

## **The Concepts of On, Giri and Gimu in the Story of Issun Boshi: A Cultural Analysis**

**<sup>1</sup>Leonardo Jeffry Soebagio, <sup>2</sup>Irma Winingsih**

<sup>1</sup>Dian Nuswantoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Dian Nuswantoro University, Semarang, Indonesia  
(C12.2021.01023@mhs.dinus.ac.id)

**Abstract.** This study aims to analyze the cultural concepts of on (obligation or debt of gratitude), giri (social obligation), and gimu (unlimited moral duty) in the Japanese folktale Issun Boshi, as a reflection of traditional Japanese values. Culture is a fundamental aspect of society that manifests through thought patterns, behavior, and traditions passed down through generations. Japanese culture, with its collective mindset and emphasis on interpersonal relationships, is strongly shaped by values such as on, giri, and gimu, which govern moral and social obligations. The study employs a qualitative research approach using a descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected through literature review and note-taking techniques, focusing on the Japanese folktale Issun Boshi. Referential identity analysis is used to interpret the meaning of utterances in the folktale in relation to real-world cultural contexts. The theoretical framework draws from literary anthropology (Suwardi Endraswara) and cultural ethics (Ruth Benedict), enabling a deeper understanding of how cultural values are embedded in literature. The findings reveal that on is reflected in the protagonist's gratitude and devotion to his parents (oya no on) and to his employer or benefactor (nushi no on), while giri is manifested in his sense of responsibility and loyalty toward the noble figure who accepts him (me ue no giri). Gimu is shown through the protagonist's unwavering duty and moral perseverance, even when full repayment of kindness is unattainable. These values, deeply rooted in Japanese society, are effectively communicated through folktales like Issun Boshi, highlighting the role of literature in the transmission of ethical norms and collective identity. This study not only enriches cross-cultural understanding but also contributes to moral education by illustrating the importance of gratitude, loyalty, and reciprocal responsibility in Japanese culture.

**Keywords:** Japanese culture; on; giri; gimu; Issun Boshi

### **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

Culture is an integral aspect of society, reflecting the thoughts, behaviors, and traditions of its people. The term *culture* originates from the Sanskrit word *buddhayah*, the plural form of *buddhi*, which means intellect or reason. Koentjaraningrat (2011), an Indonesian anthropologist, defines culture as the entire system of ideas, actions, and human works in social life that is learned and owned by members of society. Each nation in the world possesses its own unique culture and social customs, which are inherited through generations and manifested in daily life, work, and governance. Japan, in particular, is renowned for its distinctive cultural characteristics, from traditional arts that attract foreign tourists to the psychological and behavioral traits of its people. Due to the homogeneity of its population, Japanese society generally exhibits a collective mindset and shared patterns of behavior.

The Japanese people live by a set of cultural values that guide their thoughts and actions across all aspects of life, from interpersonal relations to social organizations. As noted by Lebra (1976), interpersonal relationships are central to the Japanese cultural ethos, emphasizing the significance of social interaction as part of their identity. Among the many cultural values in Japan, the concepts of *on* (obligation/debt of gratitude), *gimu* (unlimited moral obligation), and *giri* (social obligation) hold significant importance. According to Mitsubishi (in Wierzbicka, 1997), *on* refers to the sense of indebtedness one feels after receiving kindness or gifts from others, leading to a deep internal obligation

to reciprocate. This sense of *on* creates a burden or responsibility that the individual must carry out sincerely. *Gimu*, as described by Benedict (1982), is the unending obligation to repay *on*, especially towards parents, elders, or superiors—where even the fullest repayment is never considered sufficient. On the other hand, *giri* refers to a more formal obligation to reciprocate kindness or favors within a limited timeframe, reflecting mutual expectations within Japanese social conduct.

These values form a foundation for reciprocal behavior in Japanese society and are often represented in literary works. Literature, both traditional and modern, frequently embodies cultural values as a means of communication and moral education. One such form is *mukashi banashi*, or Japanese folktales, which play a significant role in transmitting ethical and societal norms. Folktales (*minwa*) are categorized into *shinwa* (myths), *densetsu* (legends), and *mukashi banashi* (folk tales), the latter being particularly rich in moral teachings and cultural expressions (Danandjaja, 1997).

