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KIMONO AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES¹



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This article argues that the distinction between Japanese and Western attire is a part of the process of the construction of gendered and cultural identities in modern Japan. Kimono in modern Japan has been invented as national attire and as a marked feminine costume. Women have become models of Japanese femininity, as contrasted with men, who have been given the role of models for rational action and achievement. The article follows this dynamic process in modern Japan, and more particularly analyzes the process of producing young women for their coming-of-age ceremony. (Japan, kimono, gender, cultural identities)

Modern Japanese wear Western clothing (*yōfuku*). Japanese attire (*wafuku*) that is clearly distinguished from Western attire is worn mainly on ceremonial occasions such as weddings, funerals, and the coming-of-age ceremony (*seijin shiki*) celebrated at the age of twenty. This distinction between the Western and the Japanese lies at the heart of the process of building cultural identity in modern Japan. That process consists of two aspects: by the cultural construction of what is Japanese and what is Western; and by constructing the traditional and the modern. This article illustrates how the construction of gendered identities is related to the construction of cultural identity in contemporary Japan by showing how kimono in modern Japan has been invented not only as national attire, but also as marked feminine attire, and by analyzing how young women are processed for their coming-of-age ceremony.

The aim of characterizing the Japanese woman was part of the cultural remaking of Japan from as early as the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) and has remained the preoccupation of the political and intellectual elite as the “woman question” (Bernstein 1991:13). In the Meiji era (1868-1912), with the state’s declared official aim of building a rational, modern nation, women in the new Japan were clearly and officially defined as benefiting the nation by being wives and mothers.

Modern Japanese society has waged a vivid and conscious discourse on women. The issue of how women should or should not behave has rarely been left either to chance or to individual choice (Bernstein 1991:13). The preoccupation with women’s proper role has remade them as representations. However, this has not been in the sexual sense that is usually implied in feminist writing (see Mulvey 1989, 1996), but in the sense of models of tradition and the maintenance of the precious household (*ie*).² The proper role of women, which has been defined from the Meiji period by the slogan “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*), is clearly opposed to the role of men, who are regarded as models for action and rational enlightenment (Uno 1993).

One of the fascinating symbols of the distinction between the sexes can be seen in the difference in dress on significant formal occasions such as weddings, funerals,

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and the coming-of-age ceremony celebrated at the age of twenty. While men wear rational, "active" Western suits, women are encouraged to put on kimono. This is more than a question of fashion or taste: the kimono that is wrapped around the female body has become a national symbol of tradition, and so perfectly completes the image of Japaneseness, as opposed to Westernness, which the kimono-clad woman has come to represent in contemporary Japan.

This article examines some of the ways by which Japanese women are made into representations of Japaneseness via the role of kimono in modern Japan. My argument draws on a Geertzian distinction between models *of* and models *for*. I show that while women have been made into models *of* Japaneseness (or of Japanese womanhood), the role of men has been constructed as a model *for* rational action and achievement. While models *for* provide "non-symbolic" information and are in fact models for action, models *of* "function not to provide sources of information in terms of which other processes can be patterned, but to represent those patterned processes as such" (Geertz 1973:94).

Since the Second World War, the coming-of-age day has been a national holiday. Celebrated on January 15, schools, municipalities, and other social institutions hold public ceremonies called *seijin shiki* honoring all who will be turning twenty in that calendar year. As twenty is the age of legal majority in modern Japan, these young adults are therefore honored as becoming legal adults. However, it seems that in recent years the participation in the ceremony itself is certainly not the main focus of the day. It is the attire worn, and especially the expensive kimono worn by the female participants, which has become the focus of the day. While great effort and money are invested in producing the perfect woman in kimono, men are formally required to don a Western suit. This obvious gender distinction is significant for supporting this article's thesis that the process of kimono dressing produces a cultural idiom called the "Japanese woman."

In contemporary Japan, kimono has become so separated from everyday life that kimono dressing itself has become the esoteric knowledge of a few. These are women who have achieved their expertise through special kimono schools offering courses to modern women who lack familiarity with kimono and kimono dressing. The involvement of such expert hands in producing the right kimono appearance has created a complicated process aimed at achieving a well-packaged cylindrical form of the female body (Dalby 1983:291). In so doing, the female body is not only shaped into a cylindrical form, but is in fact molded into the cultural pattern of the "good wife, wise mother."

In no way is this to argue that women in contemporary Japan are restricted only to traditional or female roles. Their involvement in wage labor is high and steadily increasing (Brinton 1993; Molony 1995; Saso 1990) and their intimacy with the West has been increasing (Kelsky 1994, 1996; Rosenberger 1992). The important point is that the construction of modern Japanese identity has involved inventing traditional cultural roles for men and women. Just as the process of new nation and identity building has been closely related to distinctions between the Japanese and the

Western, so has the distinction between men and women constantly been related to the same cultural construction. The invention of modern kimono lies at the heart of these cultural distinctions.

THE INVENTION OF MODERN KIMONO

The word kimono simply denotes something to wear. However, while in premodern Japan it included various styles of everyday as well as festive clothing (Dalby 1993:139; Yanagida 1957:11), in modern Japan only one mode has remained. When contemporary Japanese use the word kimono, they usually refer to the modern kimono, which stems from the decorative festive clothing worn by the elite on special occasions (Dalby 1993:139). The shift to a single-mode kimono was coupled with the almost total neglect, as well as denigration, of the many traditional work kimono, especially those of rural men and women (Dalby 1993:146-49; Segawa 1948:89). Japanese styles of dress lost their dominance in the Meiji period due to the growing availability of Western attire, which not only was cheaper but also was much more convenient as work apparel. From the nineteenth century on, a single-mode kimono has been defined as native attire as opposed to the foreign or Western.

