

Nightwork

*Sexuality,
Pleasure, and
Corporate Masculinity
in a Tokyo
Hostess
Club*



Anne Allison

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

I

A Type of Place

The nightlife is defined by Japanese more by what it does than by where it exists. Accordingly, it is not geographically specific and does not occur in only one region of Japan or one section of a particular town. Rather, men recognize the nightlife by the pleasure it promises to deliver. Here customers can escape from the responsibilities that burden them elsewhere—so runs the advertisement, and the message is encoded in the decor, atmosphere, and service offered by bars and clubs.¹

This sense of distance from the social spheres of one's normal habits is the mark of the *mizu shōbai*, the broadly based service and entertainment industry within which the more specifically male-oriented establishments of the nightlife are set. Literally "the water business," *mizu shōbai* connotes fluidity—an occupation that one can float into and out of without the rigidity required by other forms of employment, and a service that one can enjoy while being freed from duties and responsibilities that matter elsewhere.² As in the ubiquitous *kissaten*, the often intimate and luxurious coffee shops where the price of coffee is exorbitant but the service is exquisite, being a customer in the *mizu shōbai* allows not only the taste of a particular luxury but momentary displacement from the mundane world outside.³

1. While the nightlife is often associated with definite neighborhoods, and different neighborhoods may be known by their different types and classes of nightlife entertainment (in Tokyo, for example, Kanazawa has the Turkish baths; Asakusa, the prostitutes; Shinjuku, the seedier sex establishments), nightlife per se is not confined to one area even in a city. Though the more pedestrian local establishments tend to be congregated around train stations, even here they are in full view of local residents.

2. Donald Richie (1987) refers to this other form of more rigid life as *katai*, meaning "stiff," to which he finds the *mizu shōbai* operates in contrast.

3. *Kissaten*, as with the regional terrain that is recognized for its distinguishing features, often have a specialty by which they are known. This could be anything such as the use of Limoges china for the coffee cups, tables made out of bottle caps or coasters from around the

It is these distinctions of service that situate the *mizu shōbai* in the broader landscape of Japanese society. They are critical to the operation and meaning of the nightlife, service in this context being symbolized by one gender of servicer—female—and one gender of serviced—male. This is not to say that no women enter the nightlife as customers or that no men enter the nightlife as servicers, but the operative of the nightlife is that of a woman who serves.⁴

The kind of woman who gives the service and the quality of service a woman gives, however, vary greatly. The two extremes are the expensive, refined, and mildly provocative format of the *geisha* or high-class hostess club and the moderately priced, seedy, and overtly sexual enticements of the *pinku saron* or touchy-feely bar. The reasons men choose one type of female service over another also vary: one man only has enough money for a *pinku saron*, another desires the sexual guarantee of a “soapland,” a third prefers the voyeuristic distance of a strip show. Those who choose the hostess club, in contrast, do so less out of financial or sexual considerations than for the club’s convenient double life as an arena for (male) work and (male) play.

Play and Work for the Businessman

Men go to a hostess club to relax; they also go there on business. Such was the commonest explanation I was given for the existence and popularity of hostess clubs in Japan. Yet the one purpose seems to oppose the other. Work is escaped when one relaxes, for example, and play is defined as being “not work.” It is a floating reference (or floating signifier, in Barthes’s sense [1972]) between, around, and within these two concepts that ultimately produces and makes meaningful the institution of the hostess club. When relaxation is the essential spoken, work is the essential unspoken of its motivation.

Men will go alone to the hostess club, but much more commonly they go in groups, either as coworkers, or in some way socially related, or in an existing or potential business relation. No matter what the relationship,

world, an extensive selection of African or South American coffees, or theme motifs in interior decoration such as Western, South Sea Island, or England.

4. So-called host clubs, where those who service the customers are male and the customers are female, have opened in urban centers such as Tokyo in recent years. Though well-publicized, such clubs remain few because the women who can afford their services are generally limited to the *mizu shōbai* women or wives of extremely wealthy men.

however, most men, when asked, would tell me that they were friends (*tomodachi*). The friendly atmosphere—masculine, egalitarian, and liberating—appears to be the motivation for choosing the hostess club over other forms of nightlife. Here, coworkers can associate on a basis different from that of the hierarchy that operates during the day. And in this setting, men approaching one another for a business deal can learn to trust one another simply as men.

Work thus provides the guise, rationale, and impulse for the hostess club. Employers will take their employees out periodically for a night of drinking and making the rounds of various hostess clubs. The expense is exorbitant and the pleasure for the host perhaps nonexistent, but the social interchange is considered crucial to the sustenance of so-called healthy relations. Why this is so is commonly articulated by Japanese in terms of structure and *communitas*, as these concepts are used by Victor Turner (1969). During the day, work relations are structured by hierarchy and by the accompanying control of expectations and responsibilities. At night, men can obscure and displace this hierarchy by drinking together. At night, in other words, men can become buddies.

When a group of men from the same company come into a hostess club, the highest ranking among them is likely to set the tone with “*Bureiko shi-mashōka?*” (Shall we *bureiko?*). *Bureiko* means a breaking of regimen, courtesy, and demeanor—a release from status and tensions. When status is suspended, the employees are allowed to tell their bosses what they think of them, and the bosses are expected to “forget” everything once back at work. In a similar vein, the employees may be asked for personal or business advice by their supervisors. The relationships, in short, are pseudoegalitarian. And through such relationships, business is sustained in Japan.

It is typically accepted that men working together should go out to a place like the hostess club every so often. It is also acknowledged that business deals must be initiated and cemented within the relaxed atmosphere of such an establishment. Women as well as men explained to me that hostess clubs are “only business”—business in different surroundings, conducted at night, but business all the same.

The Japanese I talked to always coupled the concept of work with the seemingly opposing concept of relaxation. Some Japanese would claim that relaxation was the real purpose of the hostess club. Men work hard, men are always responsible, men must be dutiful both at work and at home, and the nightlife provides the only setting in which they can relax. Here their *honno* (their “true” feelings, intentions, motives, self) can come out, they do

not have to worry about anything, they can be whatever or whoever they wish, and they can "rest up" psychologically for the ordeal of living and working.

