

I would like to add a brief note about my conducting fieldwork in a hostess club. Some have questioned how the fact that I was different (at the time, I was the only foreign hostess working at Bijō) affected my reception as a hostess. There were many differences about me that were noted: my being an American; an academic, as many knew; an academic interested in hostess clubs, as was known by about a third of the customers. And certainly some men treated me with attitudes quite different from the way they treated the other hostesses, that is, with more apparent curiosity, interest, impersonality, reserve, hesitation, respect, fascination. I have attempted to factor these effects of my own position as ethnographer/hostess into my observations and analyses of Bijō and also to observe and report on as many encounters as possible between customers and other hostesses. Whether my account is nevertheless biased, I must leave to others to judge.

I would like also to comment on how fieldwork affected me as a woman and a feminist. Parts of hostessing were difficult and stressful, mainly because I had to accept the subordinate and sometimes servile position of servicer. Being a novice hostess, I was spared the touching accorded veteran hostesses, yet there were other behaviors I had to accept—constant references to my body, particularly my breasts; sometimes rude or deprecatory remarks; questions about my private life and references to personal matters; and the continual expectation that I would flatter and compliment even insulting men and never counter or protest what they said. Though many of the customers and the interchanges I had with them were pleasant, respectful, and refined, the element of crudity was ever present.

I cannot say that the disagreeableness of some hostess club behavior from the perspective of a woman working in this world has not affected my presentation and analysis of this activity. Yet my aim has not been to write a polemic on the chauvinistic or sexist attitudes of Japanese men in the nightlife or to reduce these behaviors to some essential attribute that is biologically male or universally patriarchal. Rather, in the tradition of such feminists as Linda Williams, who has written on Western pornography (1989), and Kaja Silverman, who examines phallic imagery (and its disruption) in Western film (1992), my objective has been the analysis of a masculinist behavior in terms of its historical, institutional, and ideological background. Consistent with this agenda, too, my aim has been to consider the implications of a phallogocentric practice in terms not only of the privileges it accords men but also of the price it extracts from them.



Part One

Ethnography of a Hostess Club

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 server—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 servers, 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 *pinhu 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 *pinhu 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 serve 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 liberalizing—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 "*Bureito shi-mashōka?*" (Shall we *bureito*?). *Bureito* 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 dufful both at work and at home, and the nightlife provides the only setting in which they can relax. Here their *home* (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 Bijō,⁵ is revealed primarily by Bijō'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 Bijō 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 *sararimen*, home is not the space where they

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.

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 Bijō and other hostess clubs hold for regular customers.

Another appeal is the club's luxury and status. As virtually everyone who enters Bijō 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. Bijō has the air of a first-class club. The Mamma 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, Bijō has strong appeal.

Finally, the hostess club offers its customers excellent service by concentrating on the people who are doing the entertaining. Bijō 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 Mamma 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 Bijō 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 Bijō

Bijō 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 (*bissaten*), 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.

Bijō, 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. Bijō is neither so small as to be homey nor so large as

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, Bijō 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" *shit-su*, 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 piece de resistance, a tiered, locked glass table displaying expensive bottles of liquor. Off to the left of the hallway is the main room, "B" *shit-su*, 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 Bijō create a nighttime sanctuary.

The spatial arrangements of Bijō 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 Bijō. 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 Bijō'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 Bijō 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 Bijō: 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 Bijō 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 Bijō 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 Bijō'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 Bijō, 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 Bijō, 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. Bijō 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 Bijō are enjoyed by a class of men whose members include some of the biggest capitalists and consumers in Japan.

The size of Bijō'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 decor⁵ or ice-cream parlors that advertise an "old-fashioned" atmosphere, Bijō gives the impression of being a caricature of a style that is immediately recognizable.

Stepping into Bijō, 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 Bijō 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 Bijō 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, Bijō'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 Bijō 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), Bijō signals what it is by dressing, and overdressing, the part.

Bijō 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.

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 Bijō 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 Bijō and the other to a bar specializing in *boutōn*. The door to Bijō 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 "*irashai mase*" ("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, Bijō 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. Bijō, 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 *sensai*, 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 okii*" (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 *tsuke* (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 *tsuke*.

Agat 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 *tatēmae* (socially expected responses) required during the day, the *honne* (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" (*pechōpai*—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-

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

ular phrase "*Bureiō shimasuka?*" (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. Bijō'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* towa kotoaba 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,

and I would be asked if I knew the meaning of such words as *sukebei* (lecher), *pechiapai* (flat-chested), *uwaki* (alfair), *omanho* (vagina), and *ososo* (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 toiu no 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 vulgarity to me in Japanese. Others would find humor in distorting words or asking, in an excruciatingly slow cadence, "*Waka-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, "*Fukimashitaka?*" (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, Chitoshin'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 motte iru 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 (*subebei*) 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 *Boeiho* (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 blubbering, 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 *sabisu-gyô* (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 itte* (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 Mamma, 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 *min'yō*, 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 Bijō the piano player starts playing at 7:30 p.m. and will occasionally sing along with his music. The Mamma 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 Mamma, a hostess, or his companions to sing. He will first resist, saying variously that he's *hazukashii* (shy), *umakunai* (not good), *heita* (bad), *saitai* (the pils), 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 Bijō.

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 pa-tan* (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 humming 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 nerve-racking. The accomplishment was, however, cathartic, and the release he shared with his companions helped produce a greater relaxation for the members of his party.

3

A Type of Woman

Woman Servicing Men

Hostess clubs, with their emphasis on service by women, exist primarily to personalize the working relations of Japanese men. But why are they so successful? Men do, after all, play in environments without women and achieve a similar degree of male bonding.¹ They can play golf during the day at clubs with a measure of extravagance and attentiveness matched only by the high-class hostess clubs on the Ginza. They are picked up at their homes in hired cars, play all day at private golf courses where membership is both exclusive and exorbitantly expensive, have their own caddies and locker-room attendants, are served exquisite lunches in magnificent dining rooms, and are returned home in the hired cars that have been waiting all day.