The state's overt involvement in cultivating a single native kimono in the crucial stages of constructing the modern Japanese society is not surprising. Processes of nation building have been described as including the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Japan has not lacked such inventions (Bestor 1990; Creighton 1992, 1995; Goldstein-Gidoni 1997; Ivy 1988; Kelly 1990; Vlastos 1998). As in other areas of the world, the field of national costume offers a creative arena for invention and deliberate changes (Trevor-Roper 1983). With modern kimono, like other inventions of tradition in modern Japan (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997, In press), what is Western plays a significant role. It is conceived in large collective terms that make it absolutely and systematically different from the Japanese (Moeran 1990:9). Both the Western and the Japanese are referred to as cultural and discursive constructs rather than as objective realities (Ivy 1995:1, n. 1).

This discursive quality of the Japanese is apparent in the way kimono is presented in contemporary Japan. Being a symbol of Japaneseness, kimono takes a role in the intensive discourse on Japanese uniqueness (Dale 1986; Befu 1993; Yoshino 1992). The vast literature usually referred to under the rubric of *nihonjinron* (discourse on being Japanese) includes a discussion of kimono. Typical of this literature, writers like Kiyoyuki Higuchi (1974) find a complete fit between kimono and the Japanese climate, as well as its people's mentality and body type. This kind of discourse has diffused widely and has become part of the language of kimono entrepreneurs. It appears in slogans such as "The beauty of kimono is the heart of Japanese people" (*kimono no utsukushisa wa nihonjin no kokoro desu*) which decorate popular magazines of kimono. (For the importance of *kokoro* in Japanese cultural debate, see Moeran 1984.) Kimono entrepreneurs always emphasize the natural "longing" (*akogare*) any Japanese girl or woman has (or should have) for donning a kimono.

These kinds of advertisements are especially numerous in the months before January 15, the coming-of-age day.

The uniqueness of the Japanese heart and spirit is typically divided from the West (Moeran 1984). Norio Yamanaka, a distinguished figure in the world of kimono,³ writes in a quasi-academic publication, "At the mention of kimono, our minds immediately tend to make a distinction between Japanese and Western styles of clothing" (Yamanaka 1986:9). This is not a distinction in clothing alone. Yamanaka says that in order to understand the role of kimono in Japanese culture, it is important to understand the West as a *suru bunka*, a culture that does things, whereas Japan is a *naru bunka*, a culture in which things become (Yamanaka 1986:7). Yamanaka explains Western culture as calculated and having utilitarian goals, whereas Japanese culture prizes love, admires beauty, respects courtesy, and fosters harmony with nature. This harmony, regarded by the Japanese as a unique characteristic of their culture (Dale 1986:42-43; Kalland 1995; Kalland and Asquith 1997), is directly related to their love of kimono. These attributes are deeply incorporated in the popular image of the kimono. For example, the distinction between a culture which does and one in which things become was expressed in an interview by a female owner of a large kimono school and a kimono expert. When asked whether wearing kimono feels constraining and uncomfortable, she replied that wearing kimono gives a feeling that a "non-Japanese cannot understand."

There is a great difference [between Western and Japanese attire]. When I wear Western dress like today, I [come to] have a feeling of activity and moving (*katsudō teki ni narimasu*); kimono, on the other hand gives one a feeling of calmness (*yuttari to*) and an urge to quit work. Life now is very busy in Japan, but when one wears kimono it gives her the opposite feeling.

Like Yamanaka and others, the kimono expert sees the difference in clothing as a basic cultural distinction between the Japanese and the Western. In her view, the kimono spirit is so deeply rooted in Japanese culture that when a woman puts on kimono it becomes part of her body.

The West does not only play a role as a distinguishing category, but also as the significant other. In this respect, some, like the kimono expert quoted above, see the new role of kimono in modern Japan as directly related to the West. In her view, "After the war many things entered [Japan] from America. . . . Because of this, it became necessary to save something Japanese, and thus kimono has gradually become a national costume (*minzoku ishō*)."

WESTERN/JAPANESE AND MALE/FEMALE DISTINCTIONS

The West has been significant in the construction of modern Japanese cultural identity (Miller 1977:77; Tanaka 1993:18). This began in the Meiji period, when Westernization was the declared goal of the government and when the cultural distinction between the Western (*yō*) and the Japanese (*wa*) was created. While governmental intervention in people's dress and appearance was not new in Japan,

in premodern Japan it related mainly to class distinctions. In the Meiji period (the symbol of Japanese modernity) it related primarily to Western-Japanese/men-women distinctions. The novel character of the regulations of the nineteenth century relating to dress and the general appearance of both sexes serves as an excellent example of the way Japanese men have been made into models for function and Western rationality while women have become models of traditional Japaneseness. The following is an engaging example of the kind of Meiji regulation, which refers to the appearance of men and women.