Choosing the Hostess Club from among Other Places

Answering the need for a space away from work that will encourage both a release *from* work and an extension of the commitment *to* work, the hostess club is theoretically only one of several possibilities. Individual homes, inexpensive pubs, hostessless bars—all are used by groups of workers to "have a good time." What distinguishes the hostess club, and particularly Bijo,⁵ is revealed primarily by Bijo's clientele: middle- to high-level white-collar workers, most of them middle-aged (between the ages of forty and sixty-five), with tabs being paid by their companies. Approximately 70 percent arrive in the company of coworkers, usually with an employer or superior as host, and approximately 25 percent more come in a business relationship, with the host entertaining actual or potential clients or customers. Roughly 5 percent come with friends. The business affiliations that predominate are brokerage firms, followed by trading companies and construction firms. Rarely seen at Bijo are professionals, scholars, government employees (unless they are present as guests), and men working in small- to medium-size companies, banks, and blue-collar jobs. Men who are young, alone, or dressed in anything but a suit are infrequent customers. Women are less common still.

Beyond providing a relaxing and convivial atmosphere for its customers, the hostess club offers a *space that is not home*. For a number of reasons, a Japanese home is impractical, inappropriate, or even hostile to either work or social gatherings. First, most homes in Tokyo are located far from business centers and require a lengthy commute. Second, most of the men have wives involved in raising children or, if beyond that stage, unaccustomed to entertaining their husbands' business colleagues at night. Some Japanese men do bring friends or coworkers home after work, but this happens least often when the men have white-collar jobs in large companies and their wives are taking care of children; from the perspective of both the mother and the family, such wives must concentrate their energies on child rearing.

Third, for many Japanese *sarariimen*, home is not the space where they

can or want to relax. There they are constantly reminded of the problems and responsibilities of being a husband and father. And the demands of work may keep men away from home so much that home lacks the familiar, comfortable appeal that Bijo and other hostess clubs hold for regular customers.

Another appeal is the club's luxury and status. As virtually everyone who enters Bijo does so on a company expense account and for reasons that are at least ostensibly business- or work-related, a connection is made between the money spent, the class of the establishment, and the importance of the client or employee. Bijo has the air of a first-class club. The *Mama* is gracious, the furnishings are beautiful, and the cost is about \$105 (15,000 yen) per person, compared to perhaps three times that at a club on the Ginza or in Akasaka. Despite the fact that the top clubs are much more costly, Bijo has strong appeal.

Finally, the hostess club offers its customers excellent service by concentrating on the people who are doing the entertaining. Bijo is very much a club where the host (in many cases the boss) is the main concern. The piano and piano player will accompany guests as they sing, the hostesses and the *Mama* will stimulate conversation around the table, and so the "host"—here used in the loosest sense—is free to relax. The men who entertain at Bijo know their party will be satisfied, but they will themselves be spared the responsibility for making the outing a success.

The Spatial Order and Appeal of Bijo

Bijo is located on the top floor of a modern high-rise in the Roppongi area of Tokyo. Situated close to the *kōsaten* (a crosswalk by which the geography of Roppongi is calculated), it comprises a neighborhood of shops, coffee houses (*kissaten*), restaurants, discos, bars, and hostess clubs. Roppongi offers, in atmosphere, a mix of the sleaziness of Kabuki-chō (in Shinjuku), the youth of Harajuku, the funkiness of Asakusa, and the expense and elegance of Ginza and Akasaka. Its signs of middle age and respectability are counterbalanced by the glitter and excitement of its many discos.

Bijo, at the time I worked there, was a relatively new club, established about the beginning of 1980. Consisting of two main rooms, a small kitchen, a bathroom, a hallway, and a small receiving closet area, it is of average size for a hostess club. Very large clubs seat two to three hundred people, but most are small, even minuscule, seating a handful of customers and offering a cozy, intimate environment. Bijo is neither so small as to be homey nor so large as

5. Discussion of the hostess club is based on fieldwork conducted at one hostess club in the area of Roppongi, Tokyo, between the months of June and October of 1981.

to seem strictly commercial. It can accommodate up to forty-five or fifty customers but manages about twenty-five or thirty most comfortably.

A little glitzy by Western standards, Bijo has floors covered in deep carpet, walls hung with Parisian paintings, and a glass wall, etched with butterflies, separating the hallway from the main room. The front door opens into a hallway, with the bathroom and receiving closet off to the right. Straight ahead is the closed door to "A" *shitsu*, the more private area of the club, which contains a velvet booth against the back wall, three small tables, chairs, plants, a painting, a mirrored wall, and the *pièce de résistance*, a tiered, locked glass table displaying expensive bottles of liquor. Off to the left of the hallway is the main room, "B" *shitsu*, into which most customers are immediately ushered. Approaching, one first sees the red of the baby-grand piano filtered through the glass wall. Obviously the focal point of the club's furnishings, the piano is fitted out with a polished wooden counter and five expensive bar stools. A mirrored wall to the right of the piano reflects the keyboard and the bar's occupants.

Plain, heavy drapes along the left wall of the room cover the club's only window and conceal the outside world. High plush booths, separated by potted plants, line each of the three unmirrored walls. Nearby are small glass tables for individual parties. Facing each booth are several high-backed chairs, stately if not also somewhat cumbersome.

The same heaviness characterizes the room itself, despite its modest size. Even the painting of a young girl is hung so as to command rather than to adorn its surroundings. And even the fresh flowers are intentionally luxurious and are displayed in thick glass vases. Viewed together, the furnishings and decorations of Bijo create a nighttime sanctuary.

The spatial arrangements of Bijo produce a sense of luxury and order that is appreciated by most Japanese. The obviously costly objects themselves—the chairs, tables, vases, and artwork—are chosen with great care and kept in prime condition. The mirrored lavatory is cleaned after each use, the shining gold-plated phone and sparkling glass wall continually polished, the velvet chairs pushed in if they seem to project a few centimeters too far, and the lacquered piano never allowed to retain a single smudge.

