JOKING, GENDER, POWER, AND PROFESSIONALISM AMONG JAPANESE INN WORKERS[1]

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Female workers at a Japanese inn express their identity and pride through joking about their work experience and private lives. Their joking is a discourse that reflects yet resists their employment conditions and social relations. (Japan, joking behavior, power relations, gender)

Studies of joking relations in different cultural contexts have been of interest in anthropology for at least a half-century (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1952; Douglas 1968; Rigby 1968; Spradley and Mann 1975). While acknowledging the vast domain of insights opened by those studies, an analysis of the joking among female workers at a Japanese inn, located at a hot-springs resort region called Hanayu, enlarges and deepens an understanding of the social functions of joking.[2] The women workers are the epitome of politeness and courtesy when dressed in their kimonos and serving guests, but when they are out of their guests' sight they joke among themselves and behave in an antistructural manner. That is, they drop manners and formality to be casual, use their own dialect, and omit polite forms of speech such as female markers. With a rudeness inappropriate before guests, they make cynical remarks about their working conditions and their superiors, thereby mocking the conditions of their lives that they can neither change nor escape.

The female staffs of the large inns at Japanese hot-spring resorts provide the resorts' primary interaction with the public. The women serve meals, make and pour tea, set out bedding, and in other ways strive to make guests feel welcome, comfortable, and relaxed. In their relations with guests the women manifest a highly skilled professionalism. They use a formal, socially distancing style of speech, move in their kimonos in a graceful, feminine manner, and serve the various breakfast and dinner dishes with meticulous care. This rigid formality before guests is dropped when they gather among themselves away from and out of sight of the guests. Then they joke and banter with one another, relax, use informal speech in the local dialect, don regional dress, and frequently are crude or gross in behavior.

Ambiguities exist in the employee structure of the inn. For example, men provide support services for the women workers, but the men's work in running the inn is subordinate to that of the women. Men in Japanese society in general have greater social status and power than women. Such ambiguities inform much of the women's joking. Because men are subordinate to women in the inn business, they frequently are the butt of jokes, and sometimes face particularly skilled jibes. They then have no recourse but to quietly and humbly swallow their pride. Another area of ambiguity that provokes joking is the strain between the most experienced female workers and

ETHNOLOGY vol. 40 no. 4, Fall 2001, pp. 361-69.
ETHNOLOGY, c/o Department of Anthropology, The University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA 15260 USA

the less experienced woman in charge of the female staff. The workers under her supervision contest her authority through joking and other means.

The Japanese believe that virtue comes from having persevered through hardship and suffering (*kurô*). Overcoming suffering and hardship is one of the ways authority is contested. The more experienced workers use this moral or spiritual superiority in their joking to dispute the authority of the head of the female workers. Her power stems from her position in the organization and not from hardship and suffering. The workers' jokes point to how their own identity is constructed. The jokes convey the concept that the status of a full-fledged worker is proudly built from hardship and the women consider that they embody the pride of hardship in their work more than do their male co-workers.

GENDERED TECHNIQUES

In contrast to a hotel, where guests receive services mostly from male workers, at a Japanese inn (*ryokan*) female workers in kimonos take care of guests throughout their stay. They welcome guests at the front entrance, carry their bags, serve tea and sweets in the guest rooms, inform them about services and sightseeing, bring them robes for bathing, and serve their meals. Guests are assigned the same worker to serve them until they check out of the inn.

In order to move properly in kimonos, workers must learn how to walk, stand up, turn around, open a sliding door, sit, bow, and kneel when serving dishes. The prescribed body movements express politeness and gratitude, and create an appropriate social space between a guest and a female worker. These conventions are derived from the art of the tea ceremony (*sadô* or *cha-no-yu*). The inn proprietress (*okami*), always a woman, expects females to be able not only to properly serve guests, but also to learn the skills of the tea ceremony.

Social distance between guests and workers is expressed through language and in the use of honorifics. Whereas polite language is associated with guests, the local dialect is used among the staff to share closeness. The use of formal Japanese prevents an improper familiarity with the guests. The body movements and language used declare that the staff are not coquettish. Indeed, they express the absence of female sexuality.