While Japanese men of the period gradually changed to Western clothing, the most notable innovation for men was cropped hair. But not all men were quick to part with their samurai-style topknots and sidelocks. The government's resolve was firm, with fines for men who did not follow the new fashion and certificates of merit given to village mayors who successfully promoted the haircut in their jurisdictions (Yanagida 1957:28). A verse that appeared in a magazine of 1871 perfectly conveys the symbolic aspect of this new Western style:

If you tap a shaven and topknotted head you will hear the sound of retrogression; if you tap an unshaven head you will hear the sound of the Restoration; but if you tap a close cropped head of hair you will hear the sound of culture and enlightenment. (Quoted in Yanagida 1957:28)

During that same period, some Tokyo women found it stylish to cut their hair short like men. However, public as well as governmental opposition soon appeared. The following comment from one of the leading magazines of March 1872 is especially illuminating in contrast to the one relating to men:

Recently in the city we have seen women with close-cropped hair. Such is not the Japanese custom and furthermore nothing of the sort is seen among the women of the West. The sight of this ugly fashion is unbearable. (Quoted in Yanagida 1957:29)

The Tokyo government's reaction was swift. In April of the same year it proclaimed a strict ban on short haircuts for women. The adoption of Western appearance and clothing by women was regarded as a rejection of female virtue for some time after the banning of short haircuts. Higuchi (1985:116) mentions a case in 1916 of a young wife who assaulted her mother-in-law and wounded her. The public prosecutor evaluated the character of the accused based on her outfit when he explained that "the accused usually wears Western apparel."

Perhaps the banning of short hair for women should be seen as a symbolic message sent to Japanese women to become repositories of the past and of traditional values. Hanna Papanek (1977:15, quoted in Sievers 1983:15) has identified this role as bestowed on women by men who often translate their fears in rapidly changing societies into attempts to prevent changes in women's roles. But comparing the two paragraphs quoted above suggests another important role assigned to Japanese women. While they are connected with "Japanese custom," the main criticism related to their behavior is concerned with appearance (e.g., "this ugly fashion"). In other words, while the behavior of men is analyzed in terms of enlightenment and

rationality that have been used since Meiji to describe the West (see Dale 1986:46), women are seen as models of tradition or as representations of Japaneseness as well as of beauty and form.

The process of molding Japanese women as symbols did not end with the Meiji period but persists today. Viewing the construction of cultural identity as an ongoing process (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Jackson 1995), we now examine the way gender identities are produced in modern Japan, with the coming-of-age ceremony as an illustration.

THE COMING-OF-AGE CEREMONY

The coming-of-age ceremony is celebrated publicly in each city and town in Japan on January 15, and symbolizes the attainment of legal majority of men and women who will become twenty in the course of that year. The theme of the coming of age is not in itself important for the participants. Most of the girls questioned regarded it mainly in terms of a social gathering and as an opportunity to be seen (or displayed). The nature of the event was clearly observed by a mother of a celebrating girl:

The day itself is mainly a kind of a reunion, meeting friends one hasn't seen for long. It does not have so much the meaning of becoming an adult. For the girls it is an opportunity to show off. Since it is not compulsory, it seems that those that cannot afford *furisode* [swinging-sleeves kimono—the proper kimono for the occasion] do not come.

Indeed, elaborate kimono has come to play a crucial role in the coming-of-age ceremony (Bestor 1989:158; Hendry 1981:206; White 1993:207). In light of the decreasing number of women wearing kimono for other ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals (mainly due to the economic recession), the recent increasing popularity of the kimono for the coming-of-age ceremony is especially illuminating.

Boys and girls both dress up for the occasion. Boys wear Western suits which they will use later when having job interviews and when going to work. Girls and their families, however, invest considerable effort and money in order to produce the perfect appearance of a kimono-clad Japanese female. This distinction between Western attire for boys and Japanese attire for girls has become a significant attribute of the occasion to the extent that girls who cannot afford the costume that will make them the proper model of Japanese femininity prefer to avoid the ceremony altogether. The various experts and entrepreneurs in the production of this perfect form of a Japanese woman add to its cost.

Japanese etiquette and rules of formality require the proper dress with great attention to detail (Buruma 1984; McVeigh 1995:36). For example, while men must don a white tie when attending a wedding, a black tie with the same black suit is appropriate for a funeral. Other rules apply to the dress of women on similar

occasions. Such strict rules of formality imply that on occasions such as weddings and funerals most attendants of the same gender dress very similarly.

The coming-of-age ceremony is considered in modern Japan as one of the life cycle rituals (*kankon sōsai*) that the Japanese are keen to perform properly. However, despite the importance given to formality, contemporary Japanese consider themselves ignorant in such matters. This presumed ignorance is perpetuated by so-called experts, including mutual assistance organizations for ceremonial occasions (*kankon sōsai gojokai*). The latter were established after the Second World War to assist poor Japanese with such requisite ceremonies and have since then become savings organizations mainly for weddings and funerals.⁴ Other important sources of information and guidance on proper etiquette in formal occasions are instructive books and manuals; e.g., the bestseller, *Introduction to Ceremonial Occasions* (*Kankon Sōsai Nyumon*) (Shiotsuki 1991).

Experts leave little room for personal preferences in terms of dress and total appearance in the case of the coming-of-age ceremony. While suggesting an expensive kimono for girls, to be used later for other ceremonial occasions, Shiotsuki (1991:36) recommends suits for boys. "There is no doubt," she writes, "that the dark blue suit will be useful as everyday attire later on." While boys are excused from severe formality, such permissiveness is out of the question in the case of girls. Shiotsuki (1991:36) dismisses the boys from following the formal rules of etiquette according to which they should wear a morning suit (*mōningu*), which is worn on other formal occasions such as weddings. With girls, the experts are very particular concerning dress and general appearance, which includes hair setting, hair decorations, and the proper way to wear a shawl.