Furnishings are not solely responsible for the sense of aesthetic well-being. Also contributing are the service provided by the manager and male waiters; the snacks, drinks, and ice at each table; and, most important, the Mama, owner and ultimate manager of the Bijo. Her given name is Tamata-san. When I met her in 1981, she was thirty-three years old and a longtime veteran of the *mizu shōbai*. Trained as a *geisha* (a woman trained to entertain

and serve men who is highly skilled in a number of Japanese arts such as dance, singing, and the playing of Japanese instruments), she initially entered the *mizu shōbai* when she was nineteen and came to manage her first club when still in her early twenties. Her father, a *sumō* wrestler, and her mother, a woman of the *mizu shōbai*, apparently never married. For many years the owner of a club in Nagoya, Tamata-san's mother now teaches the *samisen* (a traditional stringed instrument), adhering to the old association of "night women" as keepers of the arts.

Like her mother, Tamata-san has adopted the self-image of a refined lady of the traditional nightlife. She is always impeccably dressed in beautiful, extremely expensive kimonos; her outfits are subdued but perfectly coordinated, her accessories few but exquisite. She has her hair coiffed daily in the traditional upswept style, and makeup, though heavy, is never extreme. She is often described as a *bijin*—a beauty of the traditional type—in reference not only to her figure (which is delicate) and her attractive features, but her attitude, style, choice of fashion, and even her singing voice. For Tamata-san, the description serves as recognition of her success as a *mizu shōbai* woman. Her "beauty" is that of both refined taste and seductiveness; she keeps her pinky raised and her mouth modestly hidden behind a hand, yet smiles mischievously in a way few wives ever would. Called "Mama" by all the employees and by most of the customers, she is Bijo's principal attraction.

The waiters are in their mid-twenties, slender, handsome, and faultlessly groomed. Like the manager, who is in his late thirties, they always dress in black tuxedo, white shirt, black bow tie, and black shoes—models of elegant correctness.

The manner in which food and drinks are served at Bijo follows a similar style. The care given to the presentation may even overshadow the food, often no more than an insignificant snack—three bean pods, a small mound of peanuts, five or six grapes—elegantly arranged on a beautiful small plate and ritualistically served. The snack often remains untouched by the customer, for to actually consume this dish as if it were intended as food runs counter to the purpose for which it is presented.

Drinks are a somewhat different matter, for imbibing alcohol is the basic activity of the club, and men will drink their liquor no matter how it is served. Still, service as a formal display is important at Bijo: bottles, usually purchased in advance by the company and kept on the premises, are brought out immediately by a waiter and set before the customers with an air of ceremony. The hostess will add ice from crystal buckets to the glasses

of guests and fill them with mineral water poured from freshly chilled bottles. Thus, the mundane act of drinking is given a touch of elegance. The bottles of mineral water, silver ice tongs, and cut-glass ice bucket remain on the table, their presence a reminder of the status of the customer and of the faultless service provided by the club.

The customers who frequent Bijo are by no means unique in their appreciation of how things look and how one is served. What is significant, however, is the pattern and logic of a certain visual style, one selected by the club's management and found pleasing by this particular clientele. This logic requires, first of all, a setting that is meant to be seen. A person who walks into Bijo for the first time will be struck by the sumptuous materials and arrangements. The setting itself demands attention.

Another element in the stylistic logic of Bijo's space is the focus on concrete objects: the piano, the painting, the glass partition, the Mama. Of course, there is a general landscape as well—one carried through to the waiters' tuxedos and the three bean pods on a plate; yet articles in and of themselves are central here. The piano is a conspicuous example: its unusual color, its size (large for Japan), its newness, and its glistening sheen make it stand out and take over, particularly in a room where it occupies about one-fourth of the total space. Not selected to blend in with its surroundings, this piano conveys a style and posture all its own.

Actually, for the customers at Bijo, the setting offered by the club's limited space may be simply an exaggerated version of their own homes. These are moneyed men in a country where, since even large amounts of money buy little in terms of land and housing, a person's money is often, more visibly, converted into possessions. As has often been said, the Japanese are devout consumers, and high price can be an attraction to purchase rather than a deterrent. Modern Japanese fill their living space with objects that convey a sense of comfort and well-being. In the case of Bijo, what is to someone from the West a small space crowded with too many physically large things—a piano too massive, chairs too big, a painting too wide—is to most Japanese an area that accommodates a luxurious number of luxurious things. Bijo lacks the boxes of tissues, the stacked newspapers, and the hanging laundry found in Japan's residences. Instead, its objects have been selected for reasons that refer only to the objects themselves—their beauty and their costliness. Testifying to an aesthetics of consumption, the furnishings at Bijo are enjoyed by a class of men whose members include some of the biggest capitalists and consumers in Japan.

The size of Bijo's furnishings give an effect of overstatement. Everything

is in a sense overdone, as though intended to parody something else. Like bars in London with Old West decors or ice-cream parlors that advertise an "old-fashioned" atmosphere, Bijo gives the impression of being a caricature of a style that is immediately recognizable.

Stepping into Bijo, one feels an instantaneous and definite sense of presence. The customers call this a sign of a first-class club—the flourishes of classiness that may not be specified but are nonetheless perceived. Not only does Bijo seem classy but its classiness belongs to a certain category, that of the *mizu shōbai*. This means that while some of the material objects at Bijo may not differ from those customers have or would like to have in their homes, the total effect would be inappropriate there.

On the one hand, Bijo's *mizu shōbai* decor could be called simply ostentatious, a high-priced version of the tinsel, glitter, and bright colors one finds in the lower and seedier echelons of *mizu shōbai* bars and clubs. On the other hand, in its showiness, it is as if this club is making clear precisely what it is: a place where atmosphere and service are added to the price of what one drinks. In this sense one could say Bijo is dressed for the occasion. And in a society where dress is very important and people in general tend to overdress (hikers in the mountains donning mountain-climbing gear, for instance, and golfers appearing in golf outfits), Bijo signals what it is by dressing, and overdressing, the part.

Bijo not only seems to be engaged in self-reflection; it also encourages self-reflection on the part of its customers. A guest, for instance, sees in the piano an expensive *mizu shōbai* artifact, yet also the instrument that will accompany him as he sings; in the mirrors, a beautiful and visually orienting fixture, yet also a surface that reflects his image; in the Mama, an attractive and fashionable proprietress, yet also a woman whose attentions flatter him; and in the luxury of the club's surroundings, a scene pretty to look at and also a sign of his status and potential wealth.