Or Japanese men can unwind inexpensively at *yakitoriya* or *akachoshin*.² Here, too, in an environment markedly different from home and work, they can share food, drink, and talk. If they can afford more expensive entertainment, there are clubs that offer jazz, chanson, or stand-up comics. If not, they can still find bars with *karaoke*.

Yet the hostess club remains an ideal—not the only place to take colleagues on business but one, I was told, that is well suited, even best suited, to many aims at night.³ Exactly what these aims are again shifts somewhere

1. My source for this information was principally two middle-aged males in a position to both receive and initiate much business-related entertainment. One is the head of an architectural firm, the other a high-placed government official.

2. *Yakitoriya* are restaurants serving *yakitori*—skewers of meat, fish, and/or vegetables. *Akachoshin* are usually noisy and relatively cheap eating and drinking places identified by the red lanterns that are hung outside.

3. This endorsement of hostess clubs came primarily from customers at *Bijo*, middle-aged, white-collar executive types who frequent hostess clubs. Men who didn't have the expense accounts to warrant such forays—particularly academics, I found—would argue that the *yakitoriya* or small-bar format they used for group gatherings achieved the same prerequisites in

between work and play, and what role women play in realizing these aims shifts between the pragmatic one of work-related relaxation and the pleasurable one of masculine release.

Significantly, it is the former that women, in their positions as wives, tend to stress when explaining men's need for the nightlife. One group of women I interviewed⁴ insisted that the nightlife is not about sex but about work, that men go to hostess clubs less for reasons of personal desire than because of group or business pressure, and that the hostess is pivotal in all this for the "service" she provides men with while they discuss work. Women I interviewed individually also emphasized the work component of their husbands' forays into the nightlife, emphasizing the instrumental role a hostess plays in work encounters and downplaying any attractions other than those strictly work-related.⁵

While women generally were vague about what precisely it is that a hostess provides in a hostess club—never having been in a hostess club themselves—they tend to imply that whatever a hostess does, she does because she's a woman. The implication, in short, is that the service men require is a feminine one. Women serve, and receiving this service somehow bolsters the male relationships essential to work in Japan.

The management and customers of the hostess club place the same emphasis on female service. A hostess club supplies service, and the service of a hostess club is supplied by women. It is this notion of service that persuades men to pay three, four, or five times as much for a drink in a club as the drink would cost if they bought a bottle at a store. So I was told by Bijō's assistant manager on my second day of employment, after I had failed to carry out the duties expected of a hostess, which consisted explicitly of two prescriptions—light customers' cigarettes and pour their drinks. (There were also three prescriptions—don't smoke, don't rest your

atmosphere as a hostess club. Other men, however—a lawyer, a cab driver, an artist—revealed that occasionally they would pay out of their own pockets to visit a hostess club with a friend, not to build business ties but simply to enjoy the presence of hostesses.

4. The group consisted of twenty alumnae of Rikkyō University in Tokyo. They ranged in age from the mid-twenties to the mid-sixties. Almost all were married and middle- to upper-class. I addressed these women in the course of conducting fieldwork during a research fellowship I received from Rikkyō.

5. For example, one woman whose banker husband was out every week night until at least midnight often sympathized with his plight. Claiming (although she had never accompanied him) that the food in the restaurants he ate in at night wasn't tasty, the alcohol he drank in the clubs not enjoyable, and the women he was forced to converse with boring and unattractive.

elbows on the table, don't put your hands in your pockets in front of customers.)

While a hostess's duties are, on the face of it, minimal and no more than mechanical, they actually encode a more general posture that the hostess is expected to assume: she is to take care of and show respect for the customer. Men, in their roles as business or work partners, would cite this behavior of the hostess as highly conducive to their goal of relaxing in order to promote work relations. Not only does the hostess attend to the oral desires of the men as individuals—keeping their cigarettes lit and their drinks replenished—but she attends to the oral desires of the men as a group—keeping them involved as a unit through speech and song. It is she who will initiate conversation when no one is talking, keep it going if silence is threatening, encourage men to sing, and generally bring everyone into an exchange in which they open up and become involved. She makes sure that everyone has a good time, and she relieves everyone else, particularly the host, of that responsibility.

Besides supplying functional lubrication to a group, the hostess flatters the men in a more personal, individualized way. During my observations it often took the form of constant, exaggerated compliments: "You sing so well"; "You're very handsome"; "I bet you could make love all night long"; "You're the best joke teller I've ever met"; "What a gorgeous tie you have on!" While the Mama seemed less instrumental than the hostess in keeping interaction percolating at the table, in this personalizing, flattering role she was a real professional. Customers often identified her as the main reason they chose Bijō over other clubs, not because she spent much time at their tables (for in truth she did not) but because the level of her style and service was exceptional. Bijō's Mama was a master of attentiveness. Her appearance (wearing only exquisite kimonos and attending to every facet of her toilette with great care), her mannerisms (using feminine gestures such as covering her mouth when she talked and keeping the last finger of each hand raised), and her voice (cultivating what was called a beautiful, sexy singing voice) were all intended to impress and delight her clientele; and she flattered them further by remembering details of their personal lives, by referring admiringly to their jobs, characters, and personal attributes; and by showering them with personalized services such as seeing each one off, calling each one the next day, remembering each one's birthday.

This personal element of female service is also said to benefit business relations between men. The mechanism at work seems less from the sense of mutual camaraderie orchestrated by an outgoing hostess and more from

receiving special treatment and being made to feel special oneself by a very feminine woman. One customer explained this mechanism in terms of the Mama's charms: "I flatter a client by bringing him to a club with such an elegant Mama." Others explained her appeal: "The Mama is classy herself and makes the man feel important as well."

