Forbidden Sensuality: The Art of the Geisha

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[Slide 1] Some of you may have noticed in my abstract that I refer to this presentation as a lecture/workshop, but because of scheduling limitations, it has been converted to a standard 20-minute presentation.¹

For many years, the stereotypical image of Japanese geisha has been associated with tragic stories about young poor girls sold into sex slavery and treated as playthings for men. The geisha’s world has been depicted as full of sexual fantasy, with images of forbidden sensuality and eroticaism. However, as the “gei” in the word geisha stands for “art” in Japanese, geisha devote their lives to mastering Japanese traditional music and dance.

Among various types of traditional music that geisha practice, kouta, which literally means a small song in Japanese, is the musical genre created by female composers that continues to be performed in the geisha tradition, especially in ozashiki, the exclusive private guest rooms found in high-class restaurants. Despite kouta’s contribution to Japanese culture, Japanese traditional artists, mass media, scholars, UNESCO, and even the Japanese government have long neglected the subject, while male-dominated arts such as kabuki, noh, and others have received widespread attention. Why is this so?

The answer may lie in the very fact that kouta embodies subtle expressions of female sensuality and eroticaism, still considered inappropriate in the public discourse. In the first half of

¹ My entire presentation can be viewed on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugKOKkRawiA
this paper, I will analyze the aesthetic concept of *iroke*, roughly translated as sensuality or eroticism. In the second half, I will further show how Japanese notions of sensuality and eroticism have been expressed through the music and dance of kouta.

[Slide 2] Kouta is a short song form, each lasting about one to three minutes, including one or two verses written in 5-7-7 syllables, which is a typical Japanese poetic structure. Ethnomusicologist Linda Fujie observes that most kouta lyrics “convey romantic or erotic themes” and express a peculiar aesthetic concept called *iroke*, roughly translated as “sensuality,” “sexiness,” or “eroticism” (2002: 348). This concept of *iroke*, anthropologist Liza Dalby explains, is captured not only in kouta song texts and music, but also expressed in geisha’s gestures, movements, and the “subtle atmosphere” created through human contact and intimacy (2000:10-11).

[Slide 3] Dalby lists specific moments and situations, expressing *iroke* as: “one strand of hair loose in an otherwise perfect coiffure”; “the sidelong glance, exchanged without a word, between a man and a woman”; and “playing the *shamisen* with the fingernail instead of the large ivory plectrum” (ibid). These examples show that the essence of *iroke* is understated. It is detectable with one’s senses, not only through the senses of seeing and hearing but also touching, smelling, and feeling along with the moving air. This sensibility is too complicated and abstract to define in a single word. Still, sociologist Yuko Tanaka stresses that *iroke* is one of the important aesthetical concepts that specifically developed out of geisha’s *ozashiki* culture, and geisha’s arts cannot be understood without knowing this concept (2007: 208).

[Slide 4] The word *iroke* is constructed with two different characters, *iro* and *ke*. *Iro* usually means “color” in modern Japanese, but it was popularly used to indicate “sex” and to
imply something “sexually related” during the Edo period. Ke (or ki) means “air,” “atmosphere,” or “feelings.” Combining the two characters together, as in iroke, the Japanese dictionary defines the word as “sexual appeal,” “sensuality,” “eroticism,” “sexual emotions or desire,” and “womanliness.”

Although iroke has several different meanings in Japanese, I find that many English texts translate the term simply as “sexual appeal.” What seems to be lost in this translation is that the term iroke also implies “femininity” or, in Judith Butler’s term, “what makes a female a woman,” such as her gracefulness, charm, attractiveness, and beauty—all considered positive qualities for a woman to possess (1990: 10). Yet, this positivity seems to be denied and overshadowed by defining iroke with somewhat cruder expressions like “sexual appeal” or “sensuality” in English. This is because, I suggest, terms or notions involving “sex” and “body” often carry negative connotations in English, while the Japanese language treats them more positively.

[Slide 5] Japanese historian Julia Adeney Thomas writes that the Japanese tend to think of their mind and body as inseparable, unlike the Christian way of thinking:

given the lack of tension between mind and body in Japanese thought, the pleasures of the body were never in themselves considered a particular source of sinfulness, and therefore were never opposed quite so directly to goodness or spirit or society as in societies dominated by Christian thought. Even today, there is comparatively little consternation in Japan over the wide range of human sexual practices and appetites, including pornography (2001: 32).

As Thomas suggests, Christianity tends to depict the human body and sexuality negatively, viewing the body itself as evil and sexual desire as sinful. On the other hand, Japanese tend to look at them positively: pursuing pleasure is both gratifying and spiritually uplifting.
[Slide 6] Professor of Japanese Shinto religion, Toji Kamata, reports that for centuries, religious and spiritual sites have been decorated with naturally-carved “found” stones perceived to represent human sex organs, indicating that Japanese consider “sex” a symbol of godly power that brings happiness and prosperity (1994: 115). It is interesting to note that the Japanese indigenous religion views the human body—particularly human sex organs—as powerful and magical and worthy of worshipping (see Picture 1 in the appendix).