2

A Type of Routine

When men enter the hostess club in the company of other men, what they do there reflects their two objectives: to get away from work and to have a good time together. The first objective stems from what is generally said to be the great stress and strain of being a working man in Japan. Hours are long, demands are rigorous, and one is discouraged from complaining. When a man walks into a bar or club at the end of the day, he does so to release and let go, position himself in a place that looks different from the workplace, and participate in activities that are self-indulgent and carefree.

Achieving the second objective, enjoying oneself in the company of co-workers or business relations, requires that the relaxation promote business and strengthen work ties. Most Japanese believe that how men relate to one another outside the office foretells how they will behave inside. The hostess club provides customers with a common, more egalitarian ground than is possible at the office.

The activities of a hostess club—the drinking, talking, joking, flirting, singing—serve to both break down and build up; they dissolve the structure that operates outside and create a new one. The first is the more apparent. The customers drink, loosen up, and talk about things that will be forgotten or seem unimportant the next day. As simple and undirected as these activities appear, however, there is also the agenda of uniting the men. Talk should rarely be divisive, and drinking should lead men not to solitary contemplation but to an effusiveness rarely displayed elsewhere. For the evening to be considered successful this double platform must be maintained; the men get away from work, and they get together in ways essential for work.

Membership

The person heading for Bijo will be first greeted by a man in a tuxedo who opens doors and parks cars for the entire building. To the guest's right is an

elegant *kissaten* (coffee shop) on the first floor; to his left, a fancy Western disco down a mirrored flight of stairs to the basement; and on the vertical roster a list of all the bars and clubs in the building. As he enters the open foyer, the customer encounters his own image reflected in the mirror covering the whole back wall. As he rides up in a small elevator encased in mirrored door, walls, and ceiling, his gaze is inevitably directed toward himself.

Having been presented immediately with three motifs of the *mizu shōbai* domain—service (from the attendant), glitter (from the ambience of the building), and self-reflection (from real mirrors), the customer alights on the sixth floor with only two doors to choose between: one to Bijo and the other to a bar specializing in bourbon. The door to Bijo is open, and one of the three male employees (the manager and waiters) monitors it to keep out men who are not members and to greet those who are. Addressed by name, unless he is a newcomer, the customer is immediately welcomed into a familiar setting, shown into the club, and quickly seated, most likely in “B” room. He is greeted by all the employees in a position to do so with an “*Irasshaimase*” (“Please enter”), a standard greeting to private visitors and to customers in general in Japan, in restaurants, stores, small businesses. The Mama and other hostesses may also greet the customer with a nod, although their attention will be focused on their charge of the moment.

Typical of hostess clubs, Bijo services a “members-only” clientele. Potential members, introduced and recommended to the club by a member, undergo an informal interview with the Mama. The Mama exchanges *meishi* (business cards) with the prospective member and calls him the next day to make the offer definite. If he is interested, she will then turn over any subsequent practical and financial aspects of membership to the manager, thus fostering the pleasant, though hardly realistic, impression that a member's relationship with the Mama is personal rather than financial.

Another standard practice of hostess clubs is the “keep bottle” system, which requires members to purchase bottles of liquor from the club and to keep them at the club. Whenever the member visits, the bottles are brought out and the liquor is served. Some clubs require that bottles be consumed and new bottles purchased within a limited time. Bijo, however, either too classy or too expensive to adopt this policy, allows bottles to remain untouched for months in the service closet, where they are neatly stacked and dusted. Each bottle is marked with the customer's name, providing both a sign system of the status of the individual customer, based on the cost of his bottle (Chivas Regal, for example, is the most expensive, as everyone knows), and a substantiation—even reification—as they stand together in

the service closet, of a male community established through common membership.

Service by Males

Having ordered and paid for a bottle in advance, a member will be seated and then, usually without a word being spoken, his bottle will be brought out promptly, always accompanied by glasses, ice, mineral water, and a snack for each guest. The man who has served him up to this point—a waiter or the manager—will usually prepare to pour him the first drink and then, only at this point, hesitate and ask as confirmation, “Is *mizu wari* (scotch and water, the favorite drink at Bijo) all right?” Proceeding to fill the glass, the waiter exemplifies a level of service that will continue to be prompt, efficient, and unsolicited all evening.

From this moment on, a waiter will speak only to answer questions or verify commands. He will not ask for food or drink orders but will take an order for food if summoned by a guest (or, more commonly perhaps, by a hostess in the name of the guest) and will bring out new supplies of bottled water and ice whenever he sees they are needed. His service seems to consist of foreseeing and responding to the customer’s unspoken needs. Indeed, once his initial task of seeing the guest through the preliminaries is completed, his presence is practically effaced by that of the more commanding hostess. This inconspicuousness, however, has a symbolic value.

The male employees, with their silence, sobriety, and submissiveness, contrast most sharply with the *mizu shōbai* women. The waiters rank lowest of all those employed at the club; they work the longest hours, are kept the busiest, and treat customers the most politely.¹ Standing as though on guard, they smile rarely and laugh less, seldom showing any expression of emotion.

If one were to ask a customer what it is about the waiters that enhances the time he spends at the club, he would probably answer, “Nothing in particular” or simply say that the waiter expedites service. Waiters are no-

1. At Bijo there were always between four and five male employees: the manager, one or two waiters called “boys,” a piano player referred to as *sensei*, and a cook who goes by the anglicized “cook” and remains unseen in the kitchen. In rank, the cook is perhaps higher than the waiters. The manager, also higher though possibly superseded by the rank of the piano player, is paid a salary only slightly higher than most of the veteran hostesses despite the longer hours and greater responsibility. The waiters at Bijo work from about 4 P.M. to 12:30, compared to hours of about 7 to 11 P.M. or midnight for the hostesses.

ticed, in fact, only in their failure to go unnoticed. That is, if an ashtray is not emptied, a fresh bottle of water not delivered, or the request for a song not conveyed to the piano player, then a customer’s attention is distracted from whatever is happening at his table as he is forced to call on the waiter to correct the lapse. When the service provided by the waiter is at top form, however, the customer’s needs are attended to almost telepathically. What the waiter is paid for, in other words, is responsiveness without presence. It is in order to be symbolically absent that he functions silently, without facial expression.² The customer does not want to see him, so the waiter makes himself unseen.