In these more personal encounters between customer and hostess, yet a third dimension of the service expected of women in the nightlife comes into play: sexual posturing and flirting. This is what men describe as the basic, animalistic need of all men, a need that tends to be articulated in terms of what it makes of the man himself—a *sukebei*. This word, meaning "dirty old man" or "lecher," is heard repeatedly in the context of the hostess club.

Men will identify themselves as *sukebei*, refer to the others at the table as *sukebei*, question who in their party is the biggest *sukebei*, and explain their behavior out at night as that of a *sukebei*. Obviously there is a strong desire to see oneself and other men as *sukebei* in this setting. For the most part, "lecherous" behavior is limited to speech: telling jokes, commenting about women in the room, and telling stories of imaginary or exaggerated sexual escapades. Discussing his actual sex life with his wife would not be appropriate for a *sukebei*.

When the Mama or a hostess joins the table, however, the *sukebei* routines often change. The exchanging of sexual tales or barbs—"I have ten women a night, but Takaisan over here can only handle one woman and then only once a month"—may continue, but now they will most often be addressed to the woman and will frequently focus entirely on her: "I could give you good loving"; "You look like the type who enjoys good sex"; "How old were you when you lost your virginity?" "How many boyfriends do you have now and could you use one more?"

The woman becomes at one level nothing more than the medium through which men are transformed into *sukebei*. Males talk sex and the female is the sex they talk. At another level, however, men not only talk of women but to women, and out of these encounters comes a behavior I refer to as flirtation: displays of mutual interest between customer and hostess that allude to sex, romance, and sexual intimacy. The man acts as if he would like the woman for his mistress, and the woman behaves as if she would be willing to start an affair with him. There is cooing and batting of eyelashes by the hostess, provocative language, and the suggestion of a rendezvous at some future time. That rendezvous rarely occurs, however; hostess club flirtations are confined mainly to the club. Sex is built up to, but the build-up proceeds no further.

In this respect, the hostess is valued less for what she does for a work group and more for what she is to a man. And that is not just any woman, but specifically a nightlife woman—a breed apart, typified in the mass media by her willing acceptance of her own sexualization.⁶ This is a woman who will have her breast size commented upon, her sex life speculated upon, and her sexual attractiveness judged and discussed in her presence. She may not engage in acts that consummate in sex, but in her midst men are reminded of sex and positioned to think of themselves as males more than as workers. As a customer confided to me, "The hostess helps us converse and relax amongst ourselves, but men also have a *sukebei* nature and women are needed to satisfy that."

Servicing the Male Group

The hostesses at Bijō were expected to arrive at work an hour before the club opened. There seemed to be two reasons for this: to have hostesses available in the event that customers arrived early and to give the impression that they were eager to serve the men. Such anticipation (of a customer's arrival, of a man's desires, while at the club, of a party's need for stimulation) was encouraged by Bijō's management and welcomed by its clientele.

In preparation for the opening, the women would usually wait at the piano counter—simply wait. No specific duties were demanded of them; they spent the time polishing their nails, fussing with their hair, practicing a song, or smoking. Some women sat quietly; others conversed in groups of two or three, sometimes with members of the male staff. The conversations were more subdued but not unlike those carried on with the customers—few revelations of actual romantic, sexual, or familial relations; little serious commentary about the people they worked for, almost no criticism of the Mama, scarcely any mention of actual customers; and a preponderance of innocuous, light topics such as fashion, food, travel, and the famous

6. I use the terminology "to sexualize," as do Sigmund Freud (for example, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey [New York: Avon Books, 1962], 77) and Leo Bersani, following Freud (*The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], 38, 61). In their usage, "sexualizing" means making sexual a person, a thing, or an act that was originally nonsexual. Freud uses the example of a baby sucking on its mother's breast, first for nourishment and later for sensual pleasure as well. In the latter case, the mother, her breast, and the act of nursing have all become "sexualized." It should be noted that "sexualization" does not exclude the presence of nonsexual meanings. Nursing, for example, can continue to feed a child at the same time that it gives sensual pleasure. Likewise, a hostess provides a service that cultivates business at the same time it gives men sexual pleasure. The relationship between these two "uses" of the hostess is the central subject of this book.

hot springs in Japan. Occasionally, breasts would be discussed, the women sizing up and even touching each other's breasts in a ritual reminiscent of that to be initiated and indulged in later by the customers.⁷ Except for this talk of breasts, however, the hostesses strike a pose far different than that assumed in front of the customers. Now they are quiet, even sullen, with an attitude more of resignation than easy acceptance of the male behavior they'll soon encounter. Later they will play their part: one veteran told me she put up with lewd remarks and gestures only because her job required it.

When the first party walks through the door, the women all sit up straight and say "Irashaimase," the perfunctory greeting spoken to all guests in Japan. At this point, most hostesses will grab a box of matches to use in lighting their customers' cigarettes. The Mama, the manager, or a waiter (upon the instruction of either the Mama or the manager) will direct the hostesses to sit with these first guests or to wait as a group for a later assignment.

On entering the club, the visitor is likely to make a quick assessment of the hostesses: how many there are, what they look like, how well they are dressed, whether any are spectacular. On the basis of this assessment, the hostesses at Bijō were judged, by the many customers I explicitly questioned, to be mediocre. Their number was small, only four to nine women for a clientele that peaked at thirty-five to forty-five customers after 9 p.m. Their looks were considered commonplace, with no one hostess standing out. Beauty in the *mizu shōbai* sense commonly is assessed by three criteria: (1) age—the younger, the more beautiful; (2) dress—the more expensive and refined the clothing, the classier and more attractive the woman; and (3) so-called natural beauty—pretty face, lovely hair, petite or busty figure. Customers quickly perceived that the average age of the Bijō hostess was about twenty-five; her usual dress, either street clothes or *munmu*, Chinese dress with a slit up the side, or a variety of sexy attire, such as clingy top and long cotton skirt; and her looks average or at least not remarkable. These women could in no way compare to the younger, prettier, and more elegantly attired hostesses of top-rated clubs in the Ginza or Akasaka, and yet it was precisely for this lack of distinction that the Bijō hostesses were valued by customers.

