

**Performed Genders in Contemporary Japanese Society:
Geisha and Matsuri Otoko**

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Foreword

I have done research on *matsuri* (Japanese festivals) since 2005, on drag queens since 2014, and on geisha for slightly more than one year, since the end of 2020, yet it took one colleague's remark that I was going from one end of the gender spectrum to the other to make me consider analyzing my work from this perspective. I was not oblivious, of course, but there are several factors that would make this fieldwork approach difficult. In the case of *matsuri*, lately there have been numerous voices speaking of discrimination¹ (not of the "me too" level of seriousness, more of exclusion and separation), with men being accused of clinging to outdated ideas of purity and pollution in order to exclude women from activities that should involve the entire community. This has made the *matsuri otoko* (the men who not only participate in, but are also in charge of said festivals) wary of female researchers, as they do not know how their words and actions would be interpreted. The drag queens have held a liminal position in Japanese society, "special status people"² of the 21st century, and are more open to such approaches, but my interest, as in the case of *matsuri*, was focused on performance and ritual.

¹ Specific references are not provided here, as a simple internet search using keywords such as 祭り and 女性禁止 reveals a plethora of articles on the topic.

² People who occupied a special position in Japanese society, one that could be either positive or negative, but in any case, something that set them apart from ordinary people (Emily Ohnuki-Tierney. 1989. *The Monkey as Mirror*. Princeton University Press). Ohnuki-Tierney does not refer to drag queens; however, I do believe they could be easily included in this category.

The idea for this paper came from the statement of the owner of a teahouse in the Pontochô district in Kyoto. We were making plans for my fieldwork, and I wanted to know if the *geiko* (the word used to designate geisha in Kyoto) and *maiko* (apprentice geisha) did something special for Gion Matsuri³. Her answer made me think that this paper had to be written: “No, we don’t do anything special for Gion Matsuri, that’s a men’s thing.” With one statement she had unequivocally divided the world of “traditional” Japan into the realm of women and the realm of men, with no trace of regret or indignation. As a matsuri acquaintance often repeated, it is not 差別 *sabetsu* (discrimination), but 区別 *kubetsu*, a separation of roles. The goal of this paper is to shed some light on what exactly these roles are, and how they are performed in contemporary society.

1. It’s a (Gentle) Men’s World

In 2017 I started doing fieldwork and research at Tenjin Matsuri, another one of Japan’s three great festivals, and the first thing I was told (and one of the very few I was cautioned about) was not to touch the *mikoshi*, the sacred portable shrine used to transport the celebrated deities from the shrine to the journey place—the temporary abode where they are entertained during the matsuri. Tenjin Matsuri⁴ is a series of rituals performed to pacify the restless spirit of Sugawara-no-Michizane (an aristocrat and scholar from the

³ One of the “three great festivals of Japan,” and the oldest recorded large-scale matsuri, taking place in Kyoto between July 1 and July 30.

⁴ More information on Tenjin Matsuri can be found in my earlier papers: Carmen Sapunaru Tamas. 2019. “Uchimashô. Fieldnotes on Tenjin Matsuri” in *Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai*. Pro Universitaria. pp. 152-188 (https://carmentamas.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/rituals_2020.pdf); Carmen Sapunaru Tamas. 2020. “The Summer of Men. Tenjin Matsuri in the Year of the Pandemic” in *Annals of “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University. Linguistics, Literature and Methodology of Teaching*, vol. XX, Pro Universitaria. pp. 99~113

Heian Period who died in exile after having been unjustly accused of plotting against the emperor) which supposedly began in 951, less than a century after the first performance of Gion Matsuri in 869⁵. My research focused on the activities of one of the 24 active *kô* (groups who manage and organize the various performances that are part of the festival), Ôtori Mikoshi, an exclusively male group in charge of the oldest mikoshi used at Tenjin Matsuri. Composed of approximately 33 permanent members, Ôtori Mikoshi was largely closed to the outside world—new members could join based on the recommendation of old members, but they had to be male, living in the Kita Ward of Osaka and as close as possible to Osaka Tenmangu, and both capable and willing of fulfilling the obligations that came along with this membership. As keepers of one of the most sacred objects associated with the festival, they are expected to follow a set of rules implying purity and respect towards the celebrated deity: hair of its natural color, no tattoos or piercings, respect and proved desire to work for their families and communities. During interviews, many of them said that they wish to preserve the festival so that their children can enjoy this aspect of traditional Japanese culture, and lineages can be observed in the membership register: the current *fuku-kômoto* (adjunct leader) is the son of a former *kômoto* (group leader), his own son being a regular participant in the matsuri. The present *kômoto*'s son has chosen a different path in life and does not usually attend the festival, a fact which makes his father hope that his future son-in-law might show more interest in their activities.