The expert's advice is instructive with regard to the distinction between models for and models of. Advising boys to purchase a suit that can be used later for the job interviews that are an inseparable part of the life of the Japanese salaryman, the expert reproduces their male role as models for instrumental action. On the other hand, although most Japanese girls will also be university or college graduates (Brinton 1993:41; Lam 1992:74; Saso 1990:34) and will go to job interviews in Western attire, this dress should not be their formal attire. On the formal occasion that represents their entry into adult society they should adopt a Japanese appearance. In other words, they are molded into a model of Japaneseness, which is strictly opposed to the model for the rational world of work represented by boys on the same occasion.

PRODUCING THE PERFECT JAPANESE FEMALE FORM

The effort required from young men for producing a perfect appearance for the coming-of-age ceremony is minimal. They only have to purchase the right suit in one of many menswear shops found in every city and town in Japan. The case of young women is utterly different. So complicated is their total appearance that they need experts to aid them in achieving the desirable image. These experts include kimono

shops, department stores, wedding parlors, beauty salons, photo studios, and other producers of various traditional Japanese accessories considered appropriate when donning kimono. Their role in producing the proper female model is twofold; they provide the proper items and necessary services and their expertise, which is considered essential for those Japanese eager to perform properly. Japanese women regard their own ignorance in the “secrets” of kimono dressing as an embarrassing flaw in proper etiquette and femininity. Mothers who send their daughters to kimono schools as part of their bridal preparation are attempting to correct this flaw. But for the mothers who did not attend such schools, the alternative is to rely on experts (*kitsuke no hito*) to dress their daughters and themselves on the rare ceremonial occasions that require a kimono.

Mothers play a significant role in preparing their daughters for the coming-of-age ceremony. In fact, most girls, when asked their motivation for donning a constraining kimono and participating in the ceremony answered, “Because my mother wanted me to” or “I couldn’t resist my mother’s will.” Japanese mothers are generally involved in the lives of their sons and daughters even when they reach matrimonial age (Lebra 1984:260-62). Mothers of the postwar generation also regard their daughters’ opportunity to don kimono, which they themselves lacked in the harsh economic times of their youth, as too important to forsake. Mothers are responsible for making all the arrangements for the ceremony, and they are advised to make their appointments early in the year, since beauty shops in charge of dressing the girls soon become over-booked. At the Cinderella beauty shop located in a commercial wedding parlor in a large city in western Japan where I worked as a part-time dresser,⁵ mothers booked their girls for dressing as long as a year in advance of the ceremony. Booking an appointment at the beauty shop is not the first step in the preparation process. First, the mother has to convince her daughter to wear a kimono for the occasion. The alternative of putting on Western dress has recently become inconceivable. While more and more girls consent or even find this “once in a lifetime” opportunity for donning a kimono appealing, there are those who refuse to participate. Financial considerations seem to be one reason for this. While parents regard the high expense of up to ¥1,000,000 (about \$10,000) for purchasing a kimono as a social must, some “modern” girls prefer to spend the money differently. Other girls of this “new breed of humans” (*shin jinrui*)⁶ evoke an even more critical stance. These are mainly wealthy and well-educated university students, who find this old-fashioned and repulsive because it is an ostentation of the lower middle classes. This negative attitude usually did not prevent the girls from participation. Evoking the ideology of *nihonjinron*, an owner of a kimono school gave a simplistic explanation for this generation gap:

For the parents it is their desire. From the day a girl is born they have the desire to dress her in furisode when she becomes twenty in the *seijin shiki*, take her picture, and send it to relatives as custom requires. In some cases, the mother herself also wore a furisode she received from her mother in her *seijin shiki*. This is still left. Deep in their heart, the Japanese still have kimono as a latent image, as their greatest longing (*akogare*). This is a proof for that [longing], I think, though it is usually not said. This is why they want to dress their daughter. They work hard for this. There are, though, some cases

in which the girl says that it would be enough to rent a kimono and that she would prefer a small car instead.

The opportunity for the middle class to display their well-being through kimono stems from the early days of the emerging Japanese middle class in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the salaryman's wife's and daughter's kimono was one of the rare but obvious gestures of conspicuous display (Vogel 1963:82). The kimono expert continued her well-informed observations, emphasizing not only the parents' so-called natural longing for a sense of Japaneseness, but also the aspects of conspicuous display:

Everything together [the total cost of kimono and other preparations and photographs] reaches the average of ¥1,000,000. In this sum it is possible to buy a small car. The girl wants this [the car] but for the parents it is like a proof (*akashū*). If they have the possibility to dress their daughter in ¥1,000,000 kimono it is a proof that they have worked hard all their lives and they can afford it. It is the result of their life work. If they don't dress her it is as if they couldn't reach this stage. They are watched by the people around. It is a display for the neighborhood. While other girls in the neighborhood wear furisode in their *seijin shiki* and only their daughter doesn't, they are ashamed. This kind of feeling has been left. But the girls do not always understand their parents' feelings and they say they would prefer a car.

Having the economic means to dress one's daughter in an expensive kimono for her coming-of-age ceremony is still considered important for the public image of the modern Japanese household. This nuclear-family household has emerged in Japan mainly from the 1960s with the emergence of the new middle class and the archetype of the Japanese salaryman (Miller 1995; Vogel 1963). Its well-being is maintained by the mutual efforts of the salaryman as a breadwinner and his wife as a homemaker. Japanese society in general and Japanese women in particular attach high value to the role of the "professional housewife" (Vogel 1978). She is the one responsible for managing the household, including its budget, and taking care of and educating the children (Hendry 1993a; Iwao 1993; Vogel 1978). While the feminine model is opposed to the rational male model, mothers are very rational with regard to household finances. The mothers of coming-of-age girls who cannot afford the expense of a ¥1,000,000 kimono do not hesitate to look for cheaper ways to dress their daughters in the desired costume. The obvious alternative is to rent instead of purchasing it. More prudent mothers find that the cheapest way is not to rent through ordinary kimono shops but rather through one of the ceremonial-occasions mutual-assistance organizations (*kankon sōsai gojokai*) which offer kimono for very reasonable prices to their members. Some mothers have told me that they have actually entered the membership system, usually joining for a wedding or a funeral, just to get a bargain for the coming-of-age ceremony. Also, many mothers find it uneconomical to purchase a kimono if they only have one daughter. One even said that it was not worth buying a kimono for her elder daughter since her younger sister was unusually tall and the size surely would not fit both.

