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RESEARCH ONLINE

From the stage to the clinic: changing transgender identities in post-war Japan

Mark McLelland

Abstract

This paper looks at the transformation of male-to-female transgender identities in Japan since the Second World War. The development of print media aimed at a transgender readership is outlined as is the development of bars, clubs and sex venues where transgendered men sought both partners and commercial opportunities. The origin of various transgender 'folk categories' such as *okama*, *gei bōi*, *burūbōi* and *nyūhāfu* is discussed and their dependence upon and relationship to the entertainment world is outlined. Finally, the paper looks at how the resumption of sex-change operations in Japan in 1998 has led to a new public discourse about transgender phenomena that utilises a range of medical terminology. While the recent establishment in Japan of clinics for individuals who consider themselves to be transsexual is an important development, it is argued that other transgenders who identify with indigenous categories are sceptical about the new medical model which they regard as both reductionist and pathologising, and that their experience should not be overlooked when giving an account of constructions of transgender experience in contemporary Japan.

Key words: Japan, transgender, transsexuals, sex-change, homosexuality

Introduction

Japan has a long and well attested tradition of transgenderism - of biological males and females who have chosen to live their lives to varying degrees in the gender considered 'opposite' to their birth sex. Until very recently, individuals wishing to live in the opposite gender have had extremely circumscribed opportunities, largely limited to Japan's *mizu shōbai* or 'water trade' - the vast world of bars, cabarets, clubs and massage parlours that exist in Tokyo and other major cities, where transgender attributes could be marketed as a special skill or performance.

However, in 1998 when sex-change operations were legally resumed in Japan after a three-decade hiatus, ‘sexual identity disorder’ (*seidō itsusei shōgai*) was widely discussed in the media, heightening the notion that 'transsexualism' was a medical condition and that individuals, through surgical and hormonal procedures, could change their birth sex to that of the opposite gender. The establishment of strictly codified measures for treating sufferers of the condition at several treatment clinics enabled the articulation of a new kind of transgender identity. Indigenous Japanese categories had always stressed the intermediary nature of transgender individuals, highlighting their difference from 'normal' people, hence their relegation to the entertainment world where such difference could be capitalised on. However, the discourse of transsexualism as a medical condition has enabled a new understanding that, once treated for their condition, transsexuals can regain admittance to the category of 'normal'. Transsexual activists such as Torai Masai are currently pursuing court cases that would grant them permission to officially change their gender on their family register (*kōseki*), the most important document of personal identification in Japan, which, if successful, would be an important sign of official acceptance of their new gender status.

This paper looks at the paradigm shift in how transgender individuals are viewed in Japan today and argues that the new medical understanding of gender dysphoria, popularly understood as being 'a man trapped inside a woman's body' or 'a woman trapped inside a man's body' - while certainly important and enabling for some individuals, cannot adequately cover the range of transgender identities and experience in contemporary Japan. While the right of transsexual people to seek medical assistance and to re-enter society in their new gender identities must be supported, it is important not to lose sight of the variety of Japan's transgender community - a community which has a long and detailed history.

In Japan as elsewhere, there are many transgender individuals who do not feel 'trapped' in the wrong body, but instead think of themselves as living beyond or between the binary categories of 'male' and 'female'. Cromwell (1999: 24) points out that in the English-speaking world, 'the vocabulary is only now developing to speak of the experience of transpeople who do not fit neatly within existing categories'. Yet,

since the 1950s in Japan, a voluble discussion about the meaning of transgenderism has been carried out, deploying a variety of Japanese terms - some indigenous and others neologisms resulting from the Japanisation of English words. While medical experts may dismiss the transgender identities represented in popular culture as simple 'folk categories' (*minzoku hanchū*),[1] preferring newly evolved medical designations, I argue that these terms are still valuable for many individuals who live between and beyond officially endorsed gender categories. Therefore, in this paper, I seek to provide an historical outline of the various categories that have been deployed to describe male-to-female transgender[2] identities in Japanese popular culture since the end of the Second World War and show how, far from being made redundant by recent medical developments, they remain important self-designations for many people.

The rebirth of Japan's 'perverse' culture

Prior to the Second World War, Japan had a significant publications industry devoted to the discussion of sexuality - both 'healthy' and 'perverse'. This included journals specializing in sexual knowledge as well as articles and advice pages contributed to newspapers and magazines by a newly emerging class of sexual 'experts' (Fruhstuck 2000). In the 1920s there were at least six journals with the word 'sex' (*sei*) in the title but Japan's descent into militarism in the early 1930s resulted in the almost complete halt of the popularization of sexual knowledge.

