

Guilt and Shame-Based Societies in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Alexander Gould

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Any society worth its salt has to be ready and willing to maintain law and order. The concept of an ordered and lawful society existed well before there were even formal laws; early men, both in our world and Westeros, grouped together to form tribes and clans, organizations of mutual benefit, held together by societal rules. [11] As tribes grew into civilizations, their societies grew too large to police themselves, and as a result, we see the development of justice systems to enforce a strict code of behavior. Of course, a formal justice system can't do all the work; its purpose is to punish those who stray too far from societal norms. It's the job of society to police people into behaving properly in the first place, and impose values that allow all of its members to benefit. In order to keep people in line, societies need to use emotions that motivate people to police their own behavior. The emotions that encourage self-policing fall under two categories, *guilt* and *shame*. [4] These 2 emotions are often confused due to their similar effects, but they're actually diametric opposites. The definitions of these words are varied and hard to define, so it's easier to look at the two types of societies they spawned. Every culture in the world has had either a guilt-based society, or a shame-based society. The two are omnipresent, as they are necessary for society to function, yet fundamentally different. Let's take a look at the two and see why.

Guilt-based societies are centered entirely around the individual. If an individual in a guilt based society does something wrong, they are expected to feel *guilty*. It doesn't matter what the others or the collective think of me; if I've done something wrong in a guilt-based society, I'm expected to feel bad about it. Consequently, I avoid doing bad things to avoid this feeling, as a consequence of my actions. This is a double edged sword, however; while I am expected to carry my guilt regardless of what others think, I also reserve the right to carry my innocence regardless of what others think. If society turns against me, I am able to turn back and protest my innocence because the entire system is built on individual accountability. Long story short, a guilt-based society revolves around the idea that you shouldn't do bad things because of a potential negative impact for you and you alone. Guilt based societies have existed throughout history. The most famous example would probably

be Ancient Rome, which had a system of courts,[2] a representative government with emphasis on accountability,[2] and a culture of civic virtue, where people were expected to be noble and upstanding citizens of Rome for their own individual reward.[2] There are other examples of guilt-based societies, too. Mughal India featured a similar system, where rulers and subjects were expected to hold themselves to an individual standard of ethics, and to police themselves when necessary. [5] Europe developed the concept of individual humanism, which placed emphasis on the individual and his public and private actions, as early as the 1400's, and passed Enlightenment values of self-control on to the United States in the 1700's. Guilt-based societies are prevalent in the West, and have influenced our culture for centuries. Our great stories feature individual heroes, fighting against society's wrongs, and the American Dream of self-reliance and self-policing is about a guilt based as you can get.

Shame-based societies are the exact opposite. These societies are centered around the collective and the group. In a shame-based society, what I think doesn't matter as much as what others think of me. As a result, people in a shame-based society are expected to put others before themselves. This manifests itself in multiple ways. Often individuals subsume their own needs and wants to the needs and wants of their relatives and communities, and shame-based societies are far more likely to feature extremely strong family groups. Governments of shame-based societies will often be modeled after a familial structure, as the family is the first established community individuals see. In some cases, such as in China, the Imperial government named positions and relationships after familial terms. [12] A wrongdoer in a shame-society who keeps his wrongdoing secret has no compunction to feel bad at all. After all, if I've done something bad and nobody's found out, there's been no harm to the people around me, and I shouldn't care. Unfortunately, if I *am* found out, I have no right to turn against society. In shame-based societies, the testimony of others will often come before an accused's own defense and the result will often be handed down by group consensus. An individual in a shame society, while less obligated to feel bad about wrongdoings that aren't found, has no right to defend himself when others find out their wrongdoing. A shame-based society revolves around an idea that you shouldn't do bad things because of a potential negative impact for everyone around you and everyone you care about. Shame-based societies have been around just as long as guilt-based ones, but are more of a hallmark of Eastern civilization. In China, the *Analects* stress loyalty and duty to one's family and community, as well as duty to one's government. [3] Japan is world-famous for its heavy emphasis on shame and honor, and even today in modern Japan, suicide as a result of lost societal honor is a common and acceptable practice. [13] All forms of Japanese government, from the early Yamato clan-honor cult to the Warring States Period's samurai code to the Tokugawa Shogunate's 5-man teams, where all 5 members reported on each other, have been entirely based on shame,