Japanese art historians and literature scholars report that human sexual acts, specifically sexual intercourse, have been considered auspicious and portrayed extensively and explicitly in ukiyo-e (or wooden block prints) called shunga art (or spring pictures) during the Edo period.

Nudity warning! This next slide is rated “R.”

[Slide 7] While Western pornography emphasizes the naked human body (especially the female body), the Japanese shunga arts often depict a couple as a set, mostly clothed, but with special emphasis on the exposed genitals of both. Junko Saeki, a professor of comparative culture, explains that shunga arts served as more than Edo-period pornography: men and women not only viewed shunga prints to satisfy their sexual desires, but they kept them in purses or armor closets as amulets to encourage fertility or charms against evil spirits (2008: 11).

Therefore, beyond the notion of human sex as a symbol of religious auspiciousness, humans’ sexual acts were also considered to obtain a supernatural power, protecting people from death as well as bringing people new life (see Picture 2 in the appendix).

[Slide 8] What is more interesting is that the artist also drew the kimono lines and designs, background scenery with a plum tree and pretty birds, and the characters’ facial and body lines so carefully and meticulously. If the purpose of shunga arts was to simply fulfill
human sexual desire, then these details seem to be unnecessary. However, sociologist Yuko Tanaka points out that the viewers saw shunga art as a way to escape from reality, a “fulfillment of desire to drift away from the mundane” (1997: 116).

[Slide 9] The subjects depicted in the prints are polished and refined versions of reality, providing viewers a sense of utopia—a sweet, warm dream-like atmosphere that cannot be experienced in real life. People found the essence of beauty in this type of “sense of detachment.” Therefore, shunga arts reveals three important characteristics: one, the Japanese open-mindedness toward the notion of iro or sex; two, the Japanese way of using iro and environment as an expression of beauty; and three, the Japanese aesthetic sensibility in the depiction of refined versions of reality.

[Slide 10] During my kouta lesson, my teacher, Toyoseiyoshi Kasuga, kept telling me to sing kouta songs iroppoku, meaning sing it more sexy and “full of iroke.” When I asked her what exactly she meant by that, she explained to me:

The character of one’s voice does not matter too much. What matters is that you imagine your lover and keep your passionate feelings inside of you as much as possible. Keep in mind that expressing too much of your feelings, like saying ‘I love you!’ out loud, is considered yabo (‘boorish’ or ‘not cool”).

According to her, the key to sing kouta with plenty of iroke is not to express emotions boldly, but to hold the emotions inside and to sing softly as if I were talking to myself (see Picture 3 in the appendix).

The expression of iroke is not as obvious as showing off one’s body or throwing a wink or kiss to the audience, but it is an understated, unspoken seductiveness that captures listeners’ minds through the words and images provided in the song. When I asked my teacher how to
more convincingly convey *iroke* in my performance, she told me that it would come when I got older and more experienced in love. (Since I’ve been married for over a year, I am not sure how to *increase* the amount of *experience in love* as she described, to be honest...)

**[Slide 11]** In kouta dancing (called kouta-buri), my dance teacher, Yoshie Asaji, told me to dance it “iroppoku” as well. Kouta dancing deals with a set of movements that involves expressions of human emotion and the natural world, sometimes “pantomiming” or “mimicking” everyday activities or motions. “Those moves,” she said, “were created by geisha in ozashiki, and that’s why we (the geisha) are different from them (non-geisha)” (see Picture 4 in the appendix). Although kouta-buri was derived from kabuki dance, she emphasized that each single movement had its own meaning and was performed differently from kabuki dance. I suggest that this *difference* is what made kouta-buri so unique, distinguishing it from mainstream kabuki dance—the iroke.

**[Slide 12]** Unlike kabuki dance where performances take place on a wide stage in front of a large audience, kouta-buri is performed in ozashiki, a smaller and more private setting. In this context, the movements do not have to be so large and exaggerated in order to be shown clearly to a distant audience as in kabuki theatre. Rather, the movements have to be small so as not to break the paper screen or dining sets on the tatami mat floor in the ozashiki room. What’s more, the geisha’s costume, a large hair-wig and long sleeve kimono, restrict the movements a dancer can make. Because of these physical restrictions, my teacher explained to me, the good dance is actually a dance “*without dancing*,” in other words, a dance “*that does not look like the dancer is moving at all*.”
This may sound like a contradiction, but I found this is where iroke is hidden and quietly expressed. In kouta-buri, the movements are the embodiment of the kouta lyrics. For example, when the lyrics says “rain,” the hand gesture does THIS (palm up) to see if the hand gets wet from the rain. However, how often do we do THIS in our everyday life when it’s raining outside? The dance movements are supposed to represent everyday human activities, but they are not exactly as they are performed in real life. The movements are highly polished and stylized so that they can depict the refined versions of reality—the aesthetic that I referred to earlier when I was analyzing the shunga prints.