After the war, the Allied Occupation removed many of the restrictions on publishing that had stifled the press in Japan during its fifteen years of militarism (Dower 2000: 406-432). Concerned more with monitoring political than sexual discussion (Rubin 1985: 99),[3] the new administration made it possible for a new kind of publication to emerge in Japan in which perverse sexuality could be represented outside of the pathologising framework that had limited its expression before the war. The first sex-related publications, part of a wave of *kasutori zasshi* (pulp magazines),[4] appeared soon after the war. These trashy magazines featured fairly explicit depictions of sex acts and contained scant, if any, theorisation about sex itself.

However, by the early 1950s some magazines were producing more 'highbrow' articles which focussed on erotic, rather than explicitly sexual topics - resulting in more features on fetishes and S/M. From the early 1950s, a range of magazines appeared that allowed readers to indulge their interest in sexual perversity and often it was those considered perverse and not medical or other 'experts', who were able to speak.

These publications had an extremely wide range of interests and, purporting to offer true accounts, drew upon anecdotes from Japan's feudal past as well as stories from European and Asian societies, often relying on anthropological reports. Significantly, these early magazines did not segregate the material into hetero- or homosexual-themed issues, as became increasingly common in the 1970s, but presented a wide range of 'perverse desires' (*hentai seiyoku*). The most long lived was *Kitan kurabu* (Strange talk club) published between 1950 and 1975 which, albeit mainly focusing on SM, included discussions and illustrations of a range of 'queer' (*katayaburi*) topics including homosexuality and male and female cross-dressing. Other magazines which included information about transgender phenomena included *Fūzoku kagaku* (Sex-customs science; 1953-55), *Fūzoku zōshi* (Sex-customs storybook; 1953-4) and *Ura mado* (Rear window; 1957-65).

The magazines were important not simply because they described, in non-pejorative terms, a range of sexual practices outside of state-sanctioned reproductive heterosexuality but also because they offered a means for people to find each other and thereby imagine (and experience) community. In December 1953, for instance, *Fūzoku zōshi* published a *zadankai* or round-table discussion between participants in a 'Sodom Symposium' that took place in a Tokyo gay bar. The speakers included the mama-san of the bar, one of the 'gay boys' who worked there, a writer on Japan's 'sexual customs' (*fūzoku*) and an editor of the magazine who all spoke about issues associated with homosexuality. It was noted by the speakers that many (mainly rural) readers had been sending in letters asking that the magazine set up an introduction and discussion service. They also noted that for inhabitants of the cities, opportunities for homosexual liaisons had increased rapidly after the war, with there being numerous coffee shops and movie theatres catering to a homosexual clientele as well as a thriving male-prostitution industry.[5]

The perverse magazines showed awareness that their readership included distinct interest groups and articles were directed at these different audiences. The February 1955 issue of *Fūzoku kagaku*, for instance, in a section entitled 'Guide to Sodom', introduced a number of coffee shops where gay men were known to gather, describing their different clientele, as well as providing maps. The magazine that most consistently addressed transgender issues was *Fūzoku kitan* (Strange talk about sex customs), published between 1960 and 1974, which printed articles of interest to *josōsha* or 'female-dressers' (best translated as male-to-female cross-dressers).[6] In the September issue of 1960, it ran a special edition 'On men who cross-dress' and from February 1961 it included a regular column entitled 'A room for lovers of cross-dressing' (*josō aikō no heya*) which invited readers to write in with their comments and publish short articles (sometimes with photos) about their cross-dressing experiences.[7]

The development of distinct readerships around the different magazines enabled individuals to use the correspondence pages to contact each other and found social groups. One of the first groups for 'amateur' cross-dressers was The Fuki Kurabu (Wealth and Honour Club) which advertised in *Fūzoku kitan*[8] and from 1963 intermittently published its own newsletter. An effect of these magazines was that individuals whose sexual desires and gender identities fell outside of official norms were reassured that a large number of others also shared their condition and in some instances they were able to correspond with and meet each other. While the tone of the reports was conservative in that no articles launched outright attacks on the inadequacies of mainstream sex and gender notions, many writers did ask for increased understanding and tolerance of a wide range of sexual behaviors, including cross-dressing and homosexuality (e.g. Honshi Chōsabu 1954: 98). These publications were considerably more supportive of sexual and gender variety than any publications existing in English at this time,[9] the paranoia about 'the homosexual menace' in 1950s America described by D'Emilio (1992) being absent in Japan. Therefore, a wide range of sexual experiences were able to be discussed in these post-war media, making them a valuable resource which has remained largely untapped by current scholarship in either Japanese or English.