7. These breast rituals mimicked but did not parody those engaged in by men. In other words, when women did to themselves what, in the context of club routine, was done to them (by men), they were not making fun of the process but rather appropriating it as if it were their own.

As Yamada, a filthy frequent customer, articulated it, Bijō's women were *jutsu*—common, normal, usual. They were not unapproachable; in Yamada's meaning of the word they were not so gorgeous as to be a fantasy of ultimate desire, but not so fantastic either as to remind men of their own limitations and insecurities.⁸ These women made a guest like Yamada, who was well established but not wealthy or prominent enough to gain entrance to the Ginza and Akasaka hostess clubs, feel comfortable, partly because of what the women were—average rather than those categorized as professional or veteran *mizu shōbai* women—and partly because of how they behaved—taking care of and showing respect for the customer.⁹ Appearance may be what is first noticed about a hostess, but behavior and service are often most appreciated.

Which hostess the customer is assigned and the number of hostesses granted depends on several factors: how busy the club is, how large and important the party, whether a customer has indicated a preference, and, if so, whether the management can or wishes to satisfy it. Only infrequently do customers at Bijō request a hostess; it is a common practice, however, in other hostess clubs. The customer pays a large fee for choosing his hostess and retaining her for the evening. At Bijō, by contrast, all the hostesses were ultimately at the Mama's disposal and adhered only to her commands and to her policy of rotating the hostesses often.

Directed to a table by the manager or "boy" or sometimes at the command of the Mama, a hostess will approach the table with an "Irashaimase" and ask, perhaps humbly, if she may sit down. Although when and how much she participates in (or precipitates) conversation will vary, she will always pour drinks and light cigarettes, actions that symbolize as well as constitute most concretely the *sa-bisu* (service) expected of her. These "es-

8. This notion of idealizing perfect beauty but preferring to deal with a secondary class was expressed by many of the men I talked to. The rationale was that men would be stymied and immobilized by a woman who was too beautiful, made aware, as it were, of their own physical imperfections. By contrast, a woman who was less than perfect but still attractive could be approached and enjoyed.

9. The numbers would vacillate—three (Eri, Machiko, Keiko) had many years experience in the nightlife and were considered veterans, all having been with Mama since the start of Bijō, and Eri having worked in her previous club. The others came and went, some staying one night, others a week, still others for months. Some had had previous *mizu shōbai* experience, others not. The latter included Mayumi, a college student (*yōshiakasei*) who worked at the club to make money to buy a car, a would-be musician who could not yet live off her musical skills, and two or three women known as O.L.s (office ladies), who worked in offices during the day.

entials" of service may at times, although infrequently, be the hostess's only involvement with customers.

Positioning the ice bucket, bottles of mineral water, and bottle of liquor directly in front of her, the hostess will act as the constant intermediary between the men at her table and their alcohol. Anticipating what she assumes is their desire, she continually replenishes and re-ices all the drinks. A man articulates only his wish for her to stop pouring, in fact, and even then will probably be cajoled and encouraged by the hostess to drink more.

The lighting of cigarettes is even more automatic. Picking up a box of matches (imprinted with the club's name, address, and phone number) even before the first guest arrives, she will hold on to it for the entire evening, learning to jump instinctively at the mere motion of a customer's hand toward his cigarettes. This is by no means a casual act of politeness. It is a ritual a hostess must become most conscientious about observing and was the only task I was ever reminded to perform.

The men tend to be oblivious to these services unless the hostess fails to perform them. I saw one customer sit with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth waiting for a hostess positioned five seats away to strike a match for him. Another chided a hostess for allowing his glass to remain unfilled. Unnoticed or not commented on was the far greater eventuality of a cigarette being promptly lit and a glass being punctually filled. Some men would mutter their thanks (*ah domo*), and, very rarely, a man who had spent time in the West might prefer to light his own cigarette.

It takes no great skill to light a cigarette; men in Japan and elsewhere do it all the time. But the lighting of the cigarette takes on a symbolic importance in the hostess club. It imbues the man with the heightened status of the customer and strengthens the male experience. Even the lowest-ranked member of a party, who lights the cigarettes and pours the drinks when a woman is not present, is hereby freed by the one person outside the group—the female hostess.¹⁰ She is not allowed to smoke and can drink only in moderation or at the urging of a customer to keep him company.¹¹ Because of these differences from the men, she fosters their similarity to and with each other.

10. In Japan, the custom is to serve one another, taking turns filling and refilling each other's sake cups. Though the custom is intended and perceived to be reciprocal, lower-ranked members of a group tend to be more aware of it.

11. I once transgressed this understanding. Around 11 p.m., when no guests were in the club, I asked the manager if I could help myself to a beer. Everyone found this highly amusing, and thereafter I was called a *nonbe*—a lush—as if a hostess who drinks when she doesn't have to or is not doing so to serve the customer is consuming alcohol for the wrong reason.

The hostess's role is to help create a group out of a table of individuals. To restate, the role most basic to her is to change and vitalize the relations among men by her act of serving. Asked at times to sit in silence, usually because the men are discussing something of a business or serious nature, the hostess is nonetheless kept at a table for a period I've observed to last as long as an hour and a half. Thus it is not for her voice, which she is denied on such occasions, but simply for her presence that she is most valued. She is there, even when she doesn't speak, to remind the men that their reason for being at the club is not only to be together but to have a good time. And to have a good time requires making it plain that they are having a good time together.

This agenda of mutual self-enjoyment in a group is not so easy a task for men as it may appear. One customer described its complexity in this way: "We must come in and show the client a good time. But after a hard day I'm tired, too, and unless I know him well, I don't know what to say or what we could talk about that he would enjoy." Like others, this customer believes that the party hosting an outing is ultimately responsible for the enjoyment of all those he hosts. Also like others, he is grateful to have the hostess assume this responsibility: "If a hostess can liven up a table and get everyone to relax, it makes my job that much easier."