Drinking

The speed with which the setups for drinks are delivered is an indication of the significance given to drinking. It is expected and even required at hostess clubs. The Japanese male who does not drink here, in fact, is considered odd, unsociable, somewhat unmasculine, and almost un-Japanese. Alcohol goes hand in hand with the relaxing atmosphere of the nightlife; not only does it break down the barriers between men as quickly as possible, but it also dissolves barriers within the individual.

This function of alcohol—loosening the glue of a social order that is generally glued tight—is appreciated by far more than the businessman out to have a good time. Rules and expectations are burdensome in Japan, and women drinking alone, housewives drinking together at home, and students drinking in groups all seek a release from the various obligations of Japanese society. The behavior that accompanies the drinking—throwing up, urinating in public, dancing on train platforms, falling asleep stretched out on the seat of a train, making passes at or otherwise insulting someone, normally shown respect, speaking openly about things that usually go unsaid—all such behavior is for the most part excused (yet more so for males than females).

Like insanity in the United States, drunkenness in Japan grants one an immunity from acts or behavior committed “under the influence.” This was particularly true in prewar Japan, when even the charge of murder would not be leveled if the perpetrator had been drunk at the time. Today’s laws are somewhat more stringent, including penalties for driving after more than one drink. Yet socially there is still a blind spot. How people behave

2. The case with the manager is a bit different, he being more visible in his role as managerial bookkeeper and stand-in host when the hostesses and Mama are busy.

when they are drunk is overlooked because, it is believed, drink changes behavior, and drunken behavior should not be judged by the usual standards.³ The Western praise for those who “can hold their liquor well” misses the point in Japan, where many drink to achieve the freedom and the chance to act irresponsibly that come with drunkenness. The tendency is to drink hard, to get drunk, and to act drunk even when the drinking has just begun. (A parallel is the activity at American college “mixers.”)

In the hostess club this logic of drink makes good sense. Tired of the rules and rituals that control their actions during the day, men use alcohol regularly, almost fiercely, after hours. With drink as an umbrella, they are protected and indulged. Thanks to the social blind spot, what they do will be excused, what they say overlooked. With a drink, they can let their feelings loose, vent a long-harbored resentment, even cut a boss to the quick; it will all be forgotten next day. But the catharsis of their remarks and behavior builds relationships that will continue in the months and years ahead.

Talking: Banter and Breast Talk

The rules, boundaries, and key components of the talk within hostess clubs are tacitly understood. The talk should be unstructured chatter about things so insignificant that they need not be recalled later. Such forgettable conversations build a commonality among men.

Conversation, I mean to suggest, is not so much a pleasure in and of itself as a means to an end. Not dissimilar in this regard to the other activities at the club, it is often undertaken with a nervous hesitation that belies the gaiety it seeks to express. Supposedly idle conversation will begin spontaneously as soon as the first drink has been poured; in fact, the members of a party will often shift in their seats while waiting for an appropriate remark from a brave volunteer. At such a time, each moment of silence seems like an eternity.

It is at this point that the hostess is assigned a table, and her arrival will

3. According to some studies, Japanese are genetically more sensitive to alcohol than other racial groups and react strongly to even a small amount of alcohol. Reporting on such a study, *National Geographic* has also stated that the rate of alcoholism in Japan is 4 percent of drinkers—statistically half the rate in the United States. (“Alcohol, the Legal Drug” by Boyd Gibbons [February 1992]). In my experience in Tokyo I observed that drunken behavior can occur after one sip, and have been told that alcoholics are few in Japan because everyone makes it to work the next day. If cultural constructions affect the definition of alcoholism, it is difficult to compare the rates of alcoholism between Japan and the United States.

be greeted with a sigh of relief. She will ward off a silence that could threaten the evening’s objectives, launching the conversation so necessary to recreation. To smooth the conversational path between men is, in fact, a primary function of hostesses, according to most of the men I spoke with.

Although the hostess participates in the conversation, she often becomes its subject, as in the following instance. Four customers (Hamano, Agata, Mori, and Yamamoto, all from the same division in the same company) were in the club, and for about an hour I served as their sole hostess. The atmosphere was jovial and lighthearted, and the talk consisted of playful put-downs, directed primarily at Hamano, the highest-ranked among them, sexual banter about me, sometimes addressed to me, and rambling, seemingly insignificant chatter.

Hamano, speaking in English to me and his colleagues, was teased for incorporating Japanese words: “You *to* [and] me are going to Tokyo, *ne* [isn’t that so]?” Because Hamano must conduct at least some of his business in English, his companions found this very amusing.

I was asked to guess the ages of the men, a common game in the hostess club, and I answered seriously forty-six, forty-five, fifty, and then jokingly thirty for Agata, who seemed the oldest, about sixty. Only one verified my estimate, while Hamano and Agata kept joking back and forth that actually their ages were reversed. Again, all laughed at this ploy.

References to sex were constant. Hamano suggested that I should try him out as a boyfriend, gesturing toward his penis and saying in English, “cock.” Agata protested, arguing that Hamano would tire me out because he had “too much energy.”

Yamamoto had just returned from a year in Amsterdam, and they joked about how tired he was because he hadn’t seen his wife for a year and had climaxed “eight, nine times” the previous night.

Hamano said to me, “*oppai ōkii*” (your breasts are big), and then started talking to Agata about the kind of woman he liked. Agata told me that Hamano liked big-breasted women even if they were not pretty; Hamano denied this, saying that he liked pretty women even with small breasts like mine (though earlier he had said mine were big). He declared that some women have bodies of three dimensions, sketching out three increasingly large curves in the air, starting at the chest, moving to the stomach, and ending at the hips.

Agata asked me what kind of work I thought Hamano did. I replied, “*Yakuza*” (gangster). Then he pulled out a coaster and scribbled words like *oyabun* (the proper way to address a gangster boss), *chinpira* (lowest-level

gangster), *himo* (pimp), *onēsan* (familiar, impolite term for addressing a woman, literally “older sister”), and *suke* (rude for girlfriend). He continued that Hamano was a *chinpira*, that I should call the Mama *onēsan* (and that it was very respectful to do so), and that Hamano was my *himo* and I his *suke*.