Post-war transgender categories

Before discussing various modes of transgender identity, interaction and community building, it is important to look at the terms that were circulating in the media for describing transgender phenomena. In the two decades immediately following the war, male homosexuality was not clearly differentiated from cross-dressing and transgenderism. The most common term for a 'passive' male homosexual was *okama*, a slang term for the buttocks (and thereby an allusion to anal sex) that can be traced back to the Tokugawa period (Pflugfelder 1999: 323) and which has remained a constant referent for effeminate homosexuals in post-war culture.

However, immediately after the war, the transgender category the perverse magazines showed most interest in was *danshō*[10] or cross-dressing male prostitutes. According to the novel *Danshō no mori* (Grove of male prostitutes) published in 1949 by Sumi Tatsuji, there was a small scene for male sex-workers who dressed in traditional women's kimono in Tokyo's Ueno Park (Pflugfelder 1999: 331-32). Heightened police surveillance of the area from 1948 (Fushimi 2002: 208-9) caused them to move on to the red-light districts of Shimbashi and Shinjuku, as well as behind the kabuki theatre in Ginza. However, Tomida (1958: 66) reports encountering male prostitutes in Ueno who were still dressing in traditional women's kimono in the late fifties which suggests that police interference was at best sporadic.[11]

The magazines commonly referred to *danshō* and *okama* alike as 'urning' (*ūruningu*), a sexological term that had been devised by German sexologist and homosexual, Karl Ulrichs (1825-95), to designate a 'female soul in a male body'. Their male customers, on the other hand, were understood to be different sexual 'types', referred to as '*pede*' (from pederast) which, in the 1950s Japanese context, was used to signify a man interested in transgendered as well as younger men. Urning were considered to have an 'innate' (*sententeki*) desire for passive anal sex and a predisposition towards narcissism which led them to turn to prostitution as a way of fulfilling their desires as well as earning a living. They chose to practice as *transgendered* prostitutes because their sexual natures meant that they were already woman-like. Pede, however, were thought to have 'acquired' (*kōtenteki*) homosexual interests, either during the war, or through disappointment in previous relations with biological women and were

considered to be the 'active' partners in sex.[12] However, despite this strong association between male prostitution, 'passive' sex and effeminacy, there were some male prostitutes who failed to conform to this system by dressing in 'smart male clothes'; referred to as *dondengaishi* or 'reversibles', they were considered able to go either way (Miyazono 1953: 79).

Prostitution (or rather brothel keeping, pimping and soliciting) was criminalized in Japan in 1957, although this did not eradicate the practice - many brothels simply changed their name and became more discrete (Hanochi 2001: 141-2). As many businesses that had relied on heterosexual prostitution closed down or restructured their activities, space was opened up in former red-light areas for new sex-related businesses, including those catering to cross-dressers and homosexual men. Shinjuku Ni-Chōme (Shinjuku's second ward), which had been a heterosexual red-light district, was gradually taken over by gay businesses from this time and now houses the largest collection of bars catering to a homosexual clientele in Japan (Ōtsuka 1995: 14-19; Fushimi 2002: 247-258).

By the early sixties, there were estimated to be over one-hundred establishments employing a staff of more than 400 distributed throughout the former red-light districts of Asakusa, Shinjuku and Shimbashi. Among these establishments was a new style of 'gay bars' (*gei bā*) where transgendered male hostesses known as 'gay boys' (*gei bōi*) served drinks and provided conversation for customers, often making themselves available for after-hours assignations. Unlike the *danshō*, *gei bōi* did not completely cross-dress, instead preferring to wear make-up and a few items of (western) women's clothing (Tomida 1958: 181-4).

The indigenisation of the English term 'gay' is an interesting example of cross-cultural borrowing. By the end of the war, 'gay' had established itself as a common referent among homosexual men and women all over the US since the mass mobilization of US forces, bringing homosexuals together from all parts of the country, standardized gay slang (Berube 1990: 117; Cory 1951: 107-8). Gay (*gei*) subsequently entered Japanese via homosexuals in the Occupation Forces (whereas *bōi*, used to refer to a waiter or barman, dates back to the development of a café culture in the Taishō period).

