitude, mood, phenomenology

要旨

感謝とは、日常の社会的交流に遍在する出来事であるが、人類学ではあまり注目されていない。感謝に対するこれまでのアプローチは、交流関係の中での実践的な表現に焦点を当ててきた。それに対し本論では、道徳的な気分 (moral mood) としての感謝の現象学を考察する。日本で介護を受ける高齢者と無

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給で介護をする家族との間の感謝をめぐる民族誌的エピソードを基に、感謝の気持ちが介護者と介護される者を互いに同調させる審美的空気を生み出すと主張する。これを、闇と光、痛みと癒しの二分法に還元できない、共有された相互依存性と脆弱性の気分である「カゲ」という日本の概念を通して探求する。高齢者の家族介護の場合、この曖昧さによって、複雑な人間関係の経験を共有し、感情的な負担を軽減する余地が生まれてくる。この日本の事例は、特に身近な人のケア状況において、感謝というものに民族誌的に関与する新しい方法のモデルを提供するものである。

INTRODUCTION

Expressing gratitude is one of the first forms of social etiquette taught to children, and one of the last things whispered on deathbeds. Gratitude is an opening and it is a closing. We thank our audiences for attending our performances, we thank our hosts for inviting us into their homes (they may thank us in return for coming), we thank the heavens for rain and the ancestors for their protection; gratitude, with its many openings and closings, is both universal and ubiquitous.

In Japan, words and acts of gratitude constantly infuse the atmosphere of everyday life, whether one is in a business meeting or a temple; gratitude is a quick, quiet word before a meal, and it is the full-throated call of vendors seeing off customers in the marketplace. Despite, or perhaps because of its ubiquity, gratitude has only recently emerged as a research interest within psychology (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; König & Glück, 2014; Solomon, 2004, 102) and has rarely been the subject of anthropological attention (de Waal & de Waal, 2004, 213). Indeed, when I set out to begin my research on the care of older people in Japan, gratitude did not strike me as something an anthropologist would need to investigate in its own right. And yet, not only did the unpaid family carers I spoke with receive (or perceive) gratitude regularly from those they cared for, but they also told me, again and again, about *their own* gratitude (cf. Elliot & Campbell, 1993, 129). For both the carer and the cared-for, gratitude was more than a way of maintaining or repairing relationships upset by the asymmetries of indebtedness and dependence inherent in care—it was also a space of vulnerability that afforded a new awareness of the world, an opening for other existential orientations and relational possibilities.

To start with gratitude then, is to enact this opening, to make a gesture of both hospitality and care, through which we might pass into something new.¹ Gratitude as opening is both a beginning and a breach, or aperture, allowing the world to enter our being, and for new narrative lines of becoming to emerge and interweave (Ingold, 2012, 85).² The space of beginning, or of opening up to the world is what Ingold, after Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has called “an inhalation of Being” (2012, 85), which is possible because of our immersion within and our vulnerable potential to be affected by the atmosphere (Abe, 2014, 2018; Bille et al., 2015; Krueger, 2022; Lepselter, 2016; Stewart, 2011; Watsuji, 1972).³ To think about gratitude in the worlds opened up by care, is also to think about atmosphere, and what Kathleen Stewart (2011) calls its “qualities, rhythms, forces, relations and movements” of “sensual world-making” (Stewart, 2011, 446).⁴ To do so means rejecting polarized representations of both the “dark night” of carers’ exhaustion on the one hand, and the dazzling halo of carer heroics, on the other, and instead, attending to the shapes and shadows cast as these two come together in the “subjective spatiality” (Osler & Krueger, 2022, 80) of lives and homes.

An atmospheric approach to gratitude allows us to move beyond both the tendency to individualize and interiorize gratitude as something embedded in the psyche, or to rely on deterministic models rooted in

the imperative of social reciprocity and cooperation (cf. Komter, 2004). Instead, an atmospheric approach foregrounds local ethical and aesthetic attunements to unsettled relational spaces, themselves culturally and historically situated, where new forms of intersubjective being might also begin to emerge. While the ethnographic examples I describe here focus mainly on gratitude flowing from the cared-for to the carer, gratitude permeated what Steven Parish (2014) called the “space between” persons. It was within this space, charged and intensified by the intimacy, fatigue and grief of care, that gratitude became mood-like, the interaffective space-between that simultaneously separated and connected.

For unpaid family carers in Japan, it was within these spaces between that gratitude enveloped the carer and cared-for within a “moral mood” (Throop, 2014), a form of attunement that produced possibilities for care. As Throop explains, moral moods link the “residues of past experience,” including the emotional imprint of past moral failings, to “subjunctive possibilities for future transformations” (2014, 71). Moral attunements between carer and cared-for were always fragile and imperfect, the positions of the carer and the cared-for themselves constantly unsettled and shifting. Dependence and vulnerability were sources of both the comfort of intimacy and the anguish of alterity (cf. Garcia, 2010). Yet carers and cared-for returned to expressions of gratitude, as if this alone endured, motivated, and held these moral concerns within one’s being, where they could be sensed and worked through.

When individuals tried to explain gratitude to me, it perpetually slipped away, leaving its gratuitous excess of feeling unspoken. In each effort to express the mood of gratitude, those being cared for and those giving care would begin, then begin again, tracing, but unable to fully grasp the edges of its atmospheric shape.⁵ In these efforts, however, they demonstrated the ways the dense muddiness of moods can soften the edges of the sharp, tense or painful feelings arising between the carer and the cared-for, sometimes slowly over a duration of years, extending through the past (e.g., recalling unsettled past experiences of caring or being cared for) and into the future (e.g., dread, anticipatory grief, fears of abandonment). While carer and cared-for used several different phrases to express gratitude to accentuate its depth or its intimacy, for example, all indicated a similar sense of dependence on others,⁶ one of the most striking expressions concerns the image of the shadow (*kage*). As the image suggests, the shadow of gratitude could create an atmosphere of ease and protection, as well as ambiguity and disorientation. I argue here that it was this ambivalent and ambiguous quality of moral moodedness (Throop, 2014, 72) that produced affordances for human connection—new beginnings and gratuitous openings.⁷ The feeling of enshadowment is less like a distinct emotion than it is a sense of being in the world with others. In the following section, I consider an example of the way gratitude’s moodedness resonates with forms of Japanese personhood and aesthetic and moral sensibilities, which become intensified when family members take on a responsibility of care.