The owners of wedding parlors and beauty shops are well aware of the recent tendency of the Japanese to economize due to the recession. Thus, as compared to

the “bubble days” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, they increasingly are promoting kimono rental for the coming-of-age day. On top of the very reasonable rental prices, ranging from ¥75,000 to ¥180,000, they also offer special events well before January, in which the girls and their mothers can choose the furisode from the range they offer. On the same occasion, girls can also have their professional pictures taken, using accessories such as the pair of the necessary shoes (*zōri*) free of charge.

The morning of the coming-of-age day is a very busy one for the twenty-year-old girls and their mothers. It is also hectic for those involved in producing the proper appearance and for those in charge of manufacturing their replicas or representations. At the research site, the employees of the beauty shop are summoned to work at 4:30 a.m. to be ready for the first girls scheduled for 5 a.m. Photo studio workers arrive at 6 a.m. Extra part-time staff is necessary for successfully undertaking the task of preparing 120 girls in a few hours. The beauty shop employs as many as 30 part-time beauticians and kimono dressers for the day, many more than the average number of women employed on busy wedding days. Each of the workers knows her responsibility for the day (as rehearsed) and has her assigned room. The two rooms usually used for dressing female wedding guests are arranged differently for the day. A larger room is used for dressing and a smaller one for getting undressed and for putting on the special underwear necessary for kimono (*hadajuban*). In the larger room, eight to ten pairs of dressers occupy the two mirrored sides. The beauty shop assigns as many women as possible for setting hair and make-up, which are the most time-consuming chores. The beauticians occupy the beauty salon and additional available space. Another group of four women struggles against time in the room usually used for dressing the groom and male guests in order to make up the queuing girls. There is no fixed sequence. The girl may begin in either of the rooms; the procedure is decided more on the basis of convenience and the length of the queue than on any other consideration. Each of the girls holds a piece of paper, detailing the different sections of preparation and accessories needed, with which she moves between the different rooms. In each room an employee adds the necessary fee. When fully ready in her kimono, with her hair set and her face made up, the girl goes back to the beauty shop, where she pays the accumulated fees for the total form. This amount, averaging about ¥20,000, depends mainly on the various kimono and hair accessories the dressers managed to promote as “indispensable” for a perfect appearance.

KIMONO DRESSING: MOLDING A MODEL OF JAPANESE FEMININITY

Kimono dressing can best be described as a series of correcting, binding, and packaging. Hendry (1993b:73-74) writes, “Japanese kimonos, perhaps more than any other garments, are literally ‘wrapped’ around the body, sometimes in several layers, like the gifts, and they are secured in place by sashes, with a wide obi to complete the human parcel.” The girls being produced by the experts for the coming-of-age ceremony can indeed be seen as “parcels” or as packaged products of the vast

industry involved in the reproduction of their feminine Japanese image. Western attire is usually adapted to the female body; not so with kimono, where the woman's body is made to fit an ideal cylindrical body shape considered appropriate for kimono (Dalby 1983:291). While it may have been so before, the modern art of kimono dressing has developed this aim to an extreme.

The first step in dressing is to arrange all the essential items in a convenient place. The *komono*, as these items are known collectively, include various paddings, belts, cords, clips, and the like which were not necessary when Japanese attire was part of everyday life. In modern Japan they are all specially produced and sold at kimono schools, kimono shops, and wedding parlors. They have come to be considered a requisite artifact of femininity that any respectable Japanese woman should have. On ordinary days they are well wrapped in mothballs and stored in a special "Japanese attire bag" (*wasō bakku*), and are only taken out on those rare formal occasions that call for kimono appearance.

Dressing a woman requires "correction" (*hosei*), which refers to padding the body with gauze and towels to make it fit the ideal feminine form; the female body is "corrected" by pads and belts before putting on a kimono. If thin, the woman will be padded by an extra towel; if fat, her breasts will be flattened. If, alas, she has any fault such as a low shoulder, this should also be perfectly "corrected." After padding the body, special undergarments are carefully wrapped around the body, tied with cloth cords, and then fixed with an elastic belt. The kimono is wrapped over them and then folded and bound in the same way. After binding each layer, a final binding completes the wrapping. Binding the obi, however, differs from the previous ones in two ways: it is both tighter and more decorative. When the dressers at the beauty shop reach the stage of wrapping the obi, they alert their customers. "Spread your legs, because I am fastening. Please hold out [or stand firm] (*ganbatta kudasai*)," they are taught to say. They then have to use all their strength in order to bind the obi properly. But they also have to tie it beautifully, in a way that the pattern on the obi will be most obvious. The exquisite kimono bindings are prepared in advance to save time in the demanding schedule of the day and to reach perfection to the extent possible. Attention is also given to rules of etiquette as well as art in modern kimono dressing. These require a single kind of tie for married women's kimono while allowing a proliferation of shapes (carrying names such as "butterflies" and "flowers"), for the kimono of unmarried women.