Good inn workers are sensitive to what their customers prefer and know how to create a relaxing time for them. When serving dinner, the women can vary their routine according to the preferences of the guests. They usually bring many dishes and serve them in a timely manner, but they have to be careful about the order in which each of the dishes is served, and they need to be prepared for brief conversations with guests if necessary. They know how each of the food items is cooked, since guests frequently ask about the food and its preparation. They also must know the order in which to serve the guests, which depends on their rank. The person of highest social status should be served first.

The inn workers provide a kind of stage performance. The stage consists of elements that are disappearing in modern urban settings. Travelers seek Japaneseness, called "the vanishing" (Ivy 1995:20), and tourist advertisements point them toward places like inns, which recreate things seen as authentically traditional. Each inn has a traditional room with tatami mats and a *tokonoma* alcove exhibiting antiques, a scroll, and flowers. This room is where the hostesses perform. Men do not come into the tatami room to serve. They are limited to playing supportive roles behind the scenes; it is women who take center stage.

The Japanese word for how the women serve guests (*motenashi*) carries no power implications such as those embedded in the relationship between a master and servant. Neither do these services offered to guests imply any hierarchy of social position. Rather, they connote hospitality, politeness, and gratitude. The inn workers express these values to the extent that they are capable of meeting the expectations of their guests and appear to provide sincere hospitality (*kokoro no komotta motenashi*). A good performance conveys a sense of traditional Japan.

This nostalgia for the past can be traced back to Japan's economic growth in the 1960s, when people in Japan began to equate its modernization with the loss of tradition. This is especially apparent with traditional material culture. Even tatami mats are becoming scarce, let alone elegant kimonos and nicely arranged flowers. The inn business has responded to widespread Westernization and modernization in its own way. Females at the inn deal with these changes by presenting guests with something lacking in their everyday life: Japaneseness. In response to Westernization, the traditional aspects of Japan are emphasized and performed at an inn. Like seasoned actors, the inn workers have an ethic of giving their best performance despite any personal difficulties and sorrows. Maintaining a daily high level of professionalism to serve their guests is difficult for them. The challenges of the job are clearly understood and appreciated by their proprietress. She knows how hard it is to serve the guests and to live up to their high expectations. She also knows that her workers commonly have sad marriages and suffer various misfortunes. It is often said that the female workers at an inn have dark pasts. Otherwise, why would they seek such work?

FEMALE-CENTERED DISCOURSE

The following description of joking behavior focuses on one particular inn which, like other inns, is a household business handed down in the owner's family for generations and expanded with the introduction of a capitalist economy. While the proprietress controls the business, the ownership of household property is registered in her husband's name. The proprietress plays the central role of dealing with tourists, travel agents, financial consultants, bankers, and investors. She has good business sense and has increased the number of guests. At present, the inn can accommodate up to 400 guests and employs approximately 70 workers, of which females number about twenty. The cultural scenes presented below describe other

inns equally well. Most workers have come from other inns. Novices quickly learn to join with the rest in joking.

The employees who directly serve guests are called *ruumu*, which is derived from the English word "room." In the past, these women were called *jochuu*. They meet every morning after their guests check out. These meetings mark the end of their work from the previous day and the beginning of the new day. The head of the female workers usually leads the meeting, while the proprietress occasionally takes part, and assigns each worker to a group of guests. Matters that need attention are also discussed.

Ordinarily people in Japan address and refer to each other using the last name. Here, all the female workers address each other by their first name, one they chose when they came to work at the inn. If they prefer, they can use a different name. Male workers do not have such names. The name chosen when working for an inn is referred to as *Genji-na*. When they do not use this name, they call each other *o-nee-san*, which means waitress at an inn or restaurant, but also means "older sister." Although sibling relationships are not implied by this, the workers know each other well enough to talk about their private lives and problems. One said, "I enjoy my co-workers so much that I forget my personal and family problems. They mean more to me than my parents, brothers, and sisters."

The head of the women, named Nobu-san, is divorced. Like those she supervises, she is lonely, having only two dogs to keep her company at home. Although she has worked for the inn for less than ten years, she is the oldest of the workers. Her two best workers, trained by the former proprietress, are Chika-san and Shizu-san. Both are married to cooks working at different inns in the region. Another worker, Sumie-san, is in charge of five women who complete the meals prepared by the cooks. Her husband was killed in a traffic accident when she was 24 years old. She has remained single and raised their only child by herself.