Two hostesses at Bijō, Eri and Machiko, were highly praised by the customers for their ability to orchestrate lively interactions at the tables they served. Eri, in her late thirties, had worked for years in the *mizu shōbai* but also had a day job, typing assignments on commission out of her home. Judged to be average in looks (the two most common remarks about her appearance were that she was very old to be in this business and had a pudgy stomach), Eri tended to wear clothes that were somewhat cheap—Indian-print skirts with clingy tops, outdated suits, cocktail dresses that were sometimes floor length. Machiko, about twenty-five, and also a veteran of the *mizu shōbai*, was attractive but never used makeup and usually wore a simple shirtwaist dress. Because her gay lover owned a bar where Machiko worked nights after leaving Bijō, she had no time to do laundry, and she often wore the same shirtwaist dress for days in a row.

Men to whom these women were assigned were usually treated to some remark by the hostess as soon as she joined the table. From Eri, it could be a reference to her breasts or her tan; she might look down as she pulled out her shirt, for example, and say, "My tan really extends all the way to my nipples." Machiko could be more blatant still—asking who would like to touch her breasts, then taking a customer's hand and guiding it to her breast.

Machiko was the more audacious of the two. Far more inclined to be physically demonstrative, she would lean over the laps of the customers,

caressing a hand or holding a knee. Throwing out barbs to the men at her table—"I bet your penis was the size it is now when you were ten"; "Do you fart more in the morning when you wake up or at night when you're sound asleep?"; "I read an article about someone who could climax as he urinated"—her tendency was to shock and insult, all in a teasing manner that was taken to be amusing and that would provoke men into similar exchanges among themselves. Though she was known as a live wire, Machiko could accommodate herself to a guest who preferred calm and could converse quietly and tastefully. She had a beautiful voice but would only sing at the demand of a customer and then usually insist that he join her in a duet.

Eri was less lively and innovative. Treating all the customers the same, she could be overly assertive, bulldozing her way into conversations and then controlling their direction. From my Western perspective, this seemed less than desirable on occasion, particularly when the men were conversing well enough on their own about something that they appeared interested in pursuing and that Eri was likely to know nothing about. Even then, however, the men would sometimes comment on how skilled a hostess this veteran was and would describe her as the type of woman who knew exactly how to take care of men.

Once this praise of Eri was made after she had been sitting, along with another hostess and me, with two men. When we were assigned to the table, the men were already immersed in a private conversation, talking about golf in the serious fashion that Japanese often adopt for this sport. Thinking that speech on our part would be intrusive, I remained silent. Eri and Haruka, by contrast, spoke up at once and carried on a dialogue, mainly about the men: "Don't you think he looks strong?"; "Did you notice his tie, it looks European"; "His shoes are very sleek, don't you think?"; "I can tell they play golf because they both have such tans." Now and then they would try to break into the men's conversation by asking them questions: ("Do you play golf every week?"; "Are you very good?"; "Is golf a difficult game to learn?"; "Do you think even a dummy like me could learn how to play?"). At first the customers would answer questions politely but perfunctorily and then resume what was still basically their own private conversation. In about fifteen minutes, however, the women's involvement had increased and the men's attempt to converse seriously about golf was abandoned altogether.

Although two customers did complain to me of what they called Eri's boring and invasive style, far more admired her ability to produce and sustain a conversation at the table. Without fail, Eri was a woman who could and would talk, and without exception, Eri was a hostess who could and

would make those at her table talk as well. From the minimal pouring of drinks and lighting of cigarettes to encouraging the men to sing, asking if they wanted food, and wondering whether they weren't too hot or too cold, her technique came close to one of "taking over." From merely anticipating the man's needs, she at times came to define them; and from servicing male desires, it seemed that it was her desires that occasionally demanded the service. This is to say that while the first aspect of a hostess's service—ensuring that all men in a party limber up and engage in a group dynamic—is valued, it can expand into a form of coercion that is felt by some to be oppressive.

Flattering and Personalizing the Male

In all the strategies listed so far that the hostess uses in servicing the man, the pleasure gained is often that which can be shared by a group. In her hands and using her as diversion, men can relax with one another as friends and relate to one another without the divisions or tensions that operate practically everywhere else. But a man also takes pleasure in being singled out, in being recognized apart from his group and having his individual qualities addressed. In brief, a man enjoys not only assimilation with other men who, in terms of male desires, appear much the same, but the differentiation of himself from everyone else.

At Bijo, the Mamma was an expert in dispensing this particular service. Her main objective, it seemed, was to structure relationships that appeared—and more important, felt—specifically personal. That is, she treated each customer as if he alone were special and as if he alone had caught the Mamma's fancy.

Bijo's Mamma would give her personal service in a number of ways—by greeting the guest by name and by recalling details of a previous visit, reminding him of whatever he had chosen to speak of, from headaches to a fondness for Italian food. Nothing is too trivial, so long as the man himself has offered it as personally significant or at least worthy of mention.

The Mamma's memory for such details was seemingly inexhaustible. Recalling even the names of friends brought to the club months before, she would begin almost every conversation with a tidbit gleaned from a previous encounter at Bijo. Each customer, no matter how infrequent his visits to the club, was thus awarded a continuous relationship with the Mamma; her terrific memory would also result in scoldings for those customers who stayed away from the club too long.

In her attempt to obligate a customer through personalizing a relation-

ship based on money, the Mama used her memory of visits to comment on his presence as well as his absence. The guest who was made to feel temporarily guilty for not having visited Bijō sooner was also reminded that his presence has been notably missed. The Mama thus reflects back to the man an image that he has created, by repeating to him only the discursive fragments of conversation by which he has already indicated that he prefers to be known. If the Mama has pursued and acquired information about him elsewhere, she does not mention it.