Members of the Ôtori Mikoshi play a significant role in the life of the community outside the matsuri days: they coach sports teams at the local elementary school, organize

⁵ The official date mentioned on the website of Yasaka Shrine, the center of the festival (<https://www.yasaka-jinja.or.jp/event/gion/>, accessed on July 19, 2022).

school trips for students, and help in all the activities (which are not always religious, as they include blood donation events, art exhibitions, or fund raisers for various charities) organized by Osaka Tenmangu, the Shinto shrine which is the center of Tenjin Matsuri. However, when various events have different organizational teams (not those associated with the matsuri), Ôtori Mikoshi members join as representatives of this group or as individuals, and it is only when they are within their own group that gender segregation occurs. The current *kômoto* has made efforts to be more inclusive, and women have been added to the team as kimono dressers (to help the members get dressed in formal attire on the day of the festival) or nurses (to offer first aid during the Land and River processions, when accidents are known to happen), but not everybody seems happy with the change. Although the women mentioned may not and do not, under any circumstances, touch the mikoshi on July 25, Tenjin Matsuri day, when the spirit of the deity is supposed to temporarily inhabit it, some of the permanent members are of the opinion that they should never touch such the divine dwelling. The days when the mikoshi is taken out of storage for the festival (usually July 20 or 21) and then taken back (July 26) are supposed to lack the sacrality of July 25, and in 2018 the *kômoto* invited a woman to climb the poles used to carry it—something men do to guide the carriers. Nobody said anything at that moment because hierarchical principles are rigidly respected, but after that two participants confessed that they had not felt comfortable having a woman there, as the mikoshi is too sacred an object.

Their objections are based on the ancient concept of feminine impurity—or *aka fujô*, “red uncleanness.” According to Emiko Namihira, “the fact that the participation of women in Shinto rituals of major shrines and in rituals of shrines at the village level is restricted or forbidden entirely is explained in terms of the possibility that a woman may be “in a state of

red uncleanness’⁶.” One informant told me that after the purification ceremony held on July 24, he does not even allow his daughters (the eldest being ten at the time of the interview) to touch him, and I did observe that he dresses himself on July 25, without the use of the experts hired especially for the occasion—three women. A central presence on the Tenjin Matsuri stage is the 神童 *shindô*—a “divine child” performing a role similar to that of the 稚児 *chigo* from Gion Matsuri, namely to serve as a vessel for the descending spirit of the deity. The *shindô* is always a ten to twelve-year-old boy from the local elementary school who must undergo special purification rites two weeks before the ceremonies begin, which stipulate that during this period he cannot eat food cooked by a woman. Such “practices of exclusion based on ideas of pollution” are analyzed in more detail by Yumi Murayama and Erica Baffelli⁷, and I shall not insist on the theoretical aspects here. Nevertheless, regarding the place of women within religious practices in Japan in terms of pollution and purification, I asked Mr. Taneharu Terai, 宮司 *gûji* (head priest) at Osaka Tenmangu, about his opinion on a specific kind of women touching the mikoshi. I was referring to Shinto priestesses, women who are as qualified as men to conduct Shinto rituals, and do so on many occasions, Tenjin Matsuri included. My question was, if they can perform purification rites, wouldn’t that place them above the usual level of purity expected of a human being, so can they touch the mikoshi? Mr. Terai’s answer was yes, he believed they could, but permission to do so was up to the men in charge.