The morning meetings are informal and relaxed. The women sit on the floor in a loose circle around their supervisor or lean against the wall and stretch their legs. Some smoke cigarettes. One male, Nomura-san, is usually present. He is responsible for the front desk, the souvenir shop, and the bars. Meetings usually last less than 30 minutes. Nobu-san tries to conduct them in a businesslike manner, but she is frequently interrupted with teasing and joking, to which she often responds with a brief scolding. Some typical meetings are described below.

At one meeting they discussed how to retain *haori* jackets lent to guests. The proprietress ordered these traditional jackets to help create an elegant image. Occasionally, guests take them home as souvenirs. Nobu-san asked the workers for ideas to manage the problem. Getting none, Nobu-san angrily shouted, "Don't depend on others. Each of you needs to think about how to manage this problem." The workers then began to tease her, making cynical remarks like, "I think there aren't enough haori." "When we traveled [together on holiday] last time, some of us took home the bath towels." "Yeah, I couldn't ask guests to return the haori to me. It's impolite." "There are sneaky people everywhere. Besides, we're too busy and

I don't have the time and energy to work on that." Nobu-san responded and concluded with, "Give me a break! All I want is for you to think about it, not to do extra work. Anyway, try to come up with some ideas by tomorrow."

The more disciplined workers, like Chika-san, Shizu-san, and Sumie-san, do not participate in this horseplay. The jokes are made by those with less experience. Despite the fact that Nobu-san is the manager of these workers, the latter address her in the local dialect, which lacks polite forms. They are trained not to use this dialect with guests, but do joke in it. Their casual use of speech and their relaxed behavior is in sharp contrast to Nobu-san's formality and dignity. Her remarks that provoke chuckles concern the tasks and services for guests. The workers indirectly tell Nobu-san through joking that they themselves are not ideologically enslaved by their position.

After another morning meeting, some of the workers whose guests had checked out remained to rest until the next guests arrived that afternoon. Over a cup of tea, fruit, sweets, and rice crackers, they talked about themselves and joked about their work. Nomura-san, the man in charge of the front desk, sighed, "Oh, I'm tired." Sumie-san ridiculed him. "What? What do you get tired from?" The other workers grinned, for this implied that his exhaustion was not from work but due to matters like his family life. This left him speechless. Later, Nomura-san blurted out, "Oh, I wish I could be a ruumu." This remark clearly denigrated a job exclusively for females. "If you want to do it so badly, go ahead," said Nobu-san. Chika-san added, "I can lend you a wig. Oh, you also need a kimono." Sumie-san said, "Our guests would have a fit and run." Nomura-san remained quiet after being portrayed as ludicrous. In telling these jokes, the workers express not only pride in their skill but also the gender hierarchy in which males are marginal while females are central.

During the conversation, Nomura-san was attentive to the women, making sure that each had tea and something to eat. His position at the inn is equal to Nobu-san's and higher than that of other workers. Thus, his serving the women tea is anomalous. In a Japanese workplace, women, not men, serve tea. Later, Nomura-san laughingly said to me, "There are three okami in this inn; *Senmu* (executive director), Nobu-san, and Sumie-san. They are forceful. Each is a woman of decision and action."

The usual term for proprietress, okami, implies a kimono-dressed proprietress controlling a large enterprise. Although the inn business in Japan has deep historical roots, it expanded enormously with the rise of wealth in postwar industrial Japan. What had been small family enterprises became lucrative big businesses that adopted corporate organization. In such an inn, Nomura-san's position is ambiguous. On the one hand, he is a department head and superior to the female workers. On the other hand, he must defer to them and be careful not to offend them.

Male workers at the inn also talk about personal matters. For example, Imada-san's responsibility is to assist the women. Like the rest, he freely talks about his personal problems with his co-workers. He is divorced and resides with his new companion. She left her former husband and her daughter is with her. Imada-san complained that the daughter "eats three times as much as I do. Her figure is

developing and she is getting fat. She walks in front of me in only her underwear. I don't know what to do." "You might want to help her exercise at night," Sumie-san suggested slyly. Imada-san laughed and said, "I'm too tired. I work too hard."