A prominent example of *mukashi banashi* is the folktale *Issun Boshi*, which tells the story of a boy only one *sun* (approximately 3 cm) tall, born to an elderly couple. Despite his size, Issun Boshi exhibits exceptional courage and determination. He travels to the capital, pledges service to a noble family, defeats demons (*oni*), and eventually gains power and social acceptance. While entertaining, the story also reflects deep-rooted cultural values. The protagonist's devotion to his parents, loyalty to his master, and willingness to repay kindness illustrate the essence of *on*, *giri*, and *gimu*.

Analyzing these values within the context of *Issun Boshi* offers a valuable perspective on Japanese social norms and moral frameworks. It enhances our understanding of how traditional narratives function as tools for cultural transmission and how values like gratitude, loyalty, and obligation are ingrained in Japanese collective consciousness. Thus, the study of *on* and *giri* in Japanese folktales not only deepens our cultural insight but also contributes to cross-cultural moral education and intercultural literacy.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The concepts of *on*, *giri*, and *gimu* have been the subject of various studies in the context of Japanese literature and media. Moch Saikhudin Barri (2014) examined these cultural values in three Japanese folktales: *Kintarō*, *Jihi no Kami-sama*, and *Hekoki Onna*. His study revealed that all three stories depict different forms of indebtedness and moral obligations, reflecting how deeply these values are embedded in Japanese society.

Similarly, Lestari Oktaviani (2022) analyzed the cultural values of *on*, *giri*, and *gimu* in the novel *Maddogiwa no Totto-chan*, employing the theoretical framework of Ruth Benedict and Minamoto. Her findings demonstrate that various forms of moral debt and obligation in the novel are representative of social relationships in Japan, particularly in the spheres of family, education, and work.

Another relevant study was conducted by Ade Putri Pratiwi, who explored the concepts of *giri* and *gimu* in the Japanese drama *Freeter, Ie wo Kau*. This research highlights how characters express social and moral responsibilities toward their families, workplaces, and society at large.

Collectively, these studies affirm that *on* and *giri* play a significant role in shaping interpersonal dynamics within Japanese cultural narratives. They provide important insights into how moral obligations and reciprocal responsibilities are portrayed in various literary and media forms. Building on these previous studies, the present research aims to analyze the manifestation of *on*, *giri*, and *gimu* in the Japanese folktale *Issun Boshi*, as a reflection of traditional Japanese cultural values.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a descriptive-analytical method. According to Hasan (1990:25), qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words concerning the behavior of observed individuals. Meanwhile, the descriptive method, as defined by Nazir (1988:54), is a method used to investigate the current status of a group of people, an object, a condition, a system of thought, or a class of events.

The primary data source in this study is the Japanese folktale *Issun Bōshi*. Data collection was carried out through literature review techniques, specifically the note-taking method. The process involved reading and comprehending Japanese folktales, including *Kaguya-hime* and *Issun Bōshi*, followed by noting relevant research data.

For data analysis, the study uses referential identity analysis (analisis padan referensial), a technique within the linguistic approach that interprets meaning by referring to realities outside the language itself, i.e., real-world referents or specific sociocultural contexts (Sudaryanto, 2015). This method is appropriate because the data analyzed are Japanese utterances containing cultural values, particularly the concepts of *on* (恩) and *giri* (義理). Thus, the analysis does not solely focus on linguistic structures but also examines how the utterances reflect the social and cultural context of Japanese society, as explained by Ruth Benedict's theory of value structures in Japanese culture.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (HEADING 1 STYLE)

The Japanese folktale *Issun Bōshi* serves not only as a traditional narrative passed down through generations but also as a cultural text that reflects the moral and social values embedded in Japanese society. This section aims to examine the story through the lens of three interrelated concepts: *on* (恩), *giri* (義理), and *gimu* (義務). These principles are central to Japanese ethics and interpersonal relationships, shaping behavior and expectations within the community.

### The Concept of On

In Japanese culture, the concept of *on* (恩) refers to a profound sense of gratitude or moral debt that arises when one receives kindness, support, or favor from another person. It is not merely a feeling of thankfulness, but rather a deeply rooted social and moral obligation to reciprocate that kindness. According to Benedict (1982), *on* is a cultural value that signifies a weight of obligation carried by individuals who have benefited from another's goodwill. This obligation is considered a burden that must be carried with sincerity and humility.