where the wrongdoing's consequence is not on you, but on the people around you. The Japanese commit seppuku because the thought of living with the disappointment of the group carries so many horrible consequences that winning some respect back is worth dying. [13] Korea, of course has a similar society, from the early Silla and Paekchae kings all the way to the present. North Korea has an enormous emphasis on the group and a national community centered around the Kim family, while South Koreans are among the most social-media addicted people in the world. [1] In either Korea, what others think of you is of vital importance to your societal standing, be it a better job and more prestige in the South, or a home with running water and better rations in the North. Of course, Communist countries thrive in and foster shame-based societies. In the USSR, people huddled together in groups to share basic necessities and knowledge of how to get by, and there was a fierce loyalty in the USSR and Russia today to one's friends and comrades. Interestingly enough, there's an example of a western shame-based society as well, and that's England. England has a long history of guilt based society, from the Book of Common Law, to the Magna Carta, to the British justice system. But England also places an enormous emphasis on national identity and fealty to the government. The US fights for "freedom, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" while Britain fights "for King and Country", queueing and British politeness are common, and there's a huge loyalty to football clubs and social clubs that isn't common elsewhere in Europe. It seems as Britain became an empire, it developed the sense of national identity to make something of a transition.

Before I go any further, there's something very important I need to talk about. While these two types of society are extremely different, neither can be objectively claimed to be better than another. Certain advanced and modern nations, like us, embrace the ideas of a guilt-based society, civic virtue and self-regulation as a foundation of their society and culture. However, other highly developed nations with high standards of living, such as Japan and Korea, prioritize harmony, community, and a shame-based society. Libya has had a guilt-based society, from the time of the caliphs of North Africa, possibly even earlier if we count Rome and Carthage. Yet Libya has an incredibly low standard of living and has been racked by near constant war and brutal dictatorships. Russia has had a shame-based society from the time of Peter the Great, and the standard of living in Russia has always lagged behind that of Europe. What's important to note here is that while the choice of a guilt or shame-based society can influence how a society acts, neither is better than the other. They are simply opposites.

So, let's get to Westeros! We'll start by looking at the 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, or in the case of Cersei and Jamie, family taboos such as incest. Generally, the southern kingdoms have more guilt-based

societies. Dorne, for example has an enormous emphasis on individual accountability, and that people should be free to do what makes them happy, [7] While the Tyrells prize individual actors like Margery and Olenna. I'd hazard a guess that this is probably based on their proximity to King's Landing. Since the Targaryens founded the city as the capital, it had been the center of Targaryen power for hundreds of years. As the Targaryens set up political institutions, King's Landing became the center of guilt-based power in Westeros as the Targaryen government put into place systems that favored individual ties and service to one's own aims. [6] Houses farther away, like the Tullys, Greyjoys, Starks and Boltons, have a far greater emphasis on loyalty and community. The Tullys' own motto is "Family, duty, honor", while the Starks value the honor code of Lord Eddard, who executes his own criminals and prizes honor above all else, willing to trust the Freys at face value due to a prior relationship. Even the Boltons' have an enormous emphasis on community, even if their code of ethics would be considered by us as downright cruel.

Of course there are those who exist outside the Westerosi house system. 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. Theon mentions many times the necessity of the Iron Islanders to stick together and persevere as a group, [6] while the Wildings fight in clan groups, owing their allegiance to the survival of the group. 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 response to perceived "others". The Wildings are united, by spirit if not by group, against the enemy on the Wall, while the Iron Islanders are united against the Westerosi coast dwellers, who enjoy resources that the Iron Islanders lack. Theon mentions several times that the Iron Islands do not enjoy the same conveniences, and as a result have a different code of ethics, as Westeros. [8] Even Stannis Baratheon begins to develop characteristics of the ruler of a shame society, expecting loyalty and self policing far more than Robert ever did, but only once there was a clearly defined "other". Originally, Stannis was persevering against a society that he believed had done him wrong, hallmark concept of the guilt-based society of the Baratheon family. But once Westeros became a monolithic "other", and once people like Davos Seaworth began pledging loyalty to him, he quickly begins to expect the societal policing that a shame based society would have. His religious split and alliance with Melisandre, the priestess of a shame-based religion, serves to further define Westeros with the other, and align him with the cult of the Lord of Light, a religion with a constant focus on unity and purpose, with all its members acting as one. I believe this further pushes Stannis towards a shame-based system of rule.