⁶ Emiko Namihira. 1987. “Pollution in the Folk Belief System” in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Supplement: An Anthropological Profile of Japan (Aug. - Oct., 1987), pp. S65-S74

⁷ “Religion and Gender in Japan” in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture* (Routledge Companions to Gender) (p. 146). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition

The men in charge said no, women could not touch the mikoshi. While struggling between the desire to get more specific answers and worry that I might offend my informants (although I did wonder how they would have responded to a man asking the same question), I tried to delve deeper into the issue and ask whether they still believed in this “red uncleanness.” The answers were ambiguous, most likely because they had never seriously considered the issue, and I was told that it was a “matter of spirit” and “serving the gods.” I encountered a similar situation at another Osaka summer festival, Noda Ebisu (taking place on July 19-20), where the big drum used to announce the beginning of the rites and to entertain the deities assumed as present was also off limits for women, despite the fact that it does not represent a divine abode.

At Saijo Matsuri ⁸, an autumn festival from Saijo, Ehime Prefecture (October 15~16), women were permitted to help carry the *danjiri* (intricately carved parade floats) due to the fact that the number of able participants had diminished in recent years, but older men lamented the “good old days” when women would simply dress up and admire the parade from the gates of their houses, without interfering with serious matsuri business.

⁸ Fieldwork conducted between 2014~2019.



Men carrying the two-ton Ôtori Mikoshi, July 25, 2019

It becomes thus quite clear that, despite being based on real beliefs present in Japanese culture, the taboos upheld by these male communities are more supported by principles that represent a collective memory of “traditional” beliefs than religious precepts upheld in contemporary society. Emiko Namihira states that “to this day, in certain fishing and mountain villages and on large construction sites such as tunnels, dams, and underground railways, it is believed that if a woman enters the place where men are working, an accident will happen. This is said to be because Yamanokami (the mountain goddess) and Funadama (the guardian goddess of boats), who protect workers from danger, are jealous of women⁹.” My informants from Saijo Matsuri said the same thing: women should only appear on the matsuri

⁹ Emiko Namihira. 1987. “Pollution in the Folk Belief System” in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Supplement: An Anthropological Profile of Japan (Aug. - Oct., 1987), pp. S65-S74

stage in support roles, bringing food and drinks to the men, in order to avoid making the goddess Amaterasu, to whom the matsuri is dedicated, jealous. Practicality defeated belief in this case, though, as a matsuri with women joining the danjiri carriers is better than no matsuri at all.

In theory, at least some women, such as the priestesses who perform purification ceremonies, should be allowed to touch the sacred objects, but that would represent an intrusion in the men's world. A gentlemen's world, as Mr. Yoshiki Miyamoto, *kômoto* of Ôtori Mikoshi stated, men who hold in high esteem their association with the shrine and strive to appear honorable and kind in all situations. Men who protect their families and long-lasting traditions, and who for two days a year enter an extraordinary world populated by deities in need of appeasing. During those two days, the women work for the men, providing them with sustenance when required and taking care of the house and children, while the men work for the gods.



Working for the men



Working for the gods

Scenes from Noda Ebisu Matsuri, July 19, 2019

Despite the fact that three of the primordial Japanese deities, Izanami (creator of the world), Amaterasu (sun

goddess), and Ame-no-Uzume (goddess and shamaness who managed to bring back the sun through her dancing), are female, women are forbidden to enter a world temporarily populated by divine beings. In recent research and even in casual conversations (I was often asked by colleagues how I deal with working in this male group) the most used keywords related to this context are *discrimination*, 男尊女卑 *dansonjohi* (respecting men, putting down women), *exclusion*, and *pollution*.

In contrast, the concepts the participants themselves use are *tradition*, *community*, and (*gender*) *roles*. They see themselves as keepers of tradition and pillars of a community where roles are clearly defined: men work for the gods during the torrid days of summer, carrying a portable shrine that weighs approximately two tons—a job deemed too taxing for women who, even if one does not consider them physically weaker, might be less able to do the same job due to physiological phenomena such as pregnancy or breastfeeding. The *matsuri otoko* (festival men) strive to achieve ideals of what Frühstück & Walthall call a “village type” of masculinity, where “rural social mechanisms were hierarchically structured to produce men whose superior masculinity was based on their maturity¹⁰.” They also emphasize that these mechanisms assigned women roles of “wives, mothers, and objects of sexual desire” (2011: 8-9), precisely the situation encountered at and during Tenjin Matsuri, where many of the wives of the permanent members of Ôtori Mikoshi have never taken part in the River Procession because they have to tend to their homes, children, and sometimes relatives and friends who come from other parts of Japan to attend and enjoy the festival.