#### 1. On Received from Parents (*Oya no On*)

In Japanese cultural values, *Oya no On* (親の恩), or the debt of gratitude received from one's parents, is regarded as one of the most fundamental and inescapable forms of *on*. It represents a lifelong moral obligation toward one's parents for giving life, nurturing, educating, and providing care throughout childhood and beyond. This form of *on* is considered immeasurable and cannot be fully repaid, reflecting the deep-rooted Confucian influence on Japanese familial ethics.

Benedict (1982) includes *Oya no On* among the four central types of *on*, emphasizing that this form creates an enduring sense of duty in children to respect, serve, and care for their parents throughout life. In Japanese society, the expectation to uphold *filial piety* is not simply emotional but institutionalized within social customs and moral education.

The following is the data.

むかしむかし ある 所にお爺さんとお婆さんが住ました。2人には子供がいな かったの、神様にお 祈した、なんと子供を授かりました。しかし生まれた子供は指の長さにも満たない大きさで、1寸(約3センチメートル)ほどしかありませんでした。でもお爺 さんとお婆 さんは大変 喜び、子供 を

「一寸法師」と名 な 付 け、大切に育てました。

*Mukashi mukashi, aru tokoro ni ojisan to obāsan ga sumimashita. Futari ni wa kodomo ga inakatta node, kamisama ni oinori shimashita. Nanto kodomo o sazukarimashita. Shikashi, umareta kodomo wa yubi no nagasa ni mo mitanai ōkisa de, issun (yaku san- senchimētoru) hodo shika arimasen deshita. Demo, ojisan to obāsan wa taihen yorokobi, kodomo o "Issunbōshi" to nazuke, taisetsu ni sodatemashita.*

Once upon a time, in a certain place in Japan, there lived an elderly couple. Because they had no children, they prayed to God. Eventually, they were blessed with a child. However, the child who was born was no larger than the width of a finger, and only the size of an 'issun' (about three centimeters). Nevertheless, the elderly couple was very happy. They named the child Issun Boshi and took good care of him.

The data above shows that although Issun Boshi was born in an unusual condition, his grandparents did not abandon him or feel disappointed. The fact that his body was no larger than the width of a finger and only about three centimeters in size would surely cause some inconvenience. Instead, they were grateful and raised him with love. In Japanese culture, receiving affection and care without reciprocation is considered a form of *on* (debt of gratitude), so Issun Boshi has a significant debt of gratitude to the grandparents who cared for him. Regarding *on*, Benedict states, 'The feeling of debt (*on*) is not a virtue; it is the repayment of it that constitutes the virtue' (1982:121).

Therefore, as a form of *on* repayment, Issun Bōshi strives to become a filial child and honor his family by setting out for the capital in search of success and recognition. This intention is clearly reflected in the following passage from the story:

そしてある時、お爺さんとお婆さんに「私は都に行つて身を立てます」と言う。

*Soshite aru toki, ojisan to obāsan ni 'watashi wa miyako ni itte mi o tatemasu' to iu.*

He said to his grandparents, "I will go to the capital to make a name for myself."

This statement demonstrates Issun Bōshi's determination to fulfill his *giri*, his social obligation to repay the kindness and care he received by achieving something meaningful that would bring pride to his family. His decision to leave home and pursue success reflects the internalization of cultural values such as *on* and *giri*, emphasizing that repayment is not only emotional but also expressed through tangible efforts to elevate one's family status.

## 2. On Received from the Employer (*Nushi no On*)

In Japanese culture, the concept of *Nushi no On* (主の恩) refers to the debt of gratitude owed by a subordinate or employee to their employer someone who has provided not only work, but also a form of protection and livelihood. This type of *on* is deeply rooted in hierarchical relationships and is regarded as one of the moral obligations that must be repaid with loyalty and dedication.