Directing her attention solely to one or, at most, two or three guests at a sitting, Mama speaks in a quiet, almost conspiratorial voice. To keep her few moments with a customer private, she would often shoo away any hostesses already at the table. Not particularly astute politically or intellectually, as some women in the *nizū shōbai* reputedly are, the Mama discusses appealing topics that a man is not likely to pursue with other men and especially not with his wife.

The Mama is a good listener but in no way a passive conversationalist: She would sustain dialogues with concern, flattery, and flirtation. Speaking at times in a whisper, she would pick up on, reflect, and then enhance whatever the man felt most at ease with about himself. She would ask him for advice on matters she knew he could handle and compliment him on qualities he was straining to achieve. Though she would hold a hand or touch a shoulder, she mainly caressed his ego. To be told that he is handsome, charming, a splendid singer, makes a man feel good even when objectively it isn't true.

On the one hand, Mama attends to the man as subject, perceiving his needs and intuiting his desires. She asks the hostess he has admired to sit with him, keeps encouraging him to sing when she knows that is his inclination, seats him away from the air conditioner when she remembers that cold air bothers him, and makes other arrangements for his comfort and pleasure. Responsive to the wishes he expresses or implies, Mama also strives to become included in this list of his wants.

The Mama's attentiveness, however personal it seems, is routinely granted to every guest. Attempting to spend at least a few moments with each customer, she also personally sees each customer off when he leaves, calls each new guest the day after his first visit, sends all of her customers cards on their birthdays and New Year's, and mails them chocolates on Valentine's Day. Though every customer systematically received the same treatment, this fact did not diminish its appeal.

As a customer becomes a regular, Mama uses gifts and phone calls to

secure and extend the relationship and thereby increase obligations on her customers. Often they would come to Bijō, for example, on a particular evening only because Mama had called them that day, requesting that they visit. When she gave her big *buyō*, traditional Japanese dance recital, all of the customers were implored for months to attend and presumably to contribute to the expense, which was charged entirely to the participants, and while complaining out of earshot, many did.

Seeking to dispel anonymity, distance, and unconnectedness for her customers in the nightlife, Mama acts to personalize the relationships she has with them in various ways. Another of her strategies is to objectify and personify herself, in effect providing a mirror in which a man can flirt with his own reflection. Self-designed as a beautiful, refined, desirable woman, she achieves a subtle perfection in appearance and flirts with a coyness that is lent dignity by the gestures of a traditional lady.

Having built up the image that the customer wishes to project, the Mama does not wait for reciprocal treatment but will direct attention to herself, if need be, on her own. Sure of being complimented, she may ask a customer what he thinks of her new kimono or hair style. On receiving such orchestrated praise, she responds without the so-called typical modesty of Japanese femininity, voicing instead a simple "*honōō*?" (really?), thereby signaling that the compliment is something she's well aware of.

Mama's voice is celebrated for its beauty. Staging its exhibition, she will single out one guest to be her partner in a duet, encourage him if he resists, and then select a song from a separate list that, I noticed, comprises her repertoire. She will then overshadow her partner in performance, singing with a volume and a seriousness that reveal her perception of herself as a professional. To memorialize the event, Mama has a waiter photograph her and her partner. The waiter will then ceremoniously hand the photo, autographed and dated by the Mama, to the customer. As both image of her and evidence of a relationship (if only through song), this picture will be shown off and examined all evening; a flashlight is made available specifically for this purpose.

Bijō's customers not only treat these performances seriously but also visibly delight in them. They exclaim and fawn over the Mama, taking real pride in her stardom and accepting the illusion, created by her, that at some level she belongs to her customers.

The ideal the Mama can personify for her audience is that of a metaphor, stand-in, pretend, temporary, or potential mistress. Flirting with one man as if she means it, she allows the customers to bring in to think that just maybe she really is his. Her art could be said to be that of giving away

nothing yet pretending to be accessible (and getting away with the pretense). I remember one customer, Hanno-san, who, after spending an hour with the Mama at dinner and ten minutes with her at his table, asked her what she had done with the five man (50,000 yen, about \$250) he had given her as a birthday present. She nonchalantly replied that she had added five man of her own and purchased a beautiful kimono. When baited for the additional money, Hanno-san handed over five more bills, which the Mama immediately counted, joking that one was missing. Slipping the money quickly into her kimono, she smiled coquettishly but did not voice a single word of thanks. When he asked for a single kiss, he was presented only with the Mama's cheek. The Mama then smiled slyly and rushed off to another table. Gazing after her in feigned or real amazement, this sixtyish man muttered that at least he could have expected a kiss. The hostess sitting with him, however, quite seriously attempted to convince him that he had, in fact, been lucky. He had, after all, shared dinner with the Mama; with a woman so much in demand, this in itself was a great honor.

Still young and attractive enough to be desirable and concealing the fact that she already has a patron, Mama cultivates the illusion that she is still available. What flatters the customer is the possibility that her flirtatious signals can be taken seriously. But playing this game can become boring, as Hanno-san admitted to me: Realizing that a woman of the Mama's age and means must have a patron, he had found the attractions of the game-wearing thin. Nonetheless, even though the Mama's flirtatious performance had become wearisome, Hanno-san felt that the impression she made on customers he brought to Bijo was motivation enough to keep coming.

Sexualizing Male Play

Eri joins a table and is told her breasts look particularly flat. Akiko sits down, and the men wonder aloud if her breasts have grown at all since she turned twelve. When I am talking with a guest about England, he asks suddenly what my bust size is and how it compares with that of other foreigners. The men always laugh at these comments—not a snicker but a hearty guffaw, a laugh that seems to achieve a release—getting it all out, unwinding from the day, cleansing them of tensions and resentments before heading home. It is this laughter and release that men will say is one of their prime objectives in going out drinking at night.