Sumie-san, one of the model workers, says that the workday breaks energize her. When she first arrived at the inn, after working for the Toshiba Company, she was surprised at all the joking taking place. Initially, she felt unable to participate in the humor, as she was a novice. She now realizes how important it is for the workers to talk about the trifling matters of daily life and to tease each other. "People here feel lonely and are starved for affection. They have been divorced once or twice. Some live with a lover. All have family problems. They need someone to talk with about themselves." Sumie-san uses the word *seikatsu* (life) to denote what the workers do together. They are at the inn not only to earn a living, but also to share their problems. To joke with each other about private matters is their way of constructing meaning in their lives.

The inn employees are expected to work from six o'clock in the morning until late at night. They may take a break from noon to three, when some workers go home to nap. The challenging working conditions affect their marriages and family lives. Unless their spouses also work in the same industry, it is difficult for them to understand the work situation and why they cannot spend more time together.

Although men's work also is arduous, they only need to meet the expectation of the proprietress, while the women must also satisfy the guests. Women's work is also more complicated because they have to work as a team. One person's mistake will affect the others, and guests' complaints can lead to conflict within the group. How the women perform relates directly to the reputation of the inn's service, which puts them under greater stress than the men.

The women say that the most difficult and tedious tasks are when they prepare for a banquet and before the arrival of new guests. These require teamwork to arrange seats and make some of the dishes. To help set tables, each worker holds a box of dishes with her left hand, carried at waist level. She moves around the banquet room in a crouch to place the dishes on the table. Each guest must receive about fifteen dishes arranged in a certain order. The task requires physical strength and skill to balance the box. The work is hard because the women have to kneel on the tatami mats each time they bring dishes and clear them away, and many workers suffer from bad knees.

Tomiko-san, who has three years of experience at the inn, says the most difficult part of the job is serving the guests. When they approach the end of preparing the dishes and get ready to serve the guests, the workers become quiet and tense. They work in teams of two or three. Although the basic meal is already prepared and arranged on the table, other hot dishes have yet to be served. Tomiko-san worries about the right timing to bring in each dish, such as tempura, miso soup, and rice. She often works with the experienced worker, Chika-san, and asks her when to bring each of the dishes and what to do with a special guest. They also have to make sure

that every dish served maintains its proper aesthetic arrangement, as its contents may move while being carried from the kitchen.

Jokes come into play when workers make mistakes. One day, Koshizu, the youngest female worker at the inn, miscounted the number of dishes to set for guests, at which Sumie-san said, "Koshizu, you should count better. Not 47 seats here, only 40." Koshizu playfully responded, "Oh, I was thinking about Imada-san's good looks." Sumie-san replied, "Well, if you can't take your mind off handsome men, you can go home." Sumie-san and Koshizu chuckled. "Really, can I go home now?" Koshizu asked. Everyone around Koshizu laughed and followed that with banter and repartee. Who would not prefer being at home to working? Still laughing, Sumie-san and Koshizu helped each other rearrange the tables and dishes.

Small mistakes can happen at any moment because the workers are dealing with a large number of guests. Prior to the expansion of the inn business, guests did not have meals at an inn but ate out. Even if the inn served dinner, the elegant dishes that are served today did not exist. Influenced by economic changes, the inn business now has more guests than in the past. Inns now serve elaborate dinners and breakfasts consisting of numerous dishes. In addition to having a large kitchen, inns commonly have additional small restaurants, noodle shops, bars, and souvenir shops.

Chika-san and Shizu-san, who worked for the previous proprietress of the same inn, are recognized as those who underwent hardship (kurô). They often talk about their past experiences, when things were considered to be much tougher. For example, they delight in telling the other workers how they were trained by a previous proprietress. In the past, before the business had expanded, the proprietress and her workers used to do everything for the inn business. The workers washed the night robes, bed clothes, and towels, and were responsible for cleaning the guest rooms and other areas in the inn. Furthermore, they made their own uniforms. In those bygone days, young female workers used to be called *gyougi-minarai* (apprentices learning good manners and discipline) and were trained by the proprietress.

Nobu-san, the new head, sometimes feels required to assert her authority over Chika-san and Shizu-san, and does so through joking. One day, the two experienced workers talked about how they used to bring dishes from the kitchen to the guest rooms without using elevators, since there was no electricity to run elevators or even provide heat. The workers had to carry as many as ten dishes while going up and down the stairs. Listening to them bragging about how tough the past was, Nobu-san said, "You probably were deliberately ruining the food that way, always falling down and making a mess just to get the cooks angry." At this, the other workers around Nobu-san howled with delight. By provoking the laughter, Nobu-san asserted the legitimacy of the present ways of running the inn.

