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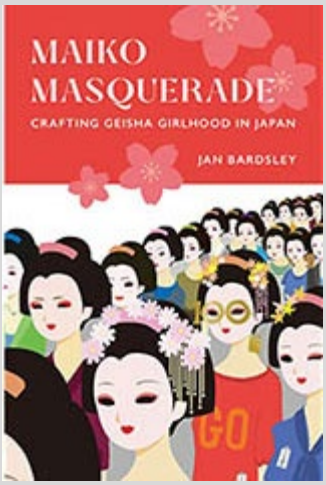

Jan Bardsley

Maiko Masquerade:
Crafting Geisha Girlhood in Japan

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reviewed by Flora Roussel

Dancing orientalism away in *maiko* studies

It is striking that the first images a western audience might have while thinking of the word *maiko* are either Chiyo-Sayuri of Arthur Goldman's bestseller *Memoirs of Geisha* (1997) and its cinematographic adaptation by Rob Marshall (2005), or—relatedly—of a girl or woman who is either a victim of, or a willingly participant in, sex work. A *maiko* (literally 'dancing girl') is in fact a *geisha* apprentice, 'the quintessential Kyoto girl' (1), who may or may not become a *geisha* (women performing Japanese traditional arts) after her apprenticeship. In *Maiko Masquerade. Crafting Geisha Girlhood in Japan,* scholar Jan Bardsley criticises such narrow views, while noting that some Japanese also see *maiko* and *geisha* as (young) women forcibly engaged in a sort of prostitution (11).

In her book, Bardsley proposes an insightful reading of numerous representations of *maiko.* Her starting point is the fascination around these *geisha* apprentices that she has observed during her field trips in Japan and in the research of westerners writing for a western audience. She compellingly avoids falling into mere orientalism, for not only is she conscious of her bias (28–30), but also, her analysis focuses for the most part on representations of *maiko* produced by and for Japanese themselves, and on how the meaning of these representations has shifted over time. Bardsley investigates the symbolism of *maiko* in the past, but also examines twenty-first-century texts—tourist guides, academic papers and books, mangas, films, novels, autobiographies, museum exhibitions, visual images and objects—in order to understand the popularity that *maiko* have acquired since the 2000s.

Bardsley asks herself how what she calls 'geisha girlhood' (front cover) is crafted, that is, how the *maiko* comes to symbolise an 'exemplary Japanese girl' (3). The *maiko* embodies tradition—in performing long-established and almost historic arts such as dance—and, at the same time, modernity—in becoming a 'positive icon' (12) of popular culture as both a branding and a holder of Japanese moral values. Indeed, the virtuous *maiko* contrasts with 'the delinquent high school girl of the 1990s' (13), who is too associated with 'compensated dating and materialism' and with a later refusal of motherhood (14). Without a doubt, Bardsley's impressively dense research contributes to the field of Gender Studies in its examination of the polishing of an already highly codified Japanese girlhood, whose sexuality and gender identity seem to be confined to

heteronormative definitions.

The flower of femininity through the *hanamachi* world

Throughout Bardsley's portrait of *maiko,* key terms such as *maiko rashisa* (maiko-likeness), *onna rashisa* (woman-likeness) and *jibun rashisa* ('living in a manner that suits and expresses one's own self') (30–32) enable an understanding of the ambivalent gender performance of *maiko.* Drawing on Gitte Marianne Hansen's concept of contradictive femininity,[1] Bardsley indeed argues that 'the narratives [she discusses in the book] call attention to the artifice and performativity of maiko-likeness, value jibun rashii goals, but rarely question the social structures and conventions driving multiple expectations for femininity' (33). Her choice of word—masquerade—illustrates a *mise en abyme* of this contradictive femininity. On the one hand, *maiko* are performers of multiple arts; on the other, they are themselves performances.