Alluding to women's breasts, the men speak at such times of females but mainly to other males. And what they speak of is themselves, not of being Yamaguchi from X section at Y company but of being "the biggest *sukebei*

I've ever seen," a *sukebei* who has ten women a night and *wants more*, "a *sukebei* who took me out last night and introduced me to a whore," a *sukebei* who can't get it up but dreams of it all the time, "a man who couldn't find a wife because all the women knew he was a *sukebei*." The tone is jocular, the gesture friendly; pointing out a woman's breasts—a body part most indicative of the female's otherness—brings out the "other" in the man himself, the dimensions of his personality that men will say must be repressed not only at work but at home as well.¹² Shifting from a remark about the female to one about the male—"Your breasts are small. What a *sukebei* I am"; "What melons she has. *Sukebei* is his middle name"—men frequently proceed to a discussion in which, by self-proclamation, they open up and reveal themselves in ways they do only rarely anywhere else—for example, telling a boss off, letting a coworker know that he had done something offensive, disclosing private dreams of the future, or telling others about a hobby one has or an invention one has made.

There is also a tendency not only to segue from breast talk into talk about one's self but to deal with woman as object from the subject position of the sexualized man. This can take several forms, exercising different dimensions of the *sukebei*/male/customer position men acquire in the context of the hostess club. One is that of going beyond language and touching the woman, usually on one or both breasts. Such touching, at Bijo at least, could be characterized by what I call "the pat," a ritualized hop to the breast that ends almost as soon as it begins. Less a caress directed to and intended for the woman, it seems a gesture engaged in more for the benefit of the other men. That is, just as a man will call a woman's breasts flat and look to the other men, who all laugh, a man will place his hand on the breast of a hostess and look not at her but at the rest of the males.

An instance of this behavior occurred one evening when, seeing off guests downstairs, I noticed another hostess returning to her club after making similar farewells. Three men who had been drinking at that club approached her. They did not seem to know the hostess, but as they passed, one reached out and patted her breast, without a murmur or even a glance. The men kept moving, but they laughed together loudly. The woman had no visible reaction: no words, no facial response, no protest. The encounter had lasted only a few seconds.

While touching can include other body parts and involve a more pro-

12. Men would say that even at home they are aware of their social responsibilities, and women would tell stories of hearing that their husbands were the "life of the party" when out at night, while they remained uptight, taciturn, and serious at home.

longed feeling or pawing, these short, ritualized pats to the breasts were by far the most pervasive form of male touching at Bijō, directed almost never to the Mama or to novice hostesses but regularly to the veterans, who would often initiate or manipulate the movements. Thus the pat to the breast (much like the remark about the breast) signifies a second aspect of the *sukebei* role: possession. The female body becomes, in a sense, possessed, and the male (as *sukebei*) is the proud possessor.

Sexuality, in this context and this construction, has inequity built into it. In the relationship between customer and server, males become the party not only of sexual desire but of sexual rights, and females become not only sexually desired but sexually owned. As Bijō's manager told the hostesses in one of two staff meetings he held during the four months I worked at the club, one reason hostesses are employed is that men have a *sukebei* nature. When they make lecherous gestures, either verbal or physical, a hostess must be willing to put up with them. Most important, she must never show anger. There to serve the man his cigarettes and drinks, she is also there to serve, within limits, his sexual needs.

Reaching out to the woman's body as assuredly as he would to his glass of liquor or plate of bean pods, the man is in the position not only to desire but to have. That the man as customer is allowed to touch the hostesses confirms both a change in his "world"—from the duties and control outside the hostess club to the pleasures and release in it—and a change in his position. Instead of bending to the system, the man finds that the system accommodates him. The woman need not be cajoled, enticed, or consulted; she may simply be "taken." The man thus becomes the "taker," a position that begets power, masculinity, and pleasure.¹³

It is from this position that customers react to the bodies of the hostesses in two other ways. The first is a more extended commentary on the women's physical appearance. Unlike the brevity of so-called breast talk—the one-liners about a hostess's breasts that end in guffaws—this body talk often involves many parts of the woman's body and can be conducted in a serious or at least semiserious tone of voice:

Guest 1: Akiko has very pretty legs. She's only nineteen, you know.

Guest 2: Yeah, she's a *joshidaisei* (university student).

13. Sexual behavior grounded in a gendered relationship of unequal power is also the structure of rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and, according to some feminists, all sexually-based heterosexual relations in Western culture (see, for example, Dworkin 1981). Here, the sexual privilege accorded to male customers in hostess clubs institutionalizes the

Guest 1: She really looks slender, but she has no breasts whatsoever.

Guest 2: Maybe as she gets older, they'll grow.

Guest 1: Amazing, no breasts whatsoever to speak of. I mean, nothing at all.

Guest 2: Yeah, not even the hint of a breast.

Guest 1: (as Akiko walked back to the table from singing) You know, her ass is surprisingly large.

Guest 2: Yeah, she's very big there. Yet she looks so slender and has no breasts at all.

"Having" the woman, in this manifestation, entails less the mere physical presence and more the aesthetics of a display, there to be looked at like the furnishings and the Mama's dress. The hostess is expected to please, of course, in the service she renders, in the appearance she provides, and in the lecherousness she allows. And while the appearance of the hostesses is the area most criticized by customers about Bijō—one man saying that the Mama, the decor, and the general service were all superb enough to make Bijō "first class," but the hostesses' dress and beauty brought it down to a "second-class" club—still the men assess how the women look, as if there were a standard of appearance and as if they were its author, or at least its judge.