The ability to joke is intertwined with the construction of a mature personhood and the means by which the workers find personal meaning in everyday life. They joke about work tasks, daily concerns, past experiences, and gender roles, all of which relate to suffering. The employees both emulate and resist the others through

joking, particularly the women. Women's importance is related to the powerful figure of the proprietress, who does not participate in the joking. The workers mention her in jest, but they do not joke in front of her. She is an intimidating person.

THE POLITICS OF JOKING

Joking is a culturally sanctioned way to express identity, pride, and power. Joking, sexual banter, irony, and ridicule reflect the inn's female centrality. The hierarchy is based on the experience and skill providing hospitality and service to guests. In addition to the performance of their Japanese-style feminine hospitality for guests, their ability to make jokes is cultivated through work experiences. As Spradley and Mann (1975) indicated for a cocktail waitress in America, learning to make jokes is a kind of rite of passage. But unlike what occurs in an American bar, in a Japanese inn females joke more energetically than males. The female inn workers also convey the notion that they are the ones who play the essential roles of the inn business.

Joking is the means by which the women express their sentiments about their work. Jokes, twisted irony, ridicule, and sexual banter are how they voice their everyday difficulties. The ironic laugh conveys their interpretation of their experiences and reveals their conviction that they achieve professionalism through their toil. They know the significance of their responsibilities and are proud to play roles exclusive to females.

The mastery and sophistication of the workers and proprietress in the art of sincere hospitality are often referred to as being filled with heart, spirit, will, or mind. This concept is central to the Japanese sense of self (Lebra 1990). A mature person is expected to show in behavior the sentiment of *omoiyari* (empathy and care for others) (Lebra 1976, 1990). The ability to be sensitive to others, considerate about their situations and feelings, and willingness to take care of them is linked to this sentiment. Through expressing politeness, courtesy, graciousness, and hospitality, the workers convey the value of empathy, which is one aspect of mature personhood. They are to be empathetic and caring toward the guests. As Lebra (1990) argues, such behavior is a manifestation of one's inner feelings. Unless the inn service is seen as sincere, the workers are not considered by their guests to be professional. This notion is regarded as a foundation of the strength, energy, and persistence of the Japanese in such roles as businessman, potter, calligrapher, and weaver (cf. Creighton 1992; Rohlen 1974; Moeran 1984; Singleton 1989, 1998).

Thus, the female inn workers convey the inner self. They know that they are the ones who are central to the inn. Its success requires them to appropriately exhibit these basic Japanese values to guests. Moreover, they need to be persistent in doing monotonous and repetitive hard work that extends from early morning to late at night. An experienced worker puts herself in her customers' place, intuitively knows their preferences, and accordingly conveys politeness, gratitude, and hospitality.

CONCLUSION

The operation of an inn is a means through which women wield power. A female-centered hierarchy is characteristic of the inn's social organization. By providing hospitality and service to guests, women gain power and the men who support them merely play marginal roles. The female workers are the "vehicles of power" (Foucault 1980:98), which they manifest through joking. Through jokes, the workers symbolically attack the established order without subverting it. Through jokes, the women manifest who they are, what they feel, what they achieved, how to cultivate themselves, and their importance for the business. Through jokes, their pride in their ability to convey Japaneseness is expressed, and the spiritual foundation of their identity through suffering is reflected.

NOTES

1. This article is based on fieldwork conducted from 1994 to 1995 and funded by the Japan Science Society Sasakawa Foundation, the Tokyo Kaijo Foundation, and the Japan Council. I am grateful to L. Keith Brown, Deborah C. Fiedler, Richard Scaglion, John Singleton, Pamela J. Stewart, Andrew J. Strathern, and Gail Benjamin for their valuable comments and support. I thank all those in Hanayu Hot Spring who assisted the research and Alice N. Lee for her editorial help.

2. Hanayu is located in a mountainous region of Honshu Island and easily accessible from Tokyo by train or car. The names of local people and the community are pseudonyms. A description of these inns and their relationship to the community appears in Yoshida (1997).

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