LIVING WITH GRATITUDE

When I think about the power of gratitude as a moral mood, I think about my first encounter with Kaneda-san.⁸ I met Kaneda-san at a “day-service center” (senior day care) where I volunteered twice a week during fieldwork. The day-service center functioned as a form of respite care for unpaid family carers, and despite their cheerful disposition, the staff were perpetually overworked and underpaid, just getting by with the help of a few local volunteers. It was a kind of transitory space, where clients who were unable to live fully independently would come before they became so frail, disabled or cognitively impaired that they required 24-h care at home or were moved into full-time residential care. Even as it provided vital care support, the day-service center also indexed the inadequacies of both the family and social welfare in the world’s oldest country, a fact that was not lost on many of the older people who came each week.

A staff member brought Kaneda-san to the table where I was chatting with another client, and I poured her a cup of cool tea and introduced myself as I pulled a small green stool closer to her. When Kaneda-san looked up at me, her face lit up, first with a smile, then a look of surprise and relief, as if I was a long-lost friend. The staff member had already hurried off to help another client, and so I tried to quickly gauge this expression—had we met before? Was she visually impaired? Did she have dementia? As if to

comfort me, Kaneda-san suddenly reached across the table and softly put her hand on my right wrist. She motioned to the walking frame next to her chair, then leaned in toward me, smiling. “I’m sorry if you can’t understand me!” Her mouth was stiff, and her tongue was heavy, as if numbed. “I have spinocerebellar ataxia (*seki-zūishō nōhenseishō*).” I had never heard this word in Japanese before, but I pieced together that it is some kind of neurological condition, and I carefully wrote the words down in my notebook, thinking that I would have to look it up in the dictionary at the end of the day. I passed the notebook across the table, so she could see what I wrote, and she nodded in approval. “That’s what I was diagnosed with. That’s why I have trouble with my legs. I can’t move them well at all. And I have this speech disability (*genjo shōgai*).” She paused again and smiled without any sense of embarrassment. Despite her impediment, Kaneda-san spoke quickly, without pause, her voice skipping along the words. “They say that it is hereditary, my father had it too. About one in a hundred people have it. But I haven’t become ‘senile’ (*boke*).⁹ It’s different than that!”

When I asked Kaneda-san why she attended the day-service center, she explained that she was the primary caregiver for her husband, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Dementia. “But he is so good-natured (*odayaka*)” she quickly added, seeing my own expression of surprise, “He’s really gentle (*yasashii*), so that saves me!” She explained, “it is still exhausting. If I don’t come here I go into a panic!” The rest of the week, she and her husband are together constantly, but on the day that she comes to the center, her husband attends a different center that specializes in the care of people living with dementia. As she started telling me about her typical day, she became more and more excited, and although her tone was almost desperate, she never stopped smiling.

Kaneda: I do it all! So, I am so busy.

I make the dinner, but [my husband] will cut the hard things like kabocha squash.

And I have him do the heavy things too. He’ll take out the trash.

I can’t do that at all the way that I am.

It’s impossible.

But even though he is very nice to me, he just forgets everything.

He’ll watch the news three times in a row and think “This the first time I’ve seen this, isn’t it?”

And I just think “*Why? Why can’t he remember?*”

(Danely: And it progresses.)

Oh, it *progresses!* It does! And I don’t know.

At any rate, it is the ‘old caring for the old’ (*rōrō kaigō*)!

I need help and

he needs help.

I wonder sometimes who will be the first of us to go?

(Danely: Oh, you think about that?)

Well, I can’t help but think about it.

When I am tired. I’ll think that one of us

has to go soon. I wonder which it’ll be.

Danely: You are unsure about the future.

Kaneda: Yes. But the future won’t be terribly long.¹⁰

Kaneda-san had not let go of my arm since we started talking, but at this point in our conversation, she pulled it hard toward her, forcing me to lean my body further across the table. I reflexively reached beneath me with my other hand and awkwardly moved my stool closer to avoid being pulled off my seat.

Kaneda-san seemed to hardly notice. She was focused, still smiling even as the tears started to fall. Her voice was a hoarse whisper:

I am just so grateful! For my husband—

grateful for everyone who helps me out.

Thank you for listening to me here rambling on!

(Danely: (whispering back) ‘Gratitude is important, isn’t it?’)

It is!

Gratitude (*kansha*)!

Thankfulness (*arigatai*)!

I always *live with gratitude* from the bottom of my heart.

Why, despite her own disability and her exhausting role as a carer of someone living with dementia, did Kaneda-san still express gratitude? How did gratitude finally flush out the tears gathering at her lower eyelid as she tightened her grip on my arm? Gratitude, as both an opening to world and as a closing—a completion of the world, rather than a “closing down,” or “closing off”—existed together in a way that brought Kaneda-san’s care into the world, and the world into her care.

“Gratitude,” writes Iza Kavedžija (2019), “makes acting in the world possible, by making us aware of the interconnected nature of life. Becoming attuned in this way, one sees the involvement of others not as a limit to our freedom, but as enabling, facilitating, protecting” (2019, 221). For Kaneda-san too, gratitude was a way of living, of being aware of the world and moving within it gracefully, even within limits. As she conjured forth the atmosphere of caring—tenderness, affection, worry, thoughts of death, brokenness, bewilderment (*Why? Why can’t be remember?*)—she was wrapped in the uncertain folds of the world, feeling it like the chill of a dense fog on the skin. Enveloped in this atmosphere of daily care, the space-between Kaneda-san and others became simultaneously more tangible and more ambiguous; it drifted between hope and grief.

For Kaneda-san, taking responsibility for caring produced ambivalent and contrasting feelings and moral demands, yet when she hit upon gratitude, it was as if a single note had cut through the cacophony and brought the world humming into resonance. Moral moods, writes Throop, “arise in response to situations in which the foundation of one’s very existence as a moral being amongst other moral beings is at stake” (2014, 78). The intensity of this coalescence registered in Kaneda-san’s body as our conversation brought the mood into the room, where already, the atmosphere was saturated with gestures of dependence and care. It did not resolve the ambivalence or lead to a particular moral choice, but it generated an atmosphere between the two of us to sit with the weight of care, to bear it together in that intersubjective space where moral experience might take hold.