What I would like to call a doubling effect of masquerade is analysed in six chapters. The first two chapters posit the backstage of the *maiko* on display. Here, Bardsley focuses on the association or identity that the image of *maiko* has with the community that the *hanamachi* (literally 'flower district') represents, as well as on the career trajectory of *maiko,* from apprentice to *geisha.* While the choice of becoming *maiko* is (now) a free one, the way into maiko-likeness and *geisha*-performance is highly codified, suggesting a paradox about the *jibun rashisa* of these girls (e.g., 93–101). Indeed, how to remain true to oneself if one must perform another self? The following four chapters further insist on the ambivalent meaning of *maiko.* Throughout her analysis, Bardsley demonstrates how *maiko* freely engage with the hard training for an idealised Japanese femininity, while *geisha* are independent businesswomen, unmarried and sometimes even single mothers. For instance, in Chapter Four, 'From Victim to Artist: Maiko Stories in Movies and Mangas,' she notes a significant shift in representations of *maiko:* from children forced into sex work in movies of the 1950s to perfect and virtuous Japanese girls in a 2000s' NHK-TV drama—girls who 'mature and find themselves in conservative, gender-appropriate … roles' (134).

Living in the 'flower district' *(hanamachi), maiko* are ephemeral performers of purity. Bardsley further explains that most narratives—even the autobiographies of retired or still active *geisha*—develop around maiko-likeness in order to avoid the discomfort that some might feel in front of the non-normative independence of *geisha.* This is notably illustrated in the girl comic *Maiko-san-chi no Makanai-san,* in which the main character, *maiko* Sū-chan, is confronted with 'a procession of one man after another calling on Momoko' (137), the *geisha* whose apartment Sū-chan visits to take care of Momoko's cat. The apparent 'geiko's ease with men' is quickly discarded as the manga goes on to focus on 'Momoko's role as a model of physical and emotional strength' (138). Interestingly, this erotic suggestion appears less shocking in the story of a boy maiko. Chapter Five, 'Adventures of a Boy Maiko: *There Goes Chiyogiku!,*' illustrates the use of *maiko* imaginary in a Boys' Love light novel. The boy Mikiya 'masquerades on the weekends as the maiko Chiyogiku' (140). While Bardsley concludes her analysis by stating that the gender-crossing, the sexual harassment, and the love relationships in the novel 'reinforce a female-male binary' (160), I would suggest that Mikiya's masquerade allows such connections to sexuality and sexual violence because the audience knows he is a boy, who, at the end, 'envisions only masculine roles in his future' (152).

Dolls on display in salons' vitrine

Overall, Bardsley claims that the apparent purity of *maiko* is a learned one: the gender performance of Japanese femininity is constructed. However, it would have been interesting to

further analyse how *maiko* representations are not solely gender performances; rather they seem to illustrate a male view of femininity—a *male gaze* that is deeply internalised. I earlier ventured in this direction in my mention of Bardsley's analysis of the BL novel *Shōnen maiko: Chiyogiku ga yuku,* and I could apply the same critique to the 'salon masculinity' described in detail in Chapter One, which opens the door to the *hanamachi* world: the residence of *maiko* and *geisha* with the teahouses, dances and evening entertainments. Describing how the *hanamachi* functions as a system, Bardsley underlines how this community might welcome women's leadership, especially in the management of the tea houses, and create safe spaces for women to go and live, yet proposes only conventional gender roles. While tourists can also enjoy the dance of *maiko* and *geisha,* the latter are still dependent on what Bardsley calls a 'salon masculinity' (53). Although the term brilliantly defines a masculinity idealised by the *hanamachi,* that is, a masculinity which is based on respect, manners, loyalty, long-term relationships, trust, wisdom, wealth (54–55), it does not completely capture the male gaze on women in the conception of the *hanamachi* community. Indeed, Bardsley explains this salon masculinity as being mostly conceived by women, especially in 'fictional portraits' (53).