Mishima Yukio mentions the term 'gay' in his 1952 novel *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours) where he glosses it as 'American slang for *danshokuka*' (1973: 2000) - the latter term being a neologism made up of the traditional term for male love *nan/danshoku* and the nominalising suffix '*ka*' or 'ist'.[13] However, the fact that he has to gloss the term suggests that it was not widely understood at this time. Yet, by the late 50s *gei*, especially as part of the compound *gei bōi*, was frequently used in the Japanese media to describe effeminate homosexual men, and was used as the title of Tomida's book, *Gei,* where he described *gei bōi* as 'more feminine than today's boyish young women' (1958: 181). The widespread use of the term *gei* in Japanese therefore predates the use of 'gay' in English which did not become a common referent for homosexuals (outside of specific subcultures) until the early 1970s (Chauncey 1994: 14-15; Faderman 1992: 163).

Another reason that *gei bōi* was so quickly popularized in Japan is that *gei* (written in the *katakana* syllables used to transcribe foreign loanwords) is a homophone for *gei* (written with the character for 'artistic accomplishment' - as in geisha) and gay boys were sometimes spoken of as *gei wo uri*, that is 'selling *gei*.' In this phrase *gei* designates not sexual orientation but a kind of artistic performance - female impersonation. While the transgender connotations of the Japanese use of *gei* were already well established by the late 1950s, they were to become even stronger due to another foreign borrowing, this time from France.

The blue boy boom

Another term used to describe transgendered males which became popular for a time in the 1960s was 'blue boy' (*burū bōi*).[14] This was first used to refer to transsexual performers from French nightclub Le Carrousel de Paris but later came to refer to all male-to-female transsexuals, that is, individuals who had undergone surgical gender reassignment. Japanese audiences were introduced to Le Carrousel through the movie *Europa di Notte* (dir. Alessandro Blasetti, 1959) which was released in Japan as *Yōroppa no yoru* in 1961. The movie, shot in documentary style, describes the nightlife of several European capitals and, in the Paris section, features the singer Coccinelle, Le Carrousel's most famous transsexual performer. Coccinelle's

performance sparked interest in both the 'perverse' press and in mainstream media[15] and members of the cabaret were subsequently invited to perform in Japan.

Le Carrousel first performed in Tokyo in 1963 at the Golden Akasaka nightclub and such was their critical success that they were invited back in 1964 and 1965. The troupe's most famous members had undergone sex-change surgery in Casablanca and much was made of them in the Japanese media. In 1964, for instance, the magazine *Hyaku man nin no yoru* ran an article entitled 'The man-made beauties from Paris' which led to a spate of articles about sex-change operations. Women's magazines were particularly interested in the phenomenon, with *Josei sebun* and *Josei jishin* running a series of articles on sex change in the entertainment world. The so-called 'blue boy boom' opened up increased space for Japanese transgender performers to develop mainstream stage careers, including Carrousel Maki, who took her stage name from the Paris nightclub.

The phenomenal success of the Carrousel performers at Tokyo nightclubs has been likened to the arrival of the black ships[16] for Japan's gay world (Mitsuhashi 2001). *Gei bōi,* who were already conspicuous for their effeminate mannerisms, were encouraged to go further in developing a transgendered appearance. Partly due to the influence of Le Carrousel, the 1960s saw a proliferation in the number of establishments, known as 'show bars' (*shō bā*) offering floor shows featuring *gei bōi* who performed for an audience of heterosexual 'tourists'.[17] One such boy was Peter (b. 1952; named after his resemblance to Peter Pan) who had left home at age fifteen and was dancing in a Roppongi show bar when he was spotted by a scout and cast in Matsumoto Toshio's 1969 movie *Bara no sōretsu* (Funeral Parade of Roses). Peter, who has continued to cross-dress, went on to star in Kurosawa Akira's film *Ran* and is today a popular television talent.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the blue-boy boom was, however, the 'Blue Boy Trial' (*burū bōi saiban*) of 1965. The trial resulted from a doctor being investigated for removing the male sex organs of three men who were later arrested on prostitution charges. It took four years for the case to work its way through the courts but in 1969 a ruling was passed down that since the doctor had interfered with otherwise healthy sex organs he was in violation of Clause 28 of the Eugenic Protection Law (*Yūsei*

hogo hō) which forbade any unnecessary procedure resulting in sterilization. From this time on, the transsexual category of blue boy gradually fell from use, and sex-change operations were not resumed in Japan until 1998 when strict, new ethical guidelines for the procedure were enacted (Ishida 2002). However, this did not mean that members of Japan's transgender community ceased to avail themselves of medical technologies for altering their bodies. Sex workers, in particular, often used their earnings to gain access to hormone treatment and surgery abroad as is the case for many 'newhalf', a new transgender category which rose to prominence in the early 1980s.