This cultural value is illustrated in the following passage from the story:

「私の名前は一寸法師。この家で働かせてくれないか」。すると屋敷の主人は一寸法師を一目で気に入り、この屋敷で働くことを許してくれました。

*Watashi no namae wa Issunbōshi. Kono ie de hatarakasete kurenai ka? Suruto yashiki no shujin wa Issunbōshi o hitome de ki ni hairi, kono yashiki de hataraku koto o yurushite kuremashita.*

“My name is Issun Bōshi. Would you please let me work in this house?” The master of the house immediately took a liking to him and allowed him to work there.

From the perspective of *Nushi no On*, this moment marks the beginning of a moral obligation between Issun Bōshi and his employer. Having arrived in the capital in search of purpose and sustenance, Issun Bōshi is granted an opportunity to work an act that, within the Japanese value system, constitutes a significant form of *on*. The acceptance of a worker, especially someone in need, is perceived as a benevolent gesture that places the recipient in a state of indebtedness. In return, it is expected that the worker demonstrates loyalty, gratitude, and diligence as a way of repaying the favor. Thus, this interaction not only establishes a working relationship but also signifies the emergence of a moral bond grounded in cultural expectations of reciprocal duty.

## **B. Concept of *Giri***

*Giri* is defined by Ruth Benedict (1982:125–149) as a social obligation to repay a favor received in a concrete and measurable way, often within a specific timeframe. Unlike *on*, which may be indefinite and immeasurable, *giri* implies a more calculated and timely form of repayment, reinforcing social harmony through clearly defined expectations.

### **1. Obligation Toward Superiors (Meue no *Giri*)**

One important expression of *giri* is the duty of loyalty and obedience toward one's superiors, known as *meue no giri*. This includes fulfilling responsibilities assigned by those in authority as a form of reciprocation for the benefits or trust that have been extended.

This notion is illustrated in the following passage from the Issun Bōshi tale:

体は小さくても元気一杯で俊敏な一寸法師は、旅の間娘の身を守る役目で、娘に付き添って行くことになりました。

*Karada wa chiisakutemo, genki ippai de shunbin na Issunbōshi wa, tabi no aida musume no mi o mamoru yakume de, musume ni tsukisotte iku koto ni narimashita.*

Although small in stature, Issun Bōshi was full of energy and agility. He was assigned the duty of accompanying and protecting the nobleman's daughter during her journey.

In this part of the story, despite his diminutive size, Issun Bōshi is entrusted with the important responsibility of safeguarding the daughter of his employer during travel. This act can be interpreted as a clear example of *giri*, as defined by Benedict. Issun Bōshi had previously been shown kindness and granted the opportunity to live and serve in a noble household—privileges that established a moral obligation for him to repay through service.

His decision to carry out this duty demonstrates not only professional responsibility but also a calculated reciprocation of the trust and kindness he received. This aligns with the principles of *giri*, which



emphasize the timely and appropriate return of favors according to established social norms. Therefore, Issun Bōshi's actions represent the reciprocal nature of relationships in Japanese culture, where social obligations are fulfilled not just out of gratitude, but also as a moral imperative to maintain harmony and uphold one's honor.

### C. Concept of *Gimu* (Moral Duty)

*Gimu*, on the other hand, is a moral duty or obligation that is not necessarily tied to a specific time frame or measurable return. It refers to a deeper, often selfless sense of duty that is undertaken not with an expectation of reward but out of a moral or ethical obligation. In the case of Issun Bōshi, the concept of *gimu* is illustrated by his unrelenting commitment to his duty to protect the princess, regardless of the danger to himself or the lack of immediate reward.

#### Moral Duty and Protection of the Princess (*Gimu*)

Quoted Data:

「鬼は痛くて一寸法師を吐き出すと、恐れをなして逃げていってしまいました。」

*Oni wa itakute Issunbōshi o haki dasu to, osore o nasite nigete itte shimimashita.*

“The ogre, in great pain, vomited Issun Bōshi out, terrified, and fled away.”

In this excerpt, Issun Bōshi's encounter with the ogre demonstrates the concept of *gimu*. Despite being swallowed whole by the ogre, he continues to fight and protect the princess from within the ogre's stomach. The pain and danger he faces are not immediate or directly linked to any material reward, but Issun Bōshi is driven by a deeper sense of moral obligation to safeguard the princess and honor the trust placed in him.