Wearing kimono invites the plausible feminist view of clothing as restricting the female body, and therefore a device for the subordination of women. It suggests parallels with such fashions as the Victorian, which included several layers of clothing and constraining elements such as the corset. Women in kimono seem to glide across the floor just like women in a corset, a hoop skirt, a crinoline, and a long dress in the Victorian age (Lurie 1981:218). The kimono has indeed been described as restricting the Japanese woman's motions and as making her "defenseless" (Higuchi 1985:115) as well as "rigidly disciplined" (Beard 1953:98). Kimono does constrain the female body. The vocabulary used by the dressers when

dressing—including holding out (*gambaru*) and endurance (*gamman*)—illustrates this. Notions of patience and endurance have been regarded as part of femininity training in Japan. The ability to remain still and tidy when wearing a kimono has always been considered a part of this kind of socialization for girls (Lebra 1984:42-45). The dressers at the beauty shop disregard complaints of young women about a constraining tie, while they may take into account the same complaints made by older women. As if fulfilling their own role in training Japanese girls for proper female roles, the dressers, as experts of feminine knowledge, frequently remind the girls (at times quite severely) that they should know how to hold out and endure suffering.

A constraint-oppression analysis should be used with caution in the Japanese case as much as in other cases in order not to “fatally oversimplify” the explanation for the oppression of women (Wilson 1987:244). The Japanese case must take into account the fact that notions of endurance and patience are characteristic of Japanese society in general. The kinds of “key verbal concepts” (Parkin 1978), such as *gamman* and *gambaru*, were defined as key words in Japanese social organization and cultural debate (Moeran 1984). A closely related term, *kurō* (hardship), is regarded as part of the requirement of many social roles including that of bride, mother, (male) worker, or hard-working student (Kondo 1992:45-46). Thus, while being an appealing explanation, the constraining argument is not satisfactory. The alternative interpretation offered here is embedded in the symbolic aspects of kimono and kimono dressing. The way kimono dressers themselves explain how body correction creates the right Japanese ambiance confirms this point; they say, “the correction (*hosei*) is used so that the woman’s appearance will give the impression that she is gentle and open hearted.”

Having argued that in modern Japan kimono has become a symbol of native Japaneseness, I now suggest that the way the female body is inserted into this mold of Japaneseness exemplifies the role that the Japanese woman has gained in modern Japanese society; i.e., that of a model of Japaneseness as well as of Japanese femininity. My interpretation emphasizes the correcting and packaging aspects of this process. Binding the kimono with a beautiful obi may be likened to the act of binding fine merchandise with a beautiful ribbon. In a similar manner, the wrapping becomes disembodied from the commodity itself and ends up as the focus of attention (Haug 1986:49-50). It is the proper (or corrected) kimono-clad young woman, with all the symbolic meaning this image entails, and not the woman as an individual, that becomes the focus of attention.

While dress in general has a sensual impact on the wearer and the viewer (Barnes and Eicher 1992:3), kimono must be understood not only in its final result, but also as a process of dressing. This process should not be seen only as constraining the female body, but in more general terms as femininity which is “donned, draped, hung, and painted on the body” (McVeigh 1995:35). These aspects of bodily experience are evident in the socialization process the twenty-year-old girls experience at the beauty shop. The time of make-up, hair setting, and kimono dressing can be regarded as a short, ritualized time in which the older dressers place

Japanese femininity on the bodies of their young female customers, a femininity that goes beyond a bodily posture to be a “way of being” (McVeigh 1995:35). This way of being was characterized by the kimono expert as the difference between Western and Japanese attire, that unlike Western dress kimono becomes a part of one’s skin. The same idea of being different when donning a kimono was mentioned by coming-of-age girls and their mothers. While observing her daughter being dressed in kimono, one mother remarked, “On ordinary days one does not sit straight. In kimono, this is impossible. One must sit straight and it is a very different feeling.”

This different feeling or way of being is promoted by kimono experts. A kimono school owner summarized the experience of donning a kimono in the following words:

When you wear kimono it reaches your feelings, it enlarges your mind and makes you calm, even if you want to run you cannot. You have to move in a natural way. So, if the feelings become calm so are your thoughts. Even if something bad is done to you, you do not react immediately, you think first before you act. A Japanese woman like this had guarded the Japanese household (ie). I would like the young women to be a little like this.

For the kimono expert, kimono is much more than a constraint on the body. It has a mental influence and its ultimate role is to cultivate the perfect Japanese “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*).

THE MANDATORY PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPH

Dressing a coming-of-age girl in kimono aims at producing a perfect image of a proper Japanese woman. The accomplishment deserves an enduring representation of the achievement; a portrait requiring the skill of a professional photographer. For several months before January 15, Japanese media, including local and national newspapers and women’s magazines, carry advertisements for the coming-of-age ceremony. The ads, always with a picture of a kimono-clad young woman, usually emphasize the “natural” longing (*akogare*) girls have for donning a kimono. Sentences such as “Every female longs for a beautiful and charming kimono appearance” (*utsukushiku, adeyakana kimono sugata wa josei no akogare*) or “Any female would yearn for a graceful manner in dress” (*shittori toshita kikonashi wa, josei nara dare mo ga akogaremasu yo ne*) are frequently used in many published materials. The girl, or more probably her mother, is encouraged to fulfill the longing for kimono dressing and is reminded repeatedly by photo studios and related businesses not to forsake capturing the memory of the important event. It is important to note that the advertisements, very much like their objects, do not refer to the civic event or the ideal of becoming an adult as much as to the “ceremonial (bright) appearance (*hare sugata*)” that the girl must leave for the future (“Aren’t you going to leave a memory of your ceremonial appearance?”). The ads praise the beauty of a twenty-year-old girl in a kimono, but also insist on the importance of the