RETHINKING GRATITUDE AS RECOGNITION AND RECIPROCITY

One reason that gratitude has received so little serious anthropological attention in its own right may be that it tends to get wrapped into theories of reciprocal obligation, indebtedness, and social hierarchy. Indeed, from a different theoretical angle, Kaneda-san’s declaration of gratitude might be interpreted as an expression of indebtedness—to her husband for being so “good-natured,” to the day-center for providing refuge, and even to me, for listening—these debts motivate her desire to reciprocate with care. Such an interpretation might also draw parallels with important Japanese social customs of etiquette and gift-giving (Daniels, 2010; Hendry, 1993; Rupp, 2003). Yet, even while these norms and customs persist and influence everyday social relationships, they are not adequate to explain the deeply emotional and embodied significance of gratitude that arises in the context of the kind of intense and intimate care that Kaneda-san described.

Marcel Mauss, for all of his insight into the nature of exchange and reciprocal obligations, mentions gratitude only very briefly in his canonical work, *Essai sur la don* (2002). The most notable passage where Mauss mentions gratitude is in the context of the distribution of goods in the extensive potlatch ceremonies of the Tlingit and Haida of the Pacific Northwest. In this passage, Mauss describes gratitude as a mode of “recognition” of social and economic hierarchy and assertions of dominance performed through acts of conspicuous generosity. It is worth noting that the words for both “recognition” and “gratitude” are identical in the text of original French (*reconnaissance*),¹¹ and undoubtedly this predisposed its author to make this association. English language versions of Mauss’s essay uphold the subtle distinction between “gratitude” and “recognition,” as in W. D. Halls’ (2002, 52) translation: “One ‘recognizes’ the chief or his son and becomes ‘grateful’ to him.” In this light, it is unlikely that Mauss was actually concerned with gratitude per se in his theory of the gift, but rather used it in the context of this play on words. Mauss’s more deliberate emphasis was on “recognition” and its role in the ritual reproduction of social forms; feelings of gratitude were incidental.

Though peripheral to Mauss’s own writing on the gift, versions of his theory have nonetheless been taken up by most subsequent anthropologists as a starting place for understanding the significance of gratitude. In his ethnographic work on the social and emotional economy of Tamil people in South India, for instance, Arjun Appadurai (1985) argued that gratitude works to construct an etiquette of “moral reciprocity” (1985, 244). For Tamils, Appadurai elaborates, “the logic of gratitude,” proceeds thus: “gratitude implies appreciation, appreciation involves acknowledgment, and the only significant form of acknowledgment is return” (Appadurai, 1985, 240). Here, as with Mauss, it is a very short step between gratitude and “acknowledgment” (another possible translation of *reconnaissance*), leading again to the obligation of reciprocity. By linking gratitude to reciprocal relationships, Appadurai helps to liberate gratitude/acknowledgment from its confinement to an “internal state” of the mind, pointing out that its effectiveness did not depend on emotion, but on the correct attention to the “rules” of formal etiquette. If done well, gratitude becomes a “promissory note,” sustaining relationships by reassuring the giver that a return gift will be forthcoming (Appadurai, 1985, 240).¹²

Similarly, Julian Pitt-Rivers (2011) characterized gratitude as a “mediating concept” or a “frame of reference by which people and situations are to be judged” (2011, 448) and deemed meaningful (analogous to what Appadurai (1985, 240) calls “acknowledgment”).¹³ The situations Pitt-Rivers uses in support of his claim include everything from Kula, to leaving a tip at a restaurant, to ritual healing. But in contrast to Appadurai’s analysis, what ties these examples together was the presence of something “in excess, left over or supplementary, transcending exact reciprocity,” (2011, 444), which Pitt-Rivers terms “reciprocity of the heart,” or “grace” (2011, 427).¹⁴ This quality of gracefulness in rituals and exchanges opens them up to a more indeterminate, mysterious, divine quality, in which agents embody social, affect-laden values such as friendship, hospitality and love (2011, 444). The frame of grace may represent more long-term commitments and relationships, but how this unfolds in practice will inevitably vary according to historical and cultural contexts.

The excesses, uncertainties and mysteries of gratitude that Pitt-Rivers describes, make gratitude something that is endlessly repeated without becoming exhausted. This repetition, habituated in small rituals and expressions as day-to-day “social graces,”¹⁵ contributes to the production of an atmosphere of gratitude in everyday Japanese cultural exchanges. Iza Kavedžija (2019, 2020) beautifully describes these everyday exchanges of thoughtful attentiveness and concern in her ethnography of a group of older adults at the Shimoichi Salon in the southern part of Osaka. Kavedžija’s analysis observes that all these interactions are generated from and reproduce a more diffuse “attitude,” “mode of attunement,” (2020, 66), or “disposition” of gratitude, based on the fundamental “*recognition* of how much one relies on others as one moves through life” (2020, 60, emphasis mine). For the Shimoichi older adults, gratitude was a way of building and maintaining a world and of reflecting on the past, making old age a time of “quiet hope,” that “things will, indeed, work out somehow” (Kavedžija, 2020, 61). In contrast to the independent, self-reliant individual celebrated in models of “successful aging,” (Danelly, 2019; Lamb, 2017) on the one hand, and the passive subjects of care duties linked to marriage or filial piety (Shea et al., 2021) on the other, the “attitude of gratitude” produced an intermediary space where dependence and agency could coexist. Kavedžija’s

work demonstrates how these qualities of gratitude animate ordinary interactions and reflections among a group of relatively healthy, mobile, and socially active older people (2020, 61–62), and while most of her observations drawn from this group would also ring true more generally across Japanese society, they also raise questions about how gratitude might be lived in situations where relationships are more uneven, unstable, and unsettled (Cook & Trundle, 2020; Rapp, 2020).

In Kyoto, where I conducted fieldwork, gratitude was often expressed using the Japanese word for shadow (*kage*). The image brings to mind both protection and concealment, security and obscurity. For those giving or receiving unpaid care, to be in the shadow of others (to be grateful) was to intersubjectively inhabit a *mood* (Throop, 2021, 2017a, 2017b, 2014; Zigon, 2014). Moods are “atmospheric” (Ahmed (2010, 40), quoted in Throop, 2014, 70) modes of experience characterized by feelings that are diffuse, vague, murky, and encompassing. Gratitude arose, swelled and dispersed, its affective intensity tethered to memories, it motioned to worlds beyond, yet it was also responsive to the changing shapes of relations, moving alongside them like a spirit, a shadow. This moodedness of gratitude, its unsettled, haunting “spirit,” was also what made gratitude at times precarious, transient, or merged with darker feelings of guilt, grief, exhaustion, and despair (cf. Throop, 2015, 2021). The mooded space of gratitude, I argue, involves both the cared-for and the carer in the co-creation of a culturally situated and shared moral experience—like the “air” that fills the space-between, carer and cared-for are both “in” the mood and the mood is “in” them. This mood of gratitude continually attunes cared-for and carer to the world in ways that are crucial for enduring the often long, exhausting, and existentially threatening work of care in later life (Daneley, 2022).