Further, my dance teacher told me the following:

Through dance, the geisha expresses her troubled mind, such as the hardship for not being able to be together with the one she loves, so on. This is not simple, but the performance should look simple. This is where iroke lies.

Geisha’s dance, kouta-buri, expresses human emotions through subtle gestures and movements. This subtlety is the representation of iroke, as Liza Dalby mentioned earlier, and is used as a type of judgement of the kouta music and dance performances.

[Slide 13] To demonstrate this point, let us take a look at an example. The song is called Uchimizu no (打ち水の), “Sprinkling the Garden.” This song was composed by my teacher’s teacher, Toyo Kasuga, in the late 1890’s. The lyrics read:

打たれた草に 光る露 恋にこがれて 鳴く虫の 声をあわれと 聞くほどの 寂しい我が身に 誰がした

The dewdrops are sparkling on the grass after I sprinkled the garden. The insects are crying out for love – Who made me this woman so lonely that she even feels pity on crying insects?
In reading the lyrics, one might first imagine a beautiful garden, grass dripping pure water, and the cute chirping sounds of insects. My teacher, however, explained to me that this song was written when her teacher had a broken heart, and that some terms have double meanings; for example, tsuyu (dewdrops) can also mean tears or a representation of the ephemeral.

I’ve been studying both kouta singing and dance; however, since my time today is limited, and since dance is a theme of this year’s conference, I’ll attempt to demonstrate iroke through a dance example. Rather than analyze my performance too cerebrally or critically, please try to feel the essence of iroke. Here it goes! (This dance performance is uploaded on the YouTube—http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YG-1fTv2j0A (2:16 minutes)).

I hope you were able to sense the iroke through my performance?

[Slide 14] I mentioned earlier that kouta has been neglected and has never received any direct governmental support. When I traced the history of music education in Japan, I found that the Meiji government once attempted to incorporate kouta songs in children’s music textbooks. However, Shuji Izawa, founder of the Tokyo Music School, considered the lyrics of kouta vulgar and unfit to be taught in schools because they captured the essence of iroke.

Sadly, the meaning and usage of iroke has changed over time because of the influence of Western or Christian notions of sex. Recently, the term iroke is used with “o” in front of the word, which ordinarily indicates “respect” toward the term, as in O-iroke. The effect, in this case, is opposite in that the term now carries a more pejorative negative sexual meaning than even the English term “sensuality.”

The concept of iroke, which represented a Japanese highly sophisticated sensibility, is now skewed and merely used to describe something “vulgar,” “dirty,” and even “forbidden.” The
geisha, as she appeared in Arthur Golden’s famous book and movie adaptation, now has a fate to carry this misperception of sensuality. It is time for us to sweep away the images created from notions of Orientalism or Exoticism and to see what really lies underneath the geisha’s arts.
Picture 3: Toyoseiyoshi Kasuga (春日とよせい吉, on the right) and Yuko Eguchi (on the left)
Kouta concert held at the Tokyo Stock Market Building (October 17, 2009)

Picture 4: Yoshie Asaji (浅茅与志江) at the Kouta-buri dance concert in Asakusa (November 1, 2009)
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Terms:
Geisha (芸者・芸妓): a person with art
Kouta (小唄): a small song
Ozashiki (お座敷): an exclusive private guest room in high-class restaurants
Iroke (色気): roughly translated as “sensuality,” “eroticism,” or “sexiness”
Shamisen (三味線): a three-stringed long neck lute
Ukiyo-e (浮世絵): wooden block prints
Edo period (江戸時代): 1600 – 1868
Shunga (春画): spring pictures
Kimono (着物): Japanese traditional robes
Toyoseiyoshi Kasuga (春日とよせい吉, 1925- ): my kouta singing and shamisen teacher
Yabo (野暮): boorish, not cool
Yoshie Asaji (浅茅与志江, 1947- ): my kouta dancing teacher
Kouta-buri (小唄振り): kouta dancing

Kouta Song Example:
「打ち水の」 “Sprinkling the Garden”
composed by Toyo Kasuga (the founder of Kasuga kouta school)

打ち水の したたる草に 光る露 恋にこがれて 鳴く虫の
声をあわれと 聞くほどの 寂しい我が身に 誰がした

The dewdrops are sparkling on the grass after I sprinkled the garden.
The insects are crying out for love – Who made me this woman so lonely
that she even feels pity on crying insects?

Note: Since the Japanese terminologies do not distinguish singular or plural forms, I will use the
singular Japanese terms and will not put “s” to indicate plural form: for example, “geisha”
remains “geisha” to indicate both singular and plural forms and will not use “geishas” to mean
more than one geisha.

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