“memorial photograph” (*taisetsuna kinen shashin*). They strongly urge the girl and her family to seize an opportunity that will not recur.⁷

The significance of the professional photograph appears in the well-advertised possibility of taking pictures in advance. Many of the advertisements, especially those for photo studios, offer free dressing and make-up for girls who will have their pictures taken before January 15. Taking the studio photo in advance removes the pressure from the day itself, when only nonprofessional stills and video representations of the kimono-clad girl will be taken. While some may skip the opportunity to take an advance picture due to the extra expenses at the beauty shop, others do prefer the easy ambiance of the day as compared to the hectic atmosphere on the ceremonial day. For those girls who are dressed at the wedding parlor and do not use the opportunity of an advance photo, the professional photographs taken at the parlor’s photo studio on the ceremonial day are sometimes considered the peak of the day. The photo studio, with its supplementary work force, is organized to take the pictures of two girls simultaneously. In conjunction with the parlor, the studio offers two options of framed photographs: a “one pose” (*one pozu*), standing; or a set of “two poses” (*tsu pozu*), standing and sitting. The prices are ¥10,000 and ¥18,000, respectively (about \$100 and \$180).

The photograph of a daughter’s coming-of-age ceremony, along with photographs taken at other memorable events such as weddings and graduation ceremonies, has become an indispensable part of the “portable kit of images” that can be brought out periodically to bear witness to the family’s continuity and connectedness (Sontag 1973:8). As I was told, one of the most successful ways to convince a young woman who does not want to don a kimono is to show her her own album pictures in kimono from her childhood initiation rites celebrated at ages three, five, and seven. “When the girl sees how nice a kimono appearance is, she may think things over and decide to wear a kimono for her coming-of-age ceremony after all.” The Japanese girl’s coming-of-age photograph is more than an affirmation of the continuity of the family or an important souvenir (*kinen*) of life events (Graburn 1983). Freezing the perfect image of the Japanese woman is also related to the way Japanese women are being made into models of Japaneseness.

The girl’s coming-of-age photograph takes on some specific purposes. Young women are likely to choose January 15 to pose for portraits that will be shown to potential marriage partners in a matchmaking (*miai*) procedure (Cherry 1987:50; Edwards 1989:59). Photographs are also used to thank the relatives who have sent congratulatory gifts (*o-iwai*) for the occasion of the daughter’s coming of age. The custom in these cases is to send a professional photograph of the girl in a kimono to all the relatives who have sent congratulatory gifts. The Japanese attach great importance to what they call *seken*, meaning a reference group (Inoue 1977) or a generalized audience (Lebra 1992). Maintaining the right image for others, or the *sekentei* (the honorable appearance as viewed by the surrounding world), falls mainly upon the housewife (Lebra 1984:154). A mother of a twenty-year-old girl, highly aware of her responsibility for maintaining her household *sekentei*, told me of the

efforts it took her to convince her daughter to put on a kimono that she had bought for her. The girl consented only on the condition that she would be taken by car directly to the beauty shop and from there directly to the photo studio. Going to the civic ceremony or even walking in the streets was totally out of the question. However, for her mother this solution was satisfactory since it saved her from the embarrassment she would have faced if photographs of the kimono-clad daughter had not been sent to the congratulating relatives.

The importance of photos is evident in that most girls and their families spend the day taking still pictures and video recordings of the girls and their girlfriends. But one of the interesting aspects of the coming-of-age ceremony is the separation between the event and its representation. The practice of taking pictures in advance (*maedori*), typical also of weddings, is the epitome of this division between the event and its representation, or the disembodiment of the packaging from the content. Moreover, with popular commercial weddings, the representations of the event, whether in stills or video, are considered so important that mishaps in the event can be corrected (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997:73-77). The recurrence of this approach suggests that in modern consumerist Japan the event and its representation are separated, and the representation seems to overshadow the event itself. Regarding gender in relation to the importance of representation, as much as it is the bride who is the star of the wedding album, it is the photograph of the kimono-clad coming-of-age girl and not that of her male counterpart which is the focus of attention.

THE WOMAN AS A MODEL OF JAPANESENESS

The owner of one of the largest kimono schools, with branches all over Japan teaching about 30,000 students, when interviewed, indicated her expectations for the women who were taking courses for their bridal preparation. She hoped, she said, that the education they acquired at her school would help them to be *ryōsai kenbo*.

A characterization of Japanese woman as “good wife, wise mother” emerged in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. The term has since been promoted vigorously by male politicians who define women as domestic managers of households and nurturers of children. The concept has pervaded Japanese society and has come to constitute the official discourse on women in Japan (Uno 1993). Paradoxically, although this concept was initially taken from the Western model of the ideal Christian woman of the nineteenth century (Sievers 1983:22-23), it is now viewed as traditionally Japanese. The kimono school owner, who regards herself as an educator of women, said that being a good (Japanese) wife and wise mother “is a traditional Japanese pattern. . . . This is a splendid woman. This kind of woman has guarded the Japanese household (ie) over the years.” For the kimono expert, the link between this kind of woman and putting on kimono properly was obvious. According to this view, kimono calms a woman, makes her think before she reacts, and thus makes her a proper woman. One of the main goals of teaching the art of kimono dressing in contemporary Japan is the cultivation of this kind of woman.