DWELLING IN SHADOWS

The first time I heard gratitude described as a mood was during one of my weekly visits to the home of Hayakawa-sensei,¹⁶ a 90-year-old retired physician. Hayakawa-sensei lived with his wife, who was a few years younger and living with some visible mobility limitations. On this occasion, we were joined by his son, a soft-spoken man in his 50s, who worked for a social welfare agency in northern Japan but was considering moving back to Kyoto to be closer to his parents. It was only the third time that Hayakawa-sensei, and I had met, but there was no sense of stiffness or formality in his manner, and the three of us were soon sipping pale green tea and laughing easily as we sat cross-legged on the tatami mat floor. As I steered our conversation toward the topic of eldercare in Japan, Hayakawa-sensei’s son’s tone became much more serious, explaining in a low voice that it was typical, only a generation ago, to “hide” “bed-ridden” (*netakiri*) older people away in a small room in the back of the family’s house. This comment prompted Hayakawa-sensei to turn to me, asking, “Do you know the word ‘*inkyō*? Or inkyō room? It means ‘to be in the shadows,’ (*kage ni iru*) to live ‘hidden away’ (*kekureta sumi*).”

He asked his son to write the word out in Japanese script so that I could see the two characters it was composed with: the first meaning “hidden,” 隠 (*in*) and the second meaning “dwelling” 居 (*kyō*). However, as Hayakawa-sensei directed his son, he referred to the first character as “shadow,” 陰 (*kage*), a different and unconventional way to write the word, even if it was phonetically identical and semantically similar. Typically, the word *inkyō* is glossed simply as “retirement” in English, and no longer carries the bleak images that the son described as common in past generations, but is considered a time of ease and leisure, unburdened by the responsibilities of managing a job or household.¹⁷ It seemed that the father and son, however, had something different in mind, more along the lines of the final stage of life, when care becomes important. The son continued, “Care wasn’t something that we’d show to the outside world, it was something hidden.” He paused, making sure I had understood, before asking me, “So, what do you think the children of those parents feel?” Again, another pause.

Before I could respond, Hayakawa-sensei’s low, growling voice burst into the room like an old engine firing up: “Ooooh boy!” It seemed like he was about to leap off of his cushion with delight. “We’ve come to an interesting place now! *Inkyō*, *inkyō*!” He looked at me. “You see, [*inkyō*] is like this: [we have] initiative, authority, leadership, and then we *pass it on* to the next generation.” As he spoke, he drew out the words

and the rumble of his voice became softer, the engine brought to a steady idle. There was a glint in his eye as he picked up a slice of cake from the tray on a nearby table.

“Take a look at this sensei” he said, referring to me as “teacher” as he slowly extended his arm and reached the cake out to his son. “*We pass it on*” each word clearly articulated. “And you see, I’m like this.” He sits slumped to the side. “I don’t have any power.” He stayed in that position for a moment longer, his face staring at me blank and expressionless, as if drained of life, before again snapping back into action.

Hayakawa: So that’s what we mean by “*inkyō*”

[Danely]: So, [you mean] yielding (*yuzuru*)?

Son: Yes, yielding.

Hayakawa: So, what happens to an old person when they *inkyō*?

BURA-

BURA-

*buru-buru-buru...*¹⁸

His pitch fell from high to low as the words came bubbling out, his hand tracing a downward fall in the air. “It gets *worse*. They get weaker, they get dementia...” He continued, listing several other indignities of age. Dominant gerontological paradigms that privilege “independent” and “active aging” would likely view Hayakawa-sensei’s statements about decline as indicative of some kind of self-neglect. Yet, Hayakawa-sensei’s interpretation of the word *inkyō*, was not only one of dwelling in the shadows, but of becoming shadowlike, fading into the background, but remaining almost imperceptibly present, atmospheric, a mood. Sarah Lamb (2014), observing similar attitudes towards aging in India, refers to this as “meaningful decline,” or what has been examined elsewhere as the “creativity of loss” (Danely, 2014). This became clearer when I tried to shift the conversation back to the importance of elders in the household, recalling past conversations we had had about aging and the connection of older people to the ancestors. This topic seemed to ignite something. Hayakawa-sensei caught me again with a sudden epiphany:

Although I said that [the elder] loses authority, something remains. *Zanzō*!

“*Zanzō*” means something like

an afterimage (*nokotteru kage*),

a shadow (*kage*),

a trace of something from the older person that reminds us that we should never forget their importance.

That’s the ‘en-shadow-ment’ (o-kage-sama-de).

You can’t see it, but there is a shadow (*kage*).

In Japanese we always say ‘*o-kage-sama-de*,’ you know? It is kind of like saying, ‘*arigatō*,’ ‘Thank you.’

That way of thinking is still around. That even if [the elders] are not around, we can’t forget them. Maybe it is half religion? To respect one’s elders? But it’s not really that either, hmmm... (a long sigh)

Ah! Something *un-self-conscious* [*omowazu*, or done without conscious intention, automatic] More of a custom? You don’t think about why you do these things, you just feel something in your heart (*kokoro de kanjūteru*).

perhaps, something like feeling *thankfulness* (*arigatō*)...

It is just a matter of feeling that sense of having purpose in your heart.

Here, Hayakawa-sensei, his mind and spirit dancing with life within his fragile, bony frame, articulated what is at the heart of the matter, the trace (*zanzō*) of personhood that resides in gratitude and that persists in the shadows of decline and hidden dwelling of care. He stopped again and turned to me as if breaking off from this thought. “Do you know the phrase, ‘stopping in the shadow of a great tree?’ [Yoraba taiju no *keage*] It means that if you need to depend on something, it’s best to depend on something powerful, something that you can trust.” With these words, Hayakawa-sensei gestured towards his son, still sitting quietly to the side. “You know, I am 90,” he continued, “But I have finally found *my* great tree.”