Agata kept telling me that I must learn a Japanese song. After he got up to sing, Mori commented on what a terrible singer he was, a routine I have often seen a man's colleagues following. Some will stick tissue paper or chopsticks in their ears, roll their eyes, or feign intolerance, but only when the singer is in fact very good.

A typical exchange in some if not all respects, the above conversation illustrates some of the directions hostess-club talk is likely to take. Introduced by the host's invitation to break rank and dispense with formal courtesies, it assumes a staccato pitch. Subjects change rapidly, nothing is discussed seriously or for too long, and there is a great deal of laughter and play. Conversation is simple and undirected, the expression of men at long last released from formality.

While the language is indeed different from that of the *tatemaē* (socially expected responses) required during the day, the *honno* (true, sincere feelings) of speech expressed and so heralded during the night have their own conventions.⁴ One such convention is to refer to a woman, preferably a hostess who is present, in an obviously sexual mode. Most commonly this is a remark such as “You have large breasts,” “Your breasts are nonexistent” (*pechapai*—flat-chested), “Are your breasts on vacation?” “I need glasses to see your breasts,” or “I think your breasts have gotten bigger.” These remarks are rewarded immediately with guttural laughter. In fact, as often as I heard a comment about a breast made, it never failed to get the same reaction: surprise, glee, and release.

Though puzzling at first, considering the repetitiousness and regularity of such comments, the exaggeration of the response, I came to understand, resulted less from the content of what was said than from the fact that it was said at all. Though blatant reference to female flesh, particularly breasts, is not infrequent in Japan, it triggers in the hostess club an emotion and attitude that men are waiting to let loose. Something of the forbidden, the freedom, the frivolity that the nightlife is agreed to represent, breast talk becomes a signal that the time for play has just begun. More effective than the suggestion that propriety should be abandoned for the night—the pop-

ular phrase “*Bureikō de ikimashōka?*” (Should we dispense with rank, regimen, courtesy?)—a statement like “Your breasts are more like kiwi fruit than melons” is the act of abandon itself. When issued by the highest-ranking member of the party and greeted with laughter, the statement signals the men's endorsement of this abandon and their acceptance of a flippancy and familiarity in their language during the evening.

Speaking of a hostess's breasts is one example of talk that falls into a wider convention of pointing to, discussing, or making fun of something—or more likely, someone—that all men present can relate to on a fairly equal basis. Such references, often sexual, frequently carry the weight of authority that men have as customers and that women must yield to in their status as hostesses. Bijo's hostesses would be laughed at and ridiculed for such perceived weaknesses as lack of beauty, old age (in their thirties), having an unpleasant singing voice, making mistakes when playing the piano (one hostess played), ineptness in servicing, being part of the nightlife with its implied dirtiness, and failing to display great interest in or knowledge of the world. Remarks of this nature were often pointed and brief—“Where did you learn to play piano—in kindergarten?” “How old are you, grandma?” and “I suppose a comic book is as much as you can read.” Rarely delivering these barbs with any overt intention of being rude, the men would sit back and laugh, sure that the talk was appropriate to the place and confident that they controlled what was said and how judgment would be passed.

Talking: About the Woman and of the Man

Relying on some object, often a woman, to stimulate dialogue and rapport among men is a staple of hostess-club interactions. Taste and style, however, vary from crude, blunt utterances about the hostess to serious discussion of her. As a foreigner who was usually speaking in Japanese, I often became the butt of jokes centering on language. When this was coupled with a reference to sexuality the combination could be deadly. Not only typical but so common as to have occurred as many as three or four times every evening was the inquiry as to whether I knew certain words in Japanese. This often started when *oppai* were being evaluated and the men would say something like “*Ee, oppai toiu kotoba wa wakarimasuka?*” (Do you understand the word *oppai*?) This question was usually repeated a number of times in a tone of incredulous amusement that a foreign woman would in fact understand this term. Routinely the initial question would then be extended into a game,

4. I am using the words *tatemaē* and *honno* as they were used by customers in conversation with me or their colleagues at Bijo. How ideological these usages are I will point out in part 3.

and I would be asked if I knew the meaning of such words as *sukebei* (lecher), *pechapai* (flat-chested), *uwaki* (affair), *omanko* (vagina), and *ososō* (explained to me as the few drops of urine which may remain on a woman after she urinates). Or, if I answered in the affirmative, I would be asked something like “*Sukebei toiuno wa tatoeba nandesuka?*” (What, for example, is *sukebei*—lecherous behavior?)

Alternatively, some men would be entertained by using vulgar Japanese in a manner they felt would elude me or by ridiculously or half-seriously trying to explain some vulgarism to me in Japanese. Others would find humor in distorting words or asking, in an excruciatingly slow cadence, “*Wa-ka-ri-ma-su-ka?*” (Do you understand?), finding humor in my presumed inability to understand. When two fairly intoxicated men were speaking to me in Japanese, one asked if I had *zubon* (pants) on. Since I was wearing a dress I found the question strange and answered no. He then gestured crudely to his own genital area and motioned as if wrapping himself in a diaper. I figured he was referring to underpants and so said yes. I was then asked if they were paper ones. This was all done in slow speech, accompanied by much laughter. Excusing myself to go to the washroom, I returned to face another question, again delivered at a very deliberate speed, “*Fuki-mashitaka?*” (meaning “to wipe,” presumably in this case asking whether I had wiped myself).

More sophisticated and involved conversations are conducted as well. They can range from assessing the hostess's body almost dispassionately and with elaboration (“Your arms are very long but your torso is short. Fingers are somewhat squat but the neck is remarkably delicate”) to inquiring about the woman's personal life, her daily routines, or her past. (“Do you have dreams? I wonder if they stem from your childhood. Tell me one.”) As an object, the woman still feeds a talk that fills up the spaces and silences between men. By giving them something to speak to or about as a group, the hostess keeps the spotlight comfortably away from the men and on the one person at the table to whom all the men are equally superior.