The direction of "the look," of course, goes predominantly one way. Women do discuss how men look, but the discussion is complimentary and is usually centered on clothing and accessories as evidence of social standing: "nice Italian shoes; they must be expensive"; "a Pierre Cardin tie—classy"; "a Gucci watch; you must be important." In contrast to the woman's attempt to glamorize or inflate a man's looks, the man's impulse is generally to strip the woman down. She becomes nothing more than her sexualized body parts and is stripped to what she "naturally," "actually" is: a woman with little breasts and a large butt, a woman with coarse hair and pudgy, though cute arms, a woman with fat legs but large breasts—in general, a female who is to be seen and judged by the harsh but authoritative eyes of the male. Significantly, men neither relish nor accept comparable treatment. Twice, after conversations when all the hostesses' breasts had been evaluated and discussed at length, I tried to ask the men about the size of their

sexualization of male privilege. Significantly and consistently, a new fad in hostess clubs in the early 1990s has been "sexual harassment" (*sebu haru*) clubs, where hostesses dress the part of O.L.s. This comes in the wake of Japan's first sexual harassment case, won by the plaintiff to the puzzlement and amusement of Japan's male population (*New York Times*, 17 April 1992).

penises. The reaction was immediate. They blanched, coughed nervously, and immediately changed the topic. The hostesses, however, laughed gleefully and patted me on the back.

Although some of the things customers say about the hostess's body can be overtly crude as well as rude—"Your vagina looks wide", "Do you wear underpants? Are they made of paper?" or "Maybe you're not even a woman—your breasts are so small"—such remarks are made in a tone that doesn't appear intended to insult and doesn't appear to be taken as insulting by the hostess. Many comments on appearance, in fact, are directed openly to the woman, whose tendency is to accept and agree with them wholeheartedly:

Guest 1: You're certainly pudgy, aren't you?

Hostess 1: You're right about that. I'm a real chubette; chubby arms, chubby legs, chubby tummy.

Guest 2: How flat-chested you are!

Hostess 1: Yep, I am. I have nothing down there, nothing at all.

Guest 2 (speaking to me): I can't stand your hair. It flops all over your forehead. You should brush it away. (He leans toward me to brush my hair off my forehead.)

Hostess 2 (speaking to me): *Otōsan* (referring to the guest who had addressed me) likes women with their hair up and off their faces. That's the reason he likes me, you know.¹⁴

This move, to address the woman's body not only in her "absence"—referring to or touching it as a means of establishing a particular rapport among men—but in her presence, signals the second form of male objectification or sexualization of the female within the club. Besides moving from talking about her to talking to her, men may proceed even further and say they desire her. Of course, even an initial breast remark ("What knockers you have") can be accompanied by a statement of desire ("and I'd love to touch them in bed with you one night"), but what I'm describing here are more intimate encounters, usually between one male and one female, that can include long, private conversations; whisperings back and forth; caresses of the hand, shoulder, and hair; and confessions, often mutually expressed, of sexual or romantic interest.

One rather strained engagement I witnessed took place when a man

14. *Otōsan*, literally "father," is used in the club for customers who come often or are important. Keiko told me that she used this term with customers she'd like to make her patrons.

brought his wife and son to Bijo to celebrate the son's new job. Another hostess, Sachiko, and I were seated with the party, and while I tried to speak with the wife, who was visibly uncomfortable, the son vacillated between our conversation and that between Sachiko and his father, which had warmed up immediately. All but ignoring his son, the father devoted his attention to Sachiko, cuddling up to her, caressing her hair, asking her to sing, kissing her fingers, patting her breasts, and, with repeated insistence and specificity, trying to set up a date with her at a love hotel on Saturday night.

Whether this particular date transpired or not I have no idea, but the official club line was that liaisons between customers and hostesses were neither encouraged nor allowed. In fact, I sensed that on occasion they did occur, but if they became obvious or extended the hostess involved would be fired or asked to resign. Soon after this encounter, in fact, Sachiko was no longer working at Bijo—why, I didn't find out. Far more common were flirtations between customers and hostesses—some brief, some longer, some highly stylized, some more personal, some physical, and some with no touching at all—that would end when either the hostess was moved to another table or the customer walked out the door. Like a snapshot of two lovers, the scene is one of attachment, but the picture is framed by the club. Hence, while men and women may profess to love one another here, the understanding is that this is a form of play, one that will not usually lead to a relationship, sexual or romantic, outside the club.

The manner in which this play usually proceeds is that a customer will flirt with one hostess and then with a second, who has taken her place; or he will continue his romancing with a different hostess at each of three, four, or even five clubs he may visit in a particular night; or he will persist with his advances toward one hostess even though she has for months refused to date him outside the club. In my own experience, I had men say they adored me, desired me, thought I was beautiful, wanted me for their mistress, and then either turn to another hostess and reiterate the same sentiments or leave the club and stay away for months, forgetting my name before their return. Other customers, more ardent in their pursuits, would continue asking me out without any encouragement from me.

What the man seemed to gain in these encounters was a kind of romantic exercise rather than an emotional or sexual experience. Assured that most hostesses would at least play along, the man would act as if the woman was his heartthrob, and she would respond in kind. The lack of sincerity appears quite irrelevant to the Japanese. In fact, I was told that only Westerners

mistake a gesture of sexual interest displayed in the hostess club for a willingness to bed down elsewhere. A Japanese told me of an American who had propositioned a flirtatious hostess and had been shocked when she took offense, considering him rude and even perverse. She, after all, had only been playing the hostess game. While Japanese customers proposition hostesses, they can be joked with and put off.

Exaggerated claims of love and adoration and hyperbolic compliments are not meant to be believed so much as enjoyed. Play calls for a suspension of belief, and in the hostess club playing is an experience a man can count on. He need not worry whether he'll really be liked, whether a woman will really find him attractive, or whether a female will be willing to flirt; he knows what he can expect, and the expectation is reassuring.

As a customer explained to me, when I asked if the canned performances of the hostesses were demeaning to a man, "Men are *sukebeis*, but they only have limited time and money to act out being dirty old men. The men who come to a hostess club like this are at least middle-aged; they don't have the energy to chase women all night. When they buy a woman a drink here, they know she'll pay them attention. A man feels good when a hostess tells him he's hot stuff. And if he still wants sex, there are places to go for that, too."

Part Two



Mapping the Nightlife within Cultural Categories

Nightwork

Sexuality,

Pleasure, and

Corporate Masculinity

in a Tokyo

Hostess

Club



Anne Allison

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London