While it appears here that Hayakawa-sensei’s gratitude is more narrowly directed towards his son, I would argue that like Kaneda-san in the previous case, his efforts to conjure different images of ambiguity and vulnerability (yielding, becoming a trace, shadows, *buru-buru-buru*) revealed his concerns about the losses of yielding to the next generation (*inkyō*) within a more diffuse moral mood of gratitude. This was his way of becoming enshadowed (*keage*)—or of aging gracefully.¹⁹ Hayakawa-sensei wanted me to know that the choice to yield and to be cared for in old age was more than a mere reception of the “gift” of generations (cf. Hashimoto, 1996), one that could be summed up with ideological phrases like one’s “duty of debt repayment” (*on-gaeshi*) or “filial piety” (*oyakōkō*). Instead, Hayakawa-sensei’s careful choice of words indicated that his sentiment arose unconsciously, or “without intention” (*omowazu*) as he felt his existence becoming more shadowlike (*keage*); gratitude arose like an ancestral spirit propitiated through the care and sacrifice of its descendants. The meanings afforded by enshadowment, allow older Japanese people to come to terms with dependence and decline by reframing it as a relationship of care and gratitude. In the next section, I build on this conversation, and particularly the connection between gratitude, shadow, and mood, in order to situate these ideas within the broader context of Japanese cultural aesthetics and understandings of personhood.

ENSHADOWED MOOD, “LUMINOUS AS A RAINBOW”

For Hayakawa-sensei, gratitude meant enshadowment; but enshadowment was not complete invisibility, nor was it a descent into pitch black oblivion. Rather, dwelling in the shadow of gratitude is better imagined as a thick, dim, murkiness, where one is left, in Hayakawa-sensei’s words, as a “trace” or “afterimage,” hauntingly enduring through fragility and care. Hayakawa-sensei’s gratitude for the sheltering shadow of others was part of aging with grace, a sentiment that echoes the imagined grace of the ancestors of the household recognized in rituals of care and remembrance (Danelly, 2014; Smith, 1974; Traphagan, 2004; Tsuji, 2002). Descendants, of course, are dwelling in the shadow of the ancestors as well, just as Hayakawa-sensei’s son was in the shadow of his father. For Hayakawa-sensei and other frail and dependent elderly people I spoke with, the shadow of gratitude was a means of expressing the atmospheric effect of blurring boundaries between the self and milieu, caregiver and care recipient, and even this world and the next.

Enshadowment and gratitude are aspects of the same mood, or mode of relational attunement—to the phenomena of aging, interdependence, and care—representing the *aesthetic* and *ethical* angles respectively. This mood of enshadowed gratitude is expressed most exquisitely by Jun’ichirō Tanizaki in his essay, *In Praise of Shadows* (1977). This essay reflects on the aesthetic values of Japanese design during the post-war period, when the adoption of modern western aesthetics was becoming more prevalent in Japan. In examples ranging from medieval theater to everyday village life, Tanizaki illustrates the sublime beauty found “not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates” (1977, 30). In describing the unadorned walls of a traditional Japanese house, for example, Tanizaki explains that they can only be appreciated when the shadows cast by the “fragile beauty of the feeble light” (1977, 18).

In another striking passage, Tanizaki described the quality of darkness illuminated only by faint candlelight as “a repletion, a pregnancy of tiny particles like fine ashes, each particle luminous as a rainbow” (1977, 34). Not only do shadow and light mutually constitute each other, but the room, the implements within it, the dress and posture of the people who move within in it, are all in a process of recreating and

FIGURE 1 “*Okage-sama*” to ieru jinsei ni *kodoku wa nai* (A life where one can say “o-kage-sama” has no loneliness) (photograph by author). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]



being recreated by this quality of light—they are in the mood, so to speak—but an enshadowed mood where beauty lies not solely in what is shown, but also in what remains obscured.²⁰ Just as the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1972, 10) contends that the basis of *ethics* lies in the sensitivity and vulnerability of the lived space of “betweenness” (*aidagara*) (Inutsuka, 1997, 92; Osler and Krueger, 2021), Tanizaki suggests that betweenness is also at the core of Japanese *aesthetic* values. To appreciate, or “praise” the shadows emerging and enveloping the lived spaces between people, objects, and environments is to be in a mood of gratitude.²¹

This quality, I suggest, is enfolded in the Japanese term “*o-kage-sama*,” as used by Hayakawa-sensei during our conversation. *O-kage-sama* is an honorific form of the word “shadow” (*kage*), but it is used in the same general manner that we might say “by your grace” or less formally, “thanks to you.”²² In Kyoto, the expression “*o-kage-sama*” was used frequently in everyday conversation to express gratitude in response to another’s care or concern, such as when someone asks if you have slept soundly, or if your travels were incident-free, or if you have recovered from a cold. An appropriate response to any of these queries might be simply “*o-kage-sama de*.” The notion that one’s health, safety, and well-being are all owed to the grace of concerned others seems odd only when we assume the social world is composed of totalized individuals rather than spaces-between that connect us. This everyday, habituated expression of gratitude coalesces the relational quality of care and the murky moodedness of shadows, and takes on particular intensity and significance when it is used in morally charged contexts such as family eldercare.

O-kage-sama was not only used in conversation, but also appeared on occasion in public spaces. It was a frequent theme of pithy calligraphic meditations posted on signboards or in plexiglass display cases outside the gates of Buddhist temples. One of these signs (Figure 1), for example, read “A life where one can say *o-kage-sama* has no loneliness.”²³ In other words, to live in a mood of gratitude (in the shadow of others, living or dead, human or non-human) is to be connected to others.

Another (Figure 2) played on the double-meaning of “shadows,” stating “To beings hidden in the shadows, *O-kage-sama*.”²⁴ Again, *o-kage-sama* expressed gratitude as something springing forth from the relationality itself, or as Rapp (2020) calls it, the “interdependency that constitutes the enduring mesh of social life” (Rapp, 2020, 255), not only with those one faces in everyday life, but especially with ambiguous concerned and “hidden” others.