¹⁰ Sabine Frühstück & Anne Walthall. 2011. *Recreating Japanese Men*. University of California Press

However, one key concept here is that of “role”: these are roles both genders perform according to an agreed-upon convention. 21st century Japan is no longer a stage for submissive women who cater to the needs of their men, but rather a place where women choose their battles, and the one for being able to touch or carry the mikoshi appears not to be worth fighting. Similarly, men who are only happy to share household responsibilities with their wives must play the part of “manly men” during the festival, which is nothing but an elaborate stage for the re-enactment not only of ancient myths, but also of ancient beliefs and practices. The idea that men are strong protectors and true believers who offer their purified bodies to the deities is as much a convention as the concept that the deities are temporarily more present than usual among mortals for the duration of the matsuri.

2. Beyond the Painted Screens

The next question the present study will address is that of the connection between ordinary men, who have ordinary jobs and live ordinary lives with the exception of the sacred matsuri time, and geisha—rigorously trained artists who ply their trade daily. The answer is that both categories strive to perform a gender, to embody the perfect image of a man or woman as dictated by “traditional” Japanese culture. The word “traditional” would require some explaining here—it is the translation of 伝統文化 *dentô bunka* (traditional culture) used by both categories to refer to patterns of thought and behavior transmitted from one generation to another, and often encountered in various books (both fiction and non-fiction/ research) as embodying the concept of Japaneseness.

Geisha have long been a source of fascination for both the Japanese and non-Japanese alike. When Japan opened its borders and started exporting culture in the beginning of the Meiji Period (late 19th century), geisha became a symbol of

Orientalism (one of the sources of and often associated with Japonisme), an embodiment of eroticism for non-Japanese men, and an icon of “authentic,” traditional culture in Japan— “associated with the gratification of sexual pleasures by Western men,” and a “symbol of Japanese beauty” within the country (Nishihara 246)¹¹. The geiko and maiko from Kyoto are currently a symbol of the city, a very sought-after object of photography for the multitude of tourists who visited Japan before the pandemic started. They represent the “traditional culture” mentioned above, wrapped (to use Joy Hendry’s concept¹²) in layers of material culture—exquisite kimonos, hair and obi accessories—and art—music, dance, the art of conversation. Before being recognized as a geiko, a young woman learns to speak using a slightly outdated Kyoto dialect, to elegantly enter a room on her knees, to wear without complaining an outfit that weighs as much as half her body weight, to play an instrument, to dance, to smile, and to adapt to all styles and topics of conversation. While entertainers on conventional stages get to return to their normal lives once they leave the stage, the geiko rarely get to exhibit their real selves to the world. Their make-up (not only the well-known white one, which is for maiko and for special occasions, but also the special, distinctive make-up a geiko wears), their hairstyles, their speech, their impeccably fitted kimonos become part of their daily lives, and sometimes part of themselves as well.

¹¹ Carmen Sapunaru Tamas. 2021. “One Year in Pontochô: Research Notes on the Geiko World in the 21st Century” (co-authored with Noriko Onohara), in *Annals of “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University. Linguistics, Literature and Methodology of Teaching*, vol. XXI. Pro Universitaria. pp. 91~109

Daisuke Nishihara. 2005. “Edward Said and Critical Decolonization” in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 5002, No. 25

¹² Joy Hendry. 1989. “To Wrap or Not to Wrap: Politeness and Penetration in Ethnographic Inquiry” in *Man, New Series*, Vol. 24, No. 4. pp. 620-635

My work on the geiko world is still in the initial stages, as I started at the end of 2020, and not having Liza Dalby¹³'s advantage of actually becoming one of them, I have to rely on observation and interviews. In the case of Ôtori Mikoshi, fieldwork was focused on the month preceding Tenjin Matsuri and a few other yearly events, as for the largest part of the year the members lead regular lives that do not involve performed masculinity. The situation is different with the geiko, as they perform their “traditionally” feminine roles on a daily basis, in contexts that follow a pattern—music and dance training, banquets, dinners and events with their customers—yet are never the same. Both literally and figuratively the matsuri otoko wear just one costume: the special yukata or hakama they put on during the festival turns them into the almost heroic protectors of their community, in direct communion with the deities they serve. Geiko, on the other hand, put on a different kimono and play a slightly different role each time they are in public, depending on the situation and the customer they are entertaining.