Issun Bōshi's actions in this scene exemplify *gimu* in its purest form. There is no expectation of reward for his bravery; rather, he is compelled to act out of a sense of duty to the princess and to his own internal moral code. Even when faced with near certain death, he persists in fulfilling his obligation, representing the selfless aspect of *gimu* in Japanese culture. This self-sacrifice and commitment without the expectation of return are central to the concept of *gimu*, which emphasizes the importance of moral duty over personal gain.

## CONCLUSION

In the traditional Japanese folk tale of Issun Bōshi, the concepts of *on*, *giri*, and *gimu* play a significant role in shaping the narrative and highlighting key cultural values. These concepts, rooted in Japanese social structures, illustrate the intricate system of moral obligations, reciprocity, and duty that governs relationships in Japanese society. The concept of *on* (恩), or debt of gratitude, is a central theme in the story. Issun Bōshi's journey begins with the kindness extended to him by his elderly foster grandparents, who raised him with care despite his small size. The *on* he feels towards them motivates his decision to seek fortune in the capital, not just for personal gain, but also to repay their kindness. This repayment of *on* is a form of reciprocal obligation that reflects the cultural importance of acknowledging and honoring the help one has received from others. The concept of *giri* (義理), or the duty to repay social obligations, is demonstrated through Issun Bōshi's loyalty and sense of responsibility towards his superiors. When he is entrusted with the task of protecting the princess, he fulfills this role not out of personal desire or expectation of reward but as a way to repay the trust and opportunity he has received. *Giri* in this context

reflects a calculated and measured repayment of kindness or opportunity in a manner that aligns with the norms of Japanese society, where obligations are to be fulfilled in concrete and timely ways. On the other hand, *gimu* (義務), the broader concept of moral duty, is embodied in Issun Bōshi's selfless actions during his encounter with the ogre. Despite the overwhelming danger and his tiny stature, Issun Bōshi's sense of moral duty to protect the princess goes beyond any direct material benefit. His actions reflect *gimu* as a moral obligation that drives him to act selflessly, regardless of the personal cost. The duty to protect the princess is not bound by any explicit expectation of reward, but by an inner moral compass that compels him to fulfill his responsibilities. Together, the interplay of *on*, *giri*, and *gimu* in the story of Issun Bōshi highlights the complex layers of social and moral obligations in Japanese culture. These concepts demonstrate how individuals navigate their relationships with others, balancing reciprocity, duty, and personal sacrifice. Through Issun Bōshi's actions, we can see how these cultural values shape not only his decisions but also the broader social framework within which such obligations are expected to be fulfilled. Ultimately, the story offers valuable insights into the importance of gratitude, loyalty, and selflessness in maintaining harmony and order within society.

## REFERENCES

- Endraswara, Suwardi., 2013. Metodologi Penelitian Sastra, CAPS, Yogyakarta.
- Lebra, Takie Sugiyama., 1974. Japanese Culture and Behavior, University of Hawaii Press, USA
- Koentjaraningrat. (2011). Pengantar Antropologi I. Rineka Cipta
- Muhammad. 2011. Metode Penelitian Bahasa. Yogyakarta: Ar Ruzz Media
- Moch Saikhudin Barri. Konsep On, Giri dan Gimu dalam Cerita Rakyat Jepang Kintaro. Skripsi Program Studi Sastra Jepang. Jurusan Bahasa Dan Sastra. Fakultas Ilmu Budaya. Universitas Brawijaya. 2014

Nazir, Moh. 1988. Metode Penelitian. Ghalia Indonesia. Jakarta

Oktaviani, Lestari (2022) Tinjauan Nilai Budaya On, Gimu, Dan Giri Dalam Novel Maddogiwa No Totto Chan Karya Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. Skripsi thesis, Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing JIA.

Pratiwi, Ade P. "Konsep Giri dan Gimu yang Tercermin dalam Drama Freeter, Ie Wo Kau Karya Sutradara Kono Keita dan Joho Hidenori." Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Fakultas Ilmu Budaya Universitas Brawijaya, vol. 1, no. 7, 2013.

Sudaryanto. 2015.. Metode dan Aneka Teknik Analisis Bahasa. Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana University

Wierzbicka, Anna. 1997. Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words.