She further parallels this community with the idea of family, that is, she portrays the managers as mothers to the apprentices and as mothering the male clientele, and the *maiko* as 'surrogate daughters' to the favoured and familiar clients (55). In so doing, she refers to the weight of loyalty attached to this idealised family. However, we could also suggest that the male client symbolises a father and, as such, the head of the family. The position of authority, already implied by the client's status as buying services and sponsoring artistic careers, reveals, I believe, a male point of view on how the *hanamachi* should function. Therefore, the salon masculinity is itself a masquerade: it illustrates an internalised male gaze on the gendered relationships between artists and clients. While the novel *Shōnen maiko: Chiyogiku ga yuku* (Chapter Five) lampoons the stereotypical old male client by presenting us instead with the handsome Nirezaki, who falls in love with Chiyogiku, the comic effect emerging from a modernised and attractive salon masculinity does not result in a subversion of gender conventions. After all, Nirezaki sexually harasses Chiyogiku/Mikiya.

Although this aspect of the book is in need of more thorough scrutiny, it is another theme that leads me to close the book with a sense of having been presented with an undecided case. As Bardsley herself states (31), her argumentation recalls Judith Butler's gender performativity,[2] but her explanation of that link falls short. Bardsley might have wanted to show her avoidance of western-oriented philosophies that, in most cases, deform the reality of non-western people and cultures. To consider Butler more thoroughly, though, would have raised the question of agency that is, I would say, inherent in the analysis of *jibun rashisa.* Discussing *jibun rashisa* particularly in the conclusion, which focuses on the myth of the ordinary girl—the romanticised alter-ego of the pure *maiko* who 'has given up [the pleasures of ordinariness] for her artistic path' (201)—Bardsley convincingly shows that, although the notion of choice is liberating compared to other times where girls had no choice, this progress strips Japanese girls of any political significance. 'Attention from the foreclosures effected by gender, class, regional privilege, and ethnicity' is averted (202).

However, it would have been an asset to directly address the question of agency. In fact, agency sheds light on the *politics* of gender performance. Butler reminds us of 'the account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse/power [which] cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject.'[3] In becoming a site of performance, agency is itself vulnerable. The regulatory practice of performativity only creates the illusion of stability. Does the *maiko* masquerade not reveal this illusion? Bardsley repeatedly highlights the absence of real criticism in

maiko representations; she does not, however, politicise the discourse around *maiko* as much as the embodiment of *maiko*—the surface of a political discourse related to agency—demands. If we agree that acting is a political gesture, we should also measure its impact. Although Bardsley compellingly discusses a sort of 'Japaneseness … stimulat[ing] ethno-culturalist sentiment' (58) and national identity through national heritage and traditional culture, she also leaves unanswered questions. Some of them are acknowledged at the very end of her book, such as the motivations to abandon *maiko rashisa* and the future *onna rashisa* of *maiko* (203–4). Bardsley thus seems to invite us to pick up these questions and pursue the research.

Undaunted by the fact that *maiko* often seem to be nothing more than dolls on display in salons' vitrine, Bardsley produces deep insights into their gender masquerade, thereby criticising the codification and commodification of girlhood in Japan. As she explains in Chapter Six, 'Hit a Homer, Maiko! Maiko Visual Comedy,' which depicts attempts at subverting *maiko* representations while reinforcing *maiko rashisa,* the masquerade might be a lure, but it is a powerful one.

Notes

[1] Gitte Marianne Hansen defines contradictive femininity as follows: 'Contradictive femininity is my attempt at … conceptualising the specific chaos of Japanese normative femininity, where multiplicity, extendability and transformativity as well as the ability to navigate conflicting norms are key competences women must acquire to successfully perform within the limits of the normative Japanese gender leash' (*Femininity, Self-harm and Eating Disorders in Japan. Navigating Contradiction in Narrative and Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 38).

[2] See especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* New York: Routledge, 2007 (1990).

[3] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'* New York, London: Routledge Classics, 2011 (1993), p. xxiii.

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