A second convention found in hostess-club talk frequently involves the hostess but turns attention to the men. A man may use the hostess to show off a particular skill, demonstrate a trick, inform her of knowledge he is proud to possess, or discuss with her a hobby or recent event. Men will express themselves to the hostess or describe one another. They tell her that so-and-so is a good dancer, that his companion is a good lover, that the boss has many girlfriends, that the section chief could be a professional singer. The details come from both reality and imagination, and the stories told are

both true and pretend. The effect is dual, to make each other look good and also foolish. Hence, the strategy of mutually building up and breaking down is passed back and forth; no one is permitted to become too self-confident, nor is anyone driven out of the conversation.

My fluency in English was frequently relied on to establish conversation of this second conventional type. Men would try to get a particular member of their party to speak to me in English. For one group it was the *shachō* (president) who, after much resistance, finally gave in and spoke some English words. His underlings demanded to know how he had done. I said he was great—he wasn't!—and they commented, “*Yappari*” (that figures). Everyone except the president found the exchange highly amusing; the president appeared relieved and happy he'd passed the test.

Others played this game in a much more ridiculous way. Two men, fairly drunk, kept trying to recall at least one phrase in English and finally came up with “I am a pencil.” This they repeated to each other and to me, giggling each time. Many found the mere pronouncement of an English word to a native speaker of the language hilarious in and of itself. Others reacted more seriously and still others with obvious distaste. The former included those actually competent in English, who would use the opportunity to speak English either for personal satisfaction or for evidence of their accomplishment. Men who thought they should, for reasons of schooling or work, speak English or were self-conscious about not being able to do so would tell me not to sit next to them because they would not be able to converse, or would simply push me aside or explain to me, as did one man with whom I had in fact been speaking in Japanese for close to half an hour, that there was no way we could communicate because he didn't speak English.

Talking: Insult, Joke, and Pretense

Men use praise and insults to talk to hostesses about themselves. In a party of men, for example, the conversation may be something like “Hisao's good in English.” “No, Nobu's the one who's better. He's a real playboy.” “No, Kazuo is the one who's the playboy; Nobu's a real big shot.” “No, Hitoshi's the one who's *erai* (prestigious).” Usually the building up or praise of men (to one another) is done in terms not used for evaluation during the day (that is, at home or at work). Being *josei ni moteru hito* (good with women; having a lot of women) is typical, as are comments on how good a drinker, golfer, singer, and so on, a person is. In this vein, everything said and re-

sponded to at the club is in the realm of “happy time.” No one gets angry and everyone is mutually supportive.⁵

Men, nevertheless, also engage in mutual put-downs. Typically they are playful and are taken to be anything but serious. Two men were discussing their own sexual prowess or lack of it. Sato told me that Miyoshi started out by having sex seven times a night, decreasing to four times on the second date, three times on the third, once on the fourth, and after that being no good at all. He, in comparison, could do it four times a night but only once a month. Then he charged that Miyoshi, in fact, only did it once a month too, and Miyoshi replied that it was once a month to his *wife*. Sato counted up Miyoshi’s girl friends: Sachiko, Reiko, Keiko, and two others. Miyoshi interjected that Sachiko was the only one, that she was his ideal woman, and that Sato could talk about her all he wanted to but he’d never met her. Keiko, he said, was another story: she’s in love with Miyoshi, but Miyoshi is not in love with her. Sato said that it was just the reverse.

These men were colleagues in the same company and division and seemed to be of about equal standing. Criticism among such “friends,” they told me, was simply a form of compliment. In the repartee among men many strategies are used, in addition to compliment and insult, to juggle, homogenize, and reconfirm male relations positively. One is to introduce everyone as “friends”—*tomodachi* or “homo”*dachi* as one put it (denied, laughingly, by his mates)—while refraining from articulating the true nature of the relationship. Two men in their forties told me the unlikely story that they were brothers and that the third member of their party, a man in his fifties, was their father. Subsequently the older man assumed the role of the biggest lecher (*sukebei*) among them, the common pattern between a superior and inferiors.

Men hesitate during club conversation to identify themselves in terms of business. At a club of white-collar members, one customer told me he was a bartender at the *Bōeichō* (Defense Department). When I asked another, who had told me of traveling to Brazil and about ten other countries that year, what his work was, he answered that he had been “chasing girlfriends.” Two other times when I asked the question, I received no answer. Still another, in conversation alone with me, would talk generally about work—

5. For example, I saw one man become increasingly drunk and slovenly while other members of his group did not. He started blubbing, falling off his chair, spilling his drink, and trying repeatedly to touch the penis of the man sitting next to him. No one said anything or in any way appeared uncomfortable.

how he had worked until he came to the club that night, how work was his hobby, and so on—yet say only that his business was *sa-bisugyō* (service industry).

Pretense, preferably absurd, is a common ploy along these lines as well. Men often claim that they are *yakuza* (gangsters), for example. Joking about nationality and heritage are also prevalent. Many customers would introduce themselves or their colleagues to me as being other than Japanese. One claimed that his companion was descended from head hunters in New Guinea and another said he was descended from Scandinavians. Such absurd assertions were routinely met with a roar of laughter. When the claims were less ridiculous, however—as when one man alleged that his companion was a Korean—the laughter from the others was equally loud but the reaction from the one so depicted was a hearty and immediate “No, no, no, I’m a pure Japanese!”

In the hostess club there is little talk of the office, infrequent mention of home (specifically of wife and children), and no comment of a critical nature that is not disguised by laughter and much joking. The unspoken rule is to avoid anything that could be construed as “serious.” But there are exceptions. On occasion, business may be discussed briefly. As one customer told me, for the hours spent “bullshitting,” five minutes may be relegated to business. And if it’s a deal that is being aimed for (in contrast to the pure entertainment of coworkers going out drinking, for example), the five minutes may make the rest of the evening worthwhile.