Hayakawa-sensei’s use of *o-kage-sama*, his gratitude, anticipated the care he hoped would be given by his son and signaled his own self-awareness and readiness to accept that care. Stepping out of the light and into the shadow of another could not have been easy for someone like Hayakawa-sensei, who had a long and respected career as a doctor. The mooded space of gratitude, however, provided the aesthetic neutral

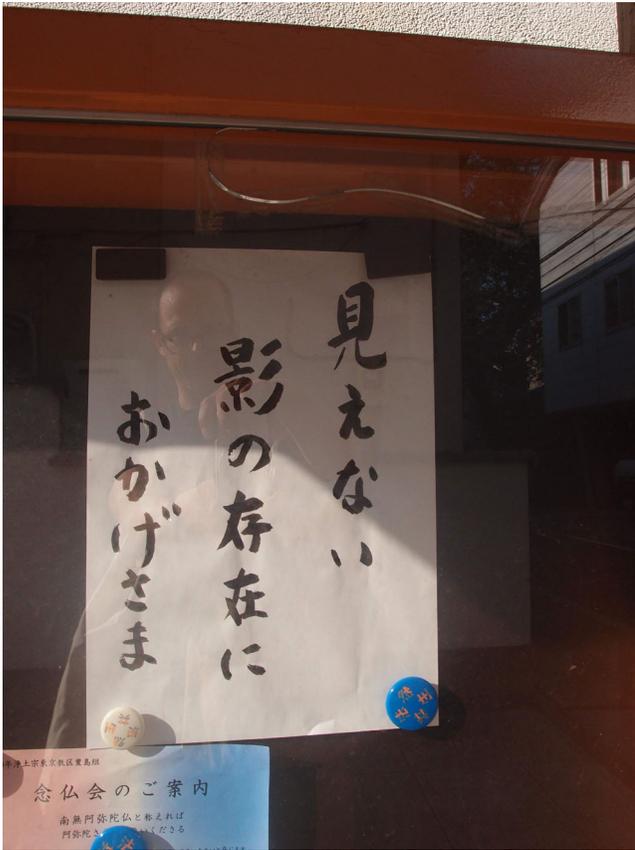


FIGURE 2 “*Mienai kage no sonzai ni okage-sama*” (“To beings hidden in the shadows, Thank you [O-kage-sama]”) (photograph by author). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

ground on which the play of shadow and light could soften this asymmetry of dependence and perhaps reveal a common vulnerability and potential for care (Garcia, 2010, 68).

TRACES AND ATTUNEMENTS: GRATITUDE AS CLOSING

If gratitude initiates care by yielding to the shadows, it also marks a kind of finality of care, when all that ought to be done has been done. Heartfelt expressions of gratitude on occasions of separation are frequently dramatized in Japanese rites of passage, from school graduation ceremonies to the common practice of brides reading thank-you letters to parents on the wedding day. Gratitude, as both closing and opening, signals the peak intensity point of these rituals, moving everyone present to tears. For carers of older family members, final words of gratitude have a similarly profound emotional impact, easing the shift from care to mourning. In this last illustration, I describe the case of Terada-san, whose husband had died only 3 months before I began my fieldwork, leaving behind his last words of gratitude.

After her husband’s death, Terada-san purchased a domestic Buddhist altar (*butsudan*), in front of which she placed his funerary portrait photograph. Sometimes we would sit by the altar as she reminisced about the ways she cared for him, only feet away, on a rented adjustable hospital bed (Danelly, 2018, 137; Danelly, 2022, 146). On one occasion, Terada-san switched her attention from the altar and began searching around the room, shuffling through several drawers packed with various papers before finally finding what she was looking for. She laid a thin loose-leaf notebook on the kitchen table, and I noticed several pages had been torn out and were kept sandwiched in the binding.

Each paper began with a nearly identical script, written vertically with a brush pen:

“Thank you, everyone.”

Page after page after page.

“He wrote this kind of thing,” Terada-san explained, as she turned the pages dreamily.

“Sometimes I’d wake up at night, or early in the morning, and I’d find him awake, sitting on the edge of his bed, writing this kind of stuff by himself...”

“Your husband?”

“Yeah” she replied, exhaling the word with a sigh as if being deflated by the memory. “His head was a little funny—you see?” She pointed at a word scrawled in a shaking script “‘Tanaka Emiko’ he wrote!” She began to giggle, “That’s not my name [the first name was correct]. Tanaka is the married name of our daughter, so maybe that’s why he wrote it like that...” She flipped through the notebook again, reading aloud, “Thank you everyone.”

Do you think he was trying to send a message to someone? I asked.

Yes, it looks that way, right? I just thought, what on earth are you doing?

[reading] Thank you, everyone...

Was he remembering some people that he wanted to say something to?

[reading] Thank you, everyone, Thank you, everyone...

Each sheet was left unfinished, trailing off before even half of the page had been filled. Some of the script was clear and flowing, at least at first. But as she continued showing me the pages, I could see the words gradually becoming more and more muddled until they were incomprehensible, drifting out of lines. Tears welled up as she talked about her husband writing these notes, day after day, desperately, persistently trying to “express his heart,” as she put it, but never able to finish—always confounded by his aging body and mind.

He understood that he was really declining in the last years.

We would try to take him places like hot springs, and he was always saying,

“Thank you, thank you” ...

I thought that I would take him this year, but he was hospitalized.

But still I went to the hospital and I told him,

‘Let’s go to the hot springs together!’ –and he was just so happy,

I’d never seen him so happy! I’m so grateful for that!

The tears broke free from the corners of her eyes again and her voice shook. Like Kaneda-san in the first vignette, the tears slid off the corners of a smile. Terada-san put the notebook down and I instinctively placed a hand on her arm, just to let her know I was present, I would wait, we could hold this fragile mood between us. Gratitude created this mooded space, one that contained and attached, something Jeanette Pols (2018) calls the “foam of the stories,” a frail yet “utopian moment” of possibility. The voice recorder set on the table between us documented a full minute of the kitchen clock ticking on the wall. The room, the notebooks, the warmth of her hand (our hands?), the smell of incense from the altar, the world transformed, richer, yet less settled than moments before. The pause held us in this mood of gratitude, as if to speak, to act, would break the enduring strength of its spell.

The gratitude expressed in the notebooks left tangible aesthetic traces of Terada-san’s husband, simultaneously a closure of care in this life and a pathway, by which Terada-san herself could continue to care

for her husband in a place beyond.²⁵ The thank-you notes materialized her attachments and interdependence, maintaining the mood of gratitude, but in a way that trailed off like the garbled words at the end of each page, into the shadows, unable to catch onto and grip this side of the world. If gratitude can be understood as a mood, as I suggest it is in the case of Japan, it may be because of this aesthetic quality of something unsettled, ambiguous, and shadowy that accompanies it. “The persisting and yet unsettled quality of moods,” writes Throop, “is morally significant” (2014, 71). Gratitude was a place where Terada-san’s complex feelings of grief would mingle, unsurfaced, in ways that shaped her moral concern to care.

I wondered what if anything would have been different if her husband’s letters did not end in ellipses, but clearly and accurately named each person and act of care, like a page of acknowledgments at the opening or closing of a book. How might this change its ability to connect Terada-san with her husband in ways that fostered care? What would happen to the moral mood? Would it be less evocative or lingering, less shadowy and unsettled? Gratitude is both closure and opening here; as the work of mourning becomes a new task of care, its moral valences have been anticipated by her late husband’s notes, the words we still wait for, never to be written, the archive of the space-between.

THE FULLNESS OF ENSHADOWED CARE

My aim in this article has been to reflect on instances in which older people receiving care expressed gratitude toward their carers, and to think about what those cases revealed about the intersubjective and interaffective experience of caring. In each of the cases I presented, family care was something unsettled: expectations and responsibilities were ambiguous and held together by tenuous and complex feelings of vulnerability. But what they suggest is that gratitude was not something exchanged for care, nor was it simply a by-product or acknowledgment of more fundamental social structures of reciprocity. Indeed, the general notion of care *givers* and *receivers* seemed to always miss something about the fluidity and ambiguity of the intimacy and responsiveness within caring relationships.

Robert Solomon (2004) writes that “like many moods, gratitude expands beyond the focus on a particular object to take in the world as a whole” (2004, 106). Understanding a particular instance or expression of gratitude, then, also requires a fuller attention to the aesthetic and moral moods through which cultural values become folded into the spaces-between persons. The ethnographic illustrations of gratitude’s moodedness that I have used in this article focused on instances where gratitude appears to be “keeping the cares together” (Taylor, 2008, 332) despite the potential for serious moral ambivalences and concerns.

Of course, gratitude is not necessarily felt, experienced, or communicated in all encounters between carers and dependent older adults, and I have not been able to provide examples of instances where expressions or accusations of ingratitude can foreclose on the potential for care and leave deep and lasting wounds (Leinaweaver, 2013)—gratitude should not be taken for granted. Nor should gratitude simply be gratuitous, such that care professionals, institutions, and systems are able to ignore it; gratitude holds the potential to enhance the well-being of both the carer and the cared for. If modern care services favor the brightly lit hospitals and care facilities, Japanese family members who endure the long years of care at home long for shadows. By restricting care to a transaction, as the administrative bureaucracy of modern welfare systems imply, something of the shadowy atmosphere of care is cast to the edges; older people start to see their care as a burden on family and society. This stands in contrast to care in mooded spaces of gratitude, which have as their foundation, a common vulnerability that makes acting in the world possible. Stories of care describe the textures of a mood that arose in the spaces-between as care disrupted, reordered and opened new possibilities.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Costello (2009, 78) writes that phenomenologically, “In gratitude, one keeps something in mind because it has opened one onto a particular (and particularly relevant) stream of experiences, has provided an organizing route through the multiplicity that before had perhaps receded from view as undifferentiated.” Costello also cites Lawrence Hatab (2000), who finds in Heidegger’s phenomenology of thankfulness “a primal mood of grateful reception and openness to the world, to others, and to the fragile marvel of human possibilities” (2009, 79).
- ² This sense of beginning is comparable to what Hannah Arendt calls “natality,” a kind of birth into the world that Christina Schües (2002) argues also involves intention and initiative. Intention, she writes, “implies, in speaking and acting, being in relations with other human beings, being directed towards meanings, tasks and events” (2002, 188). Initiative, which Michael Lambek (2007, 22) links to the separation stage of rites of passage, is described by Arendt as the capacity for “basic leap” (*Grund-Satz*) from pre-natal to natal existence (Schües 2002, 190), a separation, differentiation, or plurality. In the context of care, gratitude is a beginning in this sense of establishing a mood that makes moral responsibility and commitment to the other possible.
- ³ Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1972), like Ingold, argued that we perpetually become ourselves through atmospheres, or using Watsuji’s term, through climaticity (*jūdo-sei*). Our climaticity recognizes that the self is not something separate from the atmosphere, but always changing and responsive with it. But climaticity is not deterministic: our behaviors and sensitivities shape the atmosphere too. Furthermore, atmospheres are relational, shared, the air we breathe and the air we read. Mochizuki (2006), argued that Watsuji’s anthropology of climaticity means that “People and climate coincide in their essence.”
- ⁴ For more on the ways “atmospheres” and “moods” are similar and the ways they could be seen as different, see Trigg 2020, (ed). In Japanese, both are commonly referred to using the word *kūki* 空気 or *fun’iki* 雰囲気, incorporating the character for “air,” “spirit,” or “vital energy” (氣 *ki*). Similarly, an individual’s mood is *kibun* 気分 (literally, a part of the *ki*). Attitude or disposition, however, *taido* 態度 is very different, lacking the connotation of both space or air
- ⁵ As Bille et al (2015, 33) note, moods, and atmospheres “work at a tacit level, being ‘there but not there, imperceptible yet all-determining”
- ⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article to fully delve into the distinctions between terms such as *kansha* (gratitude), *arigatai* (thankfulness) and *okagesama* (thanks to your grace), let alone closely related notions of apology (*owabi*) or passive reception of benevolence (i.e., *itadaki*) (see McVeigh, 1991; Wierzbicka, 1996).
- ⁷ Krueger (2022, 115) use the term “affective arrangements” (which he describes as an “atmosphere” within which moods, emotions and other affective experiences are situated) in a similar way to the morally minded spaces I describe, stating, “affective arrangements open up ... social possibilities ways to connect and share with others”
- ⁸ All names used in this article are pseudonyms with the exception of Hayakawa-sensei, who gave permission and asked that I use his real name.
- ⁹ Boke, sometimes translated as “senility” is associated with physical and mental decline in old age, with connotations of increased dependence, disengagement from social activity and becoming a burden on others. Traphagan (2000, 2006) argues that boke not only consolidates a range of social fears associated with old age, but also, because it is considered preventable, boke has taken on a moral dimension linked to biomedical and gerontological discourses of active aging.
- ¹⁰ In this and other transcriptions of conversations, I have been inspired by Susan Lepselter’s (2016) unusual use of the poetic spacing of lines in order to better convey rhythms, feelings and disruptions
- ¹¹ Le potlatch, la distribution des biens est l’acte fondamental de la « reconnaissance » militaire, juridique, économique, religieuse, dans tous les sens du mot. *On « reconnaît » le chef ou son fils et on lui devient « reconnaissant ».*
- ¹² This is a reasonable assumption if indeed Appadurai is accurate in his assessment that gratitude in Tamil culture is a way of reproducing reciprocal exchanges of gifts and reinforcing status difference. Appadurai does not give any further evidence to support this hypothesis, however, and the ethnographic examples he uses throughout this article tend to rely on broad generalizations rather than specific instances. In Japan and many other cultures, gratitude is used much more freely in interactions where no exchanges of material goods occur or where reciprocity is not possible (see Kavedžija 2020, 60). In these cases, the “promissory note” hypothesis, at least in the sense of a return of a material gift, is not sufficient to explain its use.
- ¹³ Leinaweaver (2013) similarly notes the ways this frame of judgement also structures understandings of ingratitude. She argues however that in contexts of social, economic, and generational change, these structures can become contested.
- ¹⁴ Pitt-Rivers compares this “reciprocity of the heart” to Mauss’s “spirit of the gift” in his description of Maori *hau* (2011, 442).

- ¹⁵In Japanese, everyday expressions of gratitude and apology might be considered akin to metacommunicative practices of “greeting,” or “*aisatsu*” (Ide 1997; Miyake, 1993; Ohashi, 2013), where the content matters less than the expression of a sentiment of thoughtfulness. We might also note that the word “thank” in English, derives from the word “think”, again, an everyday expression of thoughtfulness.
- ¹⁶“sensei” is a respectful form of address reserved for teachers and doctors. In this case, Hayakawa was both. I use his real name at his request, but all other names in this paper are anonymized using pseudonyms.
- ¹⁷Whereas retirement today emphasizes the “withdrawal from” (*intai* 引退) or leaving work (*taishoku* 退職), *inkyō* focuses on the place one lives after retirement as well as the act of ceding house, status, and inheritance to the next generation (an emphasis on continuity of the institution, rather than disruption one’s individual identity).
- ¹⁸“Bura-bura” ブラブラ is a non-onomatopoeic ideophone that refers to something that is hanging limp. I have chosen not to substitute “bura-bura” with an English phrase, such as, “they get lazy,” to preserve the aesthetic, sensory quality of the mimetic language. While Japanese proponents of “active aging” and finding “*ikigai*” in later life see “bura-bura” as the antithesis of a “good” old age, Hayao Kawai (1997, 134–35) has defended “bura-bura” as a sense of contented repose earned after a lifetime of work.
- ¹⁹While “aging gracefully” has become a cliché of self-care product marketing to older adults, Anna Corwin’s (2021, 128) ethnography of older Catholic nuns offers a spiritually inflected sense of the term, as accepting and surrendering to God’s will. This is much closer in spirit to the “*okagesama*” phrase (except that it is the relationships with other people that one must depend upon, rather than God)
- ²⁰Gratitude, in this way, resembles a subjunctive mood of hope, a mode of living in uncertainty whilst yearning for transcendence (cf. Crapanzano, 2003)
- ²¹While the shared aesthetic spaces of gratitude and shadows is central both to my interpretation of Hayakawa-sensei’s attitude toward care (*kaigo*), and about gratitude as a moral mood more generally, it is also important to note that there are subtle linguistic distinctions between different uses of the word “*kage*.” *Kage* can be written using three different characters, which I will enumerate here for clarification: *kage* 1 (蔭), *kage* 2 (陰), and *kage* 3 (影). The subtle shadow-play that these phonetically identical terms afford, bridges the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of interpersonal betweenness and moral attunement. First, “*o-kage-sama*,” used as an expression of gratitude, is written with *kage* 1 蔭, and can be glossed as “shade,” or the darkened area caused by something blocking a sources of light, like a tree blocking the sunlight. The focus is on the object and act of shading something, rather than the dark shadow itself. However, *o-kage-sama* is typically written using the Hiragana phonetic syllabary (おかげさま), adding to its ambiguity and openness to shadow-play or slippage between different versions of “shadow.” *Kage* 2 陰 closely resembles *kage* 1 in meaning, but is perhaps more accurately translated as “shadow,” in that it does not refer to any particular object casting the shadow or the surface on which the shadow is cast. *Kage* 2 also suggests something hidden from sight and possibly negative and conspiratorial (the reason Hayakawa-sensei suggested it as the first character in the word *in-kyō*). When Tanizaki writes about the “shadows” in the context of Japanese aesthetics, he uses *kage* 1 蔭 to describe the shade provided by the eaves of the roof (1975, 31) as well as the shadows cast within a room (1975, 34). However, since Tanizaki is most interested in the interplay between light and shadow, he mostly uses the word “*inei*” (陰翳, commonly written 陰影), combining *kage* 2 and *kage* 3 影. This third term is also semantically close to the English word “shadow,” as it refers to the dark shape cast when something is illuminated. However, *kage* 3 also refers to the light source that creates the shadow (as in the word for “moonlight” 月影 (*tsukikage*)). *Kage* 3 can therefore also indicate an impression, impact or influence (*eikyō* 影響) of someone or something on another. Furthermore, while the first and third versions of *kage* (蔭 and 影 respectively) have generally positive and benevolent connotations, the second (陰) is less clear. Tanizaki’s use of the term *inei* in the title of his essay, then, comprises an aesthetics of shade, shadow, and light in multiple combinations and interaffections. Tanizaki might also be hinting at the term *inyō* (陰陽) the Chinese concept of opposite and complementary principles (*yin-yang*) of dark and light, negative and positive, female and male, moon and sun, and so on.
- ²²Younger Tokyoites found the expression old-fashioned, as it is used more frequently between and towards older people, and is more common in Kyoto, where honorific qualifiers are more prevalent in the vernacular.
- ²³*okagesama to ieru jinsei ni kodoku ha nai*
- ²⁴*mienai kage no sonzai ni, okage-sama*
- ²⁵Terada-san, like most other bereaved individuals I spoke with, continued to express care and gratitude to the spirit of her husband after he passed away, following customs of memorializing the deceased (Danelly, 2022; Traphagan, 2004)

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