Similar motivations underlay the teaching of traditional arts such as flower arrangement and tea ceremony to contemporary Japanese women (Rowland Mori 1996).

The art of kimono dressing was not considered part of bridal training in prewar Japan (Lebra 1984:58-60), since wearing a kimono was an integral part of everyday life. However, in modern Japan, as the kimono has become increasingly separated from everyday life and associated almost exclusively with special occasions, it has gradually found its place beside the refined arts of tea ceremony and flower arrangement. A young unmarried woman, who like many other modern women took evening kimono classes after work, found it hard to explain why she was investing money and time in this pursuit. Finally she said, "You know, kimono is a Japanese thing, like tea ceremony and flower arrangement, that any Japanese girl should know [even though it] is something that one does not use every day." The explanation of an experienced kimono teacher supports the connection between knowing the secrets of kimono dressing and proper Japanese femininity. As she said, "A woman who does not practice such things [like tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and kimono] is considered no good." Most Japanese women do not take courses in traditional Japanese arts in order to achieve any mastery of them (Rowland Mori 1996). They take the courses in order to internalize proper manners and comportment through the arts (Lebra 1984:59). The study of manners is part of the curriculum of kimono schools and kimono, like similar feminine pursuits, is considered to be "the best way to cultivate modesty, elegance, tidiness and courtesy" (Lebra 1984:59). A critical Japanese feminist writer has described the kind of Japanese woman who picks up courses in order to gain refinement:

She is just like a Japanese box lunch [which] contains many kinds of food prettily arranged and looks beautiful, but it does not have any distinctive feature or appearance. Whichever restaurant you may order in, they will serve almost the same box. (Higuchi 1985:164)

Metaphorically comparing the Japanese woman to a box is not very far from saying that women are actually interested only in models or forms which, compared to the real and important things men are engaged in, are unimportant. The link between the two is the idea that the cultivation of form, which Japanese women are encouraged to take to extremes, may indeed end up with women themselves becoming forms and models.

CONCLUSION

The kimono-clad Japanese woman has become a symbol in modern Japan. Like cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji, she is one of the best-known symbols of Japan as a nation (Moeran and Skov 1997:195). I have shown that the process by which kimono and the women who put it on have become symbols of tradition in modern Japan has been deliberate. There was first direct state involvement in the crucial Meiji period and then the role of kimono experts and entrepreneurs in producing this

model of traditional Japanese femininity, which is clearly distinct from the model of Western rationality imposed on Japanese men.

This analysis has not focused on the actual positions of women in contemporary Japan, but on the culturally constructed position of women. Producing Japanese women as models of traditional Japaneseness should be understood against the background of more general processes of the construction of Japanese modern cultural identity. Processes of self-definition tend to intensify the sense of self by dramatizing the difference and opposition to the other (Said 1978:55; Carrier 1995:3). In the Japanese case, the distinction between the Japanese and the Western has been pervasive and diffused to all spheres of Japanese life. The almost obsessive occupation of the Japanese with self-definition has reached the point of self-Orientalism (Miller 1982:209-11) and self-exoticism. The Japanese is now conceived as absolutely and systematically different from the Western (Moeran 1990:9). Assigning distinctive qualities, such as Japan being close to nature and feminine and the West as dominating nature and masculine (thus rational and materialistic) has been part of this discourse (Dale 1986:40-46) and has diffused into the world of kimono, where it is regarded as fostering the Japanese unique sensitivity to nature (Yamanaka 1986:11) and as a symbol of pure feminine Japaneseness.

The role of the feminine in the process of self-exoticism is also observed in other cases, such as that of women divers (*ama*) sold as prototypes of “real Japan” (Martinez 1990). It is, of course, well observed in the over-presentation of kimono-clad women in advertisements (Moeran and Skov 1997:195) in almost all promotional material selling Japan to Westerners as well as to Japanese. Robins-Mowry (1983:xvii) has beautifully described the process of producing Japanese women as symbols:

The world gently placed this living, breathing woman into the glass box used throughout Japan to encase all treasured kimono-clad and artistically hand-wrought dolls. She was entrapped in the legends of her own perfection—a likeness that harmonized with those perpetuated symbols of Japan: cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji.

The twenty-year old girls whose production process as proper kimono-clad Japanese women has been illustrated here thus join their female counterparts in the display of “dolls in boxes.”

NOTES

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2. This applies to Japanese wives and not to those women who precisely embody the aspects of femininity including sexuality and the art of entertainment that wives lack. The geisha's role is articulated in contrast to that of the Japanese wife (Dalby 1983:170-73).
3. Norio Yamanaka is the founder of Sōdō Kimono Academy and the appointed chairman of the All-Japan Kimono Consultants Association. He is the author of several books in Japanese on kimono.

4. Gojokai members pay a certain amount of money monthly to use for ceremonial occasions, and can also get a considerable reduction in the price of kimono for the coming-of-age ceremony.
5. Fieldwork was conducted from 1989 to 1991 in a wedding parlor's beauty shop. Additional data were collected in a two-month visit in 1997.
6. This is a derogatory term used by social critics and by older people to describe the young generation that has become removed from traditional Japanese values.
7. Advertisements for the coming-of-age day, like wedding advertisements, often use the term *hare* to describe the girl's appearance. This can be translated as formal or ceremonial and also as fine, bright, and pure. In the context of Shinto, the term *hare* relates to the sacred, which contrasts with *kegare*, denoting the polluted or unclean (Namihara 1984). In popular use, the *hare* or sacred always refers to traditional Japanese appearance (never to Western) and suggests that an air of sacredness envelops the traditional Japanese.

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