In addition to the houses and outcasts that jockey for power, Westeros has its fair share of 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. The very first maester we see in the books has a sense of individuality and personal knowledge and accountability that clashes with the honor based system of the Starks he serves. [6] 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. Varys and Pycelle both outright say to Tyrion that they’re in this game for nothing more than to save their own skin [7, 8] 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. COmpare his behavior and attitude towards Ned Stark as he prepares to frame and execute him to his reaction to the power politics surrounding the death of Joffrey. [8] We see Littlefinger moving towards a more shame-based code of ethics as he works his way up. Westeros is a guilt, based society, though. Why would getting closer to the center of a guilt-based society cause Littlefinger to see himself in more of a shame-based light? The answer is that it’s the only way to keep moving up. Littlefinger thrives by being different, by seeing advantages no one else can and taking them. I believe what makes him so dangerous is his ability to switch between guilt-based and shame-based ways of looking at the world. It gives him a sense of perception that most other members of Westerosi society lack.

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.

Essos has a completely different political situation. While Westeros is culturally unified, Essos is a patchwork of different cultures, as well as remnants of older cultures that still somewhat exist. Government in Essos is not unified, and there is very little communication between different parts of the continent. Essos doesn’t have a small group of outsiders like Westeros does, it has multiple small groups of “insiders”, and many people without a group or identity at all.

First up are the Free Cities. The history of these cities has always been one of a struggle for freedom and independence.

These separate city-states are born from a fight for independence from a large empire, and as a result have about as guilt-based a culture as you can get. There's a strong effort on commerce and cooperation, but not community or duty; free people in these cities can come or go as they wish without any sort of permission. The lack of community and sense of individual needs placed first also gives us the idea that slavery is okay, as it's a means to a commercial end. In many respects, the Free Cities are amoral, they don't really prohibit any activities so long as they aren't harmed by them, and the culture of many of them, Braavos especially, revolves around the accumulation of wealth, not any sort of prestige or honor. 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.

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 care about the people in your community, or value money over it, as in the Free Cities, 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 an Astapori or Yunkish or 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.

Beyond the reach of either of these groups of cities lie the plains inhabited by the nomadic Dothraki, who 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, and only by this rivalry can one hope to win notoriety, be it at a wedding to win the affection of a dancer, or challenging a Khal over control of the horde. [6] But how can this be? If guilt and shame-based societies are so mutually exclusive, how can we have a society that's a hybrid of both? I'd argue that the Dothraki have a fundamentally shame based society, but one based on a community that's so distrustful of any outsider that it can only survive through distrust and rivalry. The greatest sin against the collective Dothraki society is complacency. The Dothraki never stop, they never rest and they never let their guard down. The attitudes towards those who break this code by failing in battle or not providing adequate protection are consistent with the attitude of a shame society towards its transgressors. As a result, Dothraki shame society encourages its members to be hyper-alert, hyper-mobile, hyper-aggressive, and unfortunately

hyper-violent against others in order to advance and keep the community healthy.

Beyond much of Essos, near the lands of the Shadow, lie the cities of Qarth and Asshai. I'm grouping these two together, not because they have a similar culture, (they don't) but because the pattern that gave rise to their societies are almost exactly the same. 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, and characters describe them as strange places where stranger people seem to come from. [9, 8, 10] Qarth operates according to a set of very complex societal rules regarding the use of trade and magic that seem intentionally designed to be difficult for outsiders to understand, [7] while Asshai openly flaunts the magical arts and sees itself as a city set apart from the rest of the world.[9, 10] 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' morality, which makes sense perfectly to them, but leaves outsiders and the reader scratching their heads.

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 of what we expect 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.

Westeros and Essos are extremely different continents with extremely different societies, with Westeros being the politically constant continent and Essos being one of near constant change. On both of these continents, we see guilt and shame-based societies arise as the result of pressure from outside groups, as in the case of Essian cities, pressure from a need to adapt, as in the case of the Westerosi houses, or plain environmental needs, as in the case of the Dothraki. But while Westeros is characterized by a struggle between large political blocs, and a struggle between these 2 kinds of society, Essos is characterized by constant political upheaval, making the societies far more likely to interact. This continual release of friction between these two kinds of societies is, I think, part of the reason why Essos is decentralized and nearly constantly in a state of small scale war, unlike Westeros, which is rarely in a state of war, but when it is, it's a state of total war. Power dynamics in the Song of Ice and Fire can be seen as a constant struggle, between the guilt based societies and the shame based ones. The two societies are largely incompatible in Martin's world, and the long history of war reaching back to Ghiscari shame society and Valyrian guilt society will, I believe continue. At least, until one society fully wins.

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