The newhalf boom

By the mid 1970s, the term *burū bōi* had largely faded from public consciousness, *gei bōi*, instead, remained the most prominent term for describing transgendered men working in the entertainment industry. However, in the early 1980s, two new Japanese-English neologisms appeared: 'newhalf' (*nyūhāfu*) and 'Mr Lady' (Mr *redi*) which designated entertainers who had gone beyond the wearing of women's clothes, make up and hairstyles and had undergone varying degrees of surgical reconstruction.

Creation of the term newhalf dates back to 1981 and is attributed to Betty, the mama of the Osaka show pub Betty's Mayonnaise. Betty had a brief moment of fame when Kuwata Keisuke, a member of the pop group Southern All Stars, produced a hit single she recorded. Betty's catchphrase, which can be heard on the recording, was 'I'm half man and woman' (*otoko to onna no hāfu*). 'Half' or *hāfu* in Japanese is a term commonly used to refer to individuals of mixed race, usually Japanese and Caucasian. Betty, who styled herself a 'new half,' was therefore another indeterminate figure, not of mixed race but of mixed gender.[18] The use of the term 'half' draws attention to the fact that newhalf are not though of as women but as an intermediate category, able to draw upon both male and female elements, as discussed below.

This term might not have gained such wide currency had it not been picked up by the media. But, on 14 April 1981, *Supōtsu Nippon* ran an article about Betty entitled 'Gay singer named Betty is called a newhalf'. However, it was the massive media attention given to 'Roppongi girl' Matsubara Rumiko in May of that year that ensured the new

term became widespread. Matsubara, while hiding her biological status as a man, had won a beauty promotion staged by businesses in Roppongi (a popular Tokyo nightlife area), becoming the cover girl for a poster campaign promoting the area's clubs and bars. Once her transgender history was revealed, she was quickly elevated to idol status - posing semi-nude in *Heibon panchi* on 8 June 1981, releasing an album of songs entitled *Newhalf* in September 1981 and acting in the movie *Kura no naka* (In the Storehouse; Toei, 1981, dir Yokomizu Seishi). Matsubara's celebrity thus helped bring newhalf to a mainstream audience in much the same manner as Peter had popularised the term *gei bōi* in the 1960s. However, the media attention given to Matsubara served only to reinforce the long-standing assumption that transgender performance was something situated in the entertainment world, not in real life.

'Mr Lady' (Mr *redi*), another term that is used in the media interchangeably with newhalf, first featured in the Japanese title of the French/Italian movie *La Cage Aux Folles* (originally released in Japan in 1978 under the title *Misutā redi Misutā madamu*) but did not gain widespread currency until 1988.[19] At this time, the popular lunch-time 'wide show' (live general-interest TV program) *Waratte ii tomo* (It's OK to laugh)[20] introduced a regular segment entitled 'Mr Lady' featuring transgender beauty contests and guessing games, thus providing opportunities for some transgenders from the show-pub scene to develop media careers and bringing the transgender world to the attention of the wider public. One of the most prominent of this new generation of transgendered talents was Asakawa Hikaru who had appeared as a teen idol on the show pub circuit with the song-and-dance troupe *Beru Popinsu* before being discovered by Fuji TV. She appeared on late night shows, becoming famous for the gag that her top half resembled her mother but her lower body resembled her father.

Newhalf is a complex category that covers a range of sexual identities and practices - but not lifestyles - newhalf is used to designate transgendered men who live and work in the sex and bar world. Komatsu's (2000) collection of newhalf life stories *Nyūhāfu ga kimeta 'watshi' rashii ikikata* (On deciding to be a newhalf and living like myself) features seven individuals who are all to some extent involved in the sex-trade or other parts of the *mizu shōbai*. However, they display a range of transgender attributes - some having developed breasts through the use of hormones and some through implants.

Newhalf also differ regarding their attitudes towards their male genitalia, some having undergone castration only, others having had complete sex-change operations and yet others declaring a sense of identification with their penises. Cherry, for instance, says 'I love my well-shaped penis' (2000: 126) which she is happy to use for penetrative purposes with her clients while rejecting the notion that she might use it to penetrate her boyfriend. A brief look at *Newhalf Net*'s[21] photo personals page shows that newhalf and their admirers are interested in a range of sexual interactions including 'lesbian relationships' (*rezu na kankei*).[22] Newhalf therefore represent what Valentine has termed 'disruptive bodies' since they destabilise the 'coherence between gender, sexual practices, and somatic makeup' that characterizes medical discussion about transsexualism (1997: 215).

Newhalf make selective use of medical procedures in order to physically transform their bodies to better resemble those of women and many newhalf can pass very convincingly. Newhalf is therefore closer to the earlier category of blue boy than it is to gay boy. However, as Asakawa's popular gag indicates, newhalf often draw attention to the intermediary status of their bodies. This is made explicit on websites belonging to newhalf salon offering sexual services where the state of the newhalf companions' genitalia is always made explicit (usually *sao tsuki* - literally 'has a shaft' or *sao nashi* - 'has no shaft') (McLelland 2002: 171-72). It is not possible, then, to collapse newhalf into the category transsexual - newhalf is best understood as a category for male-to-female transgendered sex worker.

The development of transgender media

While the newhalf boom saw a revived interest in transgender phenomena in the mainstream media, the 80s also saw a parallel boom in publications for the transgender community itself. The first commercial magazine dedicated to transgender issues was *Queen* (*Kuiin*) published in 1980. *Queen* was followed by the privately circulated *Himawari* (Sunflower) in 1987 which became a bimonthly trade magazine in 1993. Both remain in publication today.[23] The early 1990s saw a rapid increase in the number of titles available, although several were short lived. These included *Cross Dressing* (1991; folded after its second issue), *Shemale* (1992 -);

inner T.V. (1994; folded after the third issue), *Josō Tokuhon* (Cross-dressing Reader; 1994 -), *Nyūhāfu Kurabu* (Newhalf Club; 1995 -), *Boku'tte KIREI* (You Say I'm Pretty; 1995, folded after its fifth issue) and *SheMale Love GOLD* (1996 -).

Queen, closely associated with the Elizabeth chain of cross-dressing clubs,[24] is distinct from other magazines in focussing primarily on 'amateur' cross-dressing as a 'hobby' and consequently does not include pornography or advertisements for bars where gender-normative men go to meet transgender partners. However, the other magazines have a variety of readers including men who are transgendered or who are interested in becoming so, as well as men who have an erotic interest in transgendered men (*josō aikō dansei*). Most magazines thus contain articles directed at both audiences, including discussions of hormone therapy, fashion and cross-dressing accessories as well as pornographic fantasy stories, manga and erotic photographs. General interest stories include a digest of what is being said about newhalf in the media, reviews of books and films featuring transgender characters, readers' letters and a travel section highlighting transgender lives in other countries. Some articles in *Queen*, *Himawari* and *Newhalf Club*[25] offer sophisticated reflections upon the history and philosophy behind cross-dressing in Japan, while others, such as *She Male GOLD* are more consistently pornographic. The magazines also carry a large amount of advertising, mainly for beauty salons (offering such services as electrolysis), bars, clubs and sex venues as well as mail-order catalogues for cross-dressing materials.

The transgender publications of the 1990s differ from the perverse magazines of the 1950s and 60s not so much in kind as in degree. In the earlier publications, it was already possible to find personal narratives of transgender identification and practice that resisted both heteronormative models of behaviour and also the colonising gaze of medical and psychiatric authorities. What was new in the 1990s was an increased openness about sexual practices and a more aggressive stance by writers who attacked the supposed naturalness of mainstream notions of gender.

While the print magazines are no doubt important in providing a medium for transgender expression, it is on the Internet that the majority of transgender networking now takes place. Transgender individuals in Japan were among the first to establish a Net presence, even before the birth of the World-Wide Web (Kuia

sutadiizu heshu iinkai 1997: 33). *EON*, a BBS (bulletin-board system) for 'transvestites and transsexuals', was established in 1990. (The name refers to the eighteenth-century cross-dressing diplomat Chevalier D'Eon from whence 'Eonism', an early term for transvestism, is derived). The transgender community was able to set up a Net presence so quickly because the boom in transgender publications in the previous decade had already helped foster a widespread sense of community that stretched well beyond the major cities.

By 2000 there were hundreds of individual transgender websites as well as Web rings dedicated to providing information and contact services for transgender individuals and their admirers. In April 2000, the Web ring *Newhalf Lady*[26] was one of the first to provide an *i-mode* service enabling browsers to surf and download material from the ring's websites via their mobile phones thus helping close the digital divide between those with computer access and those without.[27] Today, most newhalf clubs, bars and cabarets maintain websites and there are thousands of other transgender sites offering