Another category of enjoyable interchange that is not humorous is conversation about politics, music, hobbies, and current events. In the fancier clubs on the Ginza, in fact, the hostesses are said to be well versed in such fields as politics so that they can provide customers with intellectual conversation. This was not the case with the hostesses at Bijo, although I found that customers who talked to me about Japanese-American relations, politics, and education would say that they had enjoyed the conversation.⁶

Even such “serious” conversation is, however, routinely punctuated with laughter, jokes, and asides intended, it appears, to prevent discourse from

6. Such conversations led to the appraisal I heard most often from customers: *atama ga ii* (intelligent), which seemed to add to rather than detract from my appeal as a hostess. Of course, in all that has been perceived here as “male discourse,” the effects of my own position as both foreigner and observer must be considered. Both could create a distortion from that normally “spoken” at a hostess club. In regard to my foreignness, I would suggest that men behaved toward me in a manner structurally, if not stylistically, similar to that I observed operative with Japanese hostesses. Used as a vehicle to galvanize a particular kind and organization

becoming either too private (between two people, for example) or too involved. While I was discussing Japanese-American trade relations with a customer, his colleague, seated next to me, might interject a question about where my *oppai* were hiding out that night.

Singing

The somewhat illusive relationship between the serious and the light in hostess-club conversations is perhaps best exemplified by the rather recent phenomenon of singing in clubs, which represents both a break from discourse and a commonality with it. Providing, it is said, an activity by which the Japanese can enjoy themselves, it can also, I have observed, entail a considerable amount of anxiety and serious preparation.

Called generically "*karaoke*," the system is to provide accompaniment to which the customer (or the Mama, a hostess, or a piano player) will sing the words of a popular song.⁷ The singing is meant to be a performance and, even in one-counter bars, will be done into a microphone. During the performance the room quiets down, and at the end of it there is applause. Lyrics are provided in books organized by *minyō*, or folk songs; *enka*, modern Japanese songs; American songs; and so on. The selection of a song is often attended to with as much care as its execution.

In Bijo the piano player starts playing at 7:30 P.M. and will occasionally sing along with his music. The Mama or a hostess may be asked to sing, and soon the customers begin to participate. A standing microphone is placed to one side of the piano, along with the accoutrements of music stand, spotlight, and a demarcated circular area to stand in. Because the tables are located a fair distance away from the microphone, this area virtually becomes a stage. The customer's singing a song, therefore, becomes an occasion, unlike the casual outbreaks of song in an American bar.

Characteristically, a customer must be urged at length by the Mama, a hostess, or his companions to sing. He will first resist, saying variously that he's *hazukashii* (shy), *umakunai* (not good), *heta* (bad), *saitei* (the pits), or

of speech among men, the joking about language and linguistic comprehension with me, for example, seemed simply an adjustment to my peculiar features rather than a departure from a more general approach to all women in this realm. At base, my definition still came, I believe, more from being a female than from being a foreigner and anthropologist.

7. The accompaniment is usually a cassette system in smaller bars—from which comes the word *karaoke*—and a "live" piano and player in larger clubs such as Bijo.

onchi (tone deaf). Eventually he will give in, singing at least once and perhaps a second song or, later, another song to the more or less attentive room.

One customer explained that this activity, which became popular only in the 1980s, developed when the traditional split between nighttime women of culture (*geisha*) and women of sex disappeared. Now, he said, there are very few *mizu shōbai* women trained in the arts, so the men have had to take over the singing. Another said simply that men can talk only so long. Singing gives them something else to fill their time on their night out.

Others stressed that when a member of their party sings they immediately feel closer to him. *Karaoke* allows a presentation of oneself through which certain barriers between men can be surmounted. To this end it was implied that how well one did mattered far less than simply doing it. Such sociologists as Tsurumi have argued that the worse one sings, in fact, the better.⁸ To suggest a kinship of men based on inability, however, is fallacious. Though it is true that even a poor singer is applauded by a surprising number of the people in the room, and even those who are mediocre are routinely said to be good (*umai* and *jōzu*), it is also true that every man wants to be good and that the really proficient singers are recognized for being precisely that.

All men are expected to sing while out drinking with buddies at night; it is *shōganai* (inevitable). To not sing, particularly if other members of one's party have already done so, is viewed as unfriendly and distancing. To sing, therefore, becomes a sign and a promoter of camaraderie.

Singing is also a reflection of the individual. And for this reason some men practice and perfect their numbers. Many fall into what the Japanese refer to as *wan pata-n* (one pattern), performing always the same song but at least with the assurance that repetition has given them. Others will plow through the song books at length, discussing with their table what might be most appropriate to their particular voices. Singing is thus approached with a seriousness and self-consciousness not matched in conversation. And the assumption is that everyone wants to, and should, do well. A hostess who had recommended that a predominantly "one pattern" customer try a song she thought would be flattering advised him, after he sang it rather poorly, to buy a cassette of the song and practice it repeatedly for at least two weeks.

Some of the men will play up to the audience during their performances,

8. Tsurumi made the point during a lecture on Japanese social behavior given to recipients of Japan Foundation Fellowships at the Japan Foundation in 1982.

looking directly at faces or crooning to females (hostesses). Many will try to let the mood of the song (particularly the folksong) take them over, closing their eyes and coming close to tears at the inevitably sad lyrics. Nearly all who sing are attentive to the words, timing, and demeanor. Those who are not are considered sloppy and are not accorded the supportive applause at the song's end. I saw this happen only a few times, with men who were very drunk, once with a young and impatient customer, and most often with foreigners who had misinterpreted the construction and rules of the activity. As a hostess told a customer to be "serious" when he started hamming it up while singing a duet, to be untalented is excusable but to be excessively casual is inappropriate and in bad taste.

This singing, it should be noted, is not as easy as might be imagined. In addition to the appreciable anxiety of singing in front of a crowd, which includes one's coworkers, boss, and sometimes clients, is the fact that the songbooks provide only the words, not the melody. Since many of the songs are stylized, with fancy accompaniment in between, the singer, to avoid blunders, must know not only the tune but the form in which it is usually performed. For all of these reasons—the need to be fairly serious, to perform as well as possible, to be familiar with the arrangement of the selection, to just get up and do it in the first place—men are often visibly nervous as they walk up to the microphone. One man, always breaking into a sweat that he would anxiously pat at with a handkerchief, admitted that singing like this was nerveracking. The accomplishment was, however, cathartic, and the release he shared with his companions helped produce a greater relaxation for the members of his party.