One of the geiko I encountered (and interviewed) multiple times had a very domineering attitude towards the maiko and younger geiko, as well as the gentler customers, who seemed happy to satisfy the whims of the beautiful woman next to them, and acted much more politely and in a subdued manner with customers who appeared more demanding and assertive. This attitude change is not adjusted only to suit the company, but it also depends on the age of the geiko. The younger a geiko/ maiko is, the more timid and in need of protection she will appear—not an object of sexual desire, but a young artist looking for a generous patron to support her career. Just as laughter and weeping can be spontaneous expressions of emotion and gestures

¹³ Liza Dalby. 2008. *Geisha*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

expected to be performed in set contexts (shedding tears as a way of apologizing, laughing at customers' jokes), each age has a definite set of behavior rules to be followed, which also shape the persona of the geiko/ maiko.

Similar to matsuri otoko, the geiko present themselves as keepers of tradition, stating without exception that they chose this career due to their love for Japanese culture, music and dance. None of my interviews yielded any negative comments on their lives as maiko or geiko: yes, the training was hard, but rewarding, and they were proud to be symbols of Kyoto and Japan. We can identify here the pattern of using a specific narrative that justifies and provides purpose to the role played by the actors in question. The matsuri otoko live in a men-only world where they are the pillars of the community and its representatives in the interaction with the divine, and as such must be neither tainted nor hindered by female interference. The geiko live in a women-only world as keepers of culture and tradition, where men are allowed as spectators only. In both cases, the most genuine behavior I witnessed was during the matsuri organization meetings (which are accessible only to registered members of the group), and the preparations for the *omisedashi*¹⁴ — the special ceremony where a new maiko is presented to the world. Those were moments when the contrast between the role played on stage and the real person behind the actor's mask became visible: the matsuri otoko were worried that things might not go according to plan, that there might be accidents, angry at various mistakes committed during the planning or during the previous matsuri, excited about the event to come; the future maiko was trembling with anxiety and emotion, the older geiko were trying to help her, the *okaasan* (mother, owner of the geisha house) was trying to

¹⁴ the ritual showing of a new maiko to the world, which marks her ascension from *shikomi* (a teenage girl who lives in an *okiya* and trains to become a maiko) to maiko (Tamas 2021: 104).

control both her emotions and everything else that was happening around her.



A maiko in the company of matsuri otoko. Gion Matsuri, July 15, 2021, Kanko-boko¹⁵

Conclusion

While matsuri otoko and geiko may be completely unrelated at first glance, my field experience and analysis of what can only be considered ritual behavior¹⁶ has led to the conclusion that they are similar in the way they not only embody stereotypical gender characteristics, but actually consciously perform them for an audience. James W. Messerschmidt, quoted by Justin Charlebois¹⁷, categorizes

¹⁵ One of the 9 *hoko* (parade floats) present in the Gion Matsuri processions (<https://www.kankoboko.jp/about/hoko.php>)

¹⁶ “stylized behaviors demanded by conventions of social etiquette, sports, or political spectacles”

Catherine Bell. *Ritual* (p. 91). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ Justin Charlebois. *Japanese Femininities* (Routledge Contemporary Japan Series) (pp. 21-22). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition

these types of behavior as “hegemonic masculinity” (the type of masculinity that “structures and legitimates gender relations hierarchically between men and women”) and “emphasized femininity” (“a form of femininity that is practiced in a complementary, compliant, and accommodating subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity”). The present study did not aim to inquire into how (or how much) these concepts apply to contemporary Japanese society, but to prove that they are applied to the point of exaggeration in two separate worlds. What is presented on the stage of the matsuri or that of the *kagai*¹⁸ are idealized models of what is assumed to be traditional behavior, which differ from patterns that can be observed in daily life. Two complementary genders formally exclude each other from their performed lives, creating and maintaining a convention where the roles played have been chosen and assumed by the individuals.

R.W.Connell and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. “Hegemonic Masculinity. Re-thinking the Concept” in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (Dec., 2005), pp. 829-859

¹⁸ 花街, literally “flower district,” a phrase designating the geisha quarters in Kyoto