

Guilt and Shame-Based Societies in ASOIAF

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1. Definitions

- (a) **Guilt-Based** - Centered around the individual, if you do something wrong, you are expected to feel guilty for yourself, regardless of what anyone else thinks. If society turns against you, you are also able to turn against them and protest your innocence. Guilt societies revolve around the idea of not doing bad stuff because of the potential negative impact *for you*. Think Ancient Rome, Mughal India, any country in Europe from 1400 on, the US, etc.
- (b) **Shame-Based** - Centered around the collective. What you think doesn't matter as much as what others think. You are expected to put others before yourself, and you have no obligation to feel bad about wrongdoing that is successfully kept secret. However, if society turns on you, you don't have any way of turning against society. Shame societies revolve around the idea of not doing bad stuff because of the potential negative impact *for everybody else*. Think China, Japan, Korea, the USSR, England (to some extent) etc.
- (c) **Important Note** - Neither society can be objectively proven to be better than the other. While certain advanced countries like us embrace the ideas of guilt-based society and civic virtue as a foundation of our culture, other developed nations with high standards of living, like Japan, prioritize harmony, community, and a shame-based society. Guilt-based countries, like Libya, can have low standards of living, as can shame-based ones like the USSR/modern Russia.

2. Westeros

- (a) **Noble Houses** - Many of the Westerosi houses have guilt cultures, notably the Lannisters, who have such a strong sense of individuality that they will break family ties to get what they want. Generally, the southern kingdoms have more guilt-based societies, probably based on their proximity to King's Landing, the center of guilt-based power in Westeros. Houses farther away, like Tully, Greyjoy, Stark and Bolton, have a far greater emphasis on loyalty and community.
- (b) **Outcasts** - The raiders of the Iron Islands and the wildings have almost universally developed shame societies, possibly due to the scarcity of resources and constant warfare. In addition, their constant adversarial relationship to any individual authority from the Seven Kingdoms might have caused this pattern to strengthen, similar to how Japan and Britain's shame societies strengthened in comparison to perceived "others". Even Stannis begins to develop characteristics of the ruler of a shame society, expecting loyalty and self policing far more than Robert ever did, once there was a clearly defined "other".
- (c) **Transients** - Maesters, priests, and the like occupy a special place in Westerosi society. Ostensibly outside the realm of politics, and with no clearly defined "other", we see a guilt society emerge as most maesters and priests see themselves as alone against the world. In the case of Pycelle and Varys, and even lords like Littlefinger, not clearly in the social structure, we see huge amounts of personal accountability and guilt, and a complete disregard

of what society thinks. But, what's interesting to note about Littlefinger is that as he moves up in the politics of Westeros and becomes more powerful in the traditional sense, he starts to see himself as more accountable to the community, and is more willing to forgive himself for secret wrongdoings-traits that are evident of a shame society-which he didn't do at all in the early books.

- (d) **Overall Consensus** - As a continent defined by power change from invasion and steady and constant dynasties that span centuries, we'd expect Westeros to have a similar society to nations with similar histories, like Britain and Japan. But this isn't what happens. The concept of the Targaryen dynasty as an "other", with a different culture and a less than ideal regard for Westerosi culture, indigenous religion, and human life, seems to have prompted a need for reliance on oneself in some of the houses that hoped to topple Targaryen rule. Success under these systems gave the serious contenders for the Iron Throne lasting guilt-based societies. Areas left alone by the Targaryens, such as the North, not only retained their own customs and religions, but their shame-based societies as well.

3. Essos

- (a) **Free Cities** - As separate city-states born from a fight for independence, the Free Cities are as guilt-based as you can get, emphasizing commerce and cooperation, but not community or duty; free people are free to come and go as they wish. The lack of community and sense of individual needs placed first also gives us the idea that slavery is okay. The Free Cities' foreign policy reflects this; they are largely apolitical, backing whoever they think will either pay them money, or in the case of Braavos, get Westeros to pay its debt.
- (b) **Slaver Cities** - The cities that line Slaver's Bay are almost like mirror images of the Free Cities. They have economies based on slavery and are also largely apolitical, but they have a strong sense of identity and community. Slavery is not justified because you don't give a crap about the people in your community, but rather because the slaves are not in your community in the first place. Slaves are almost always considered captives, and this status is passed down from generation to generation of slaves. The dynamic here is extremely interesting as well; the slaves hate the Masters, but they do not reject the idea of a Meerenese community, and a good many of them try to reintegrate into it following Daenerys' liberation of the city. My theory is that the idea of a Ghiscari empire lives on in these cities, and the prestige of the community is a justification for it to place itself above all others, almost like a hyper-shame society, and much like Old Ghis, the greatest crime is not belonging to it.
- (c) **Dothraki** - The Dothraki have a strange sort of hybrid between a guilt-based society and a shame-based one. There's an extreme emphasis on community, but it's a community held together by antagonism between individuals. Only by achieving individually can one inspire the rivalry that keeps the group together. The Dothraki have a society that's so distrustful of any outsider that the community can only survive through distrust and rivalry.
- (d) **Qarth and Asshai** - These are cities that are defined as outsiders by default. As people close to the Shadow, the residents of these cities seem to believe the social rules of the rest of the world don't apply to them. Case in point, we've never met a truly "normal" person from either city. As people who identify more as outsiders than residents of their cities, guilt-based culture reigns supreme here, even if it's nearly unrecognizable due to the residents' blue and orange morality.
- (e) **Consensus** - As a continent with a far longer history than that of Westeros, categorized by empires rising, falling, and leaving little pieces of identity behind, we'd expect close-knit shame societies. But, like Westeros, the opposite happens. The sheer magnitude of so many societies shrinks each one down to a point of almost no consequence, meaning that the prevailing attitude on the continent is guilt-based, as opposed to the more shame-based natural attitudes of a more politically static Westeros.

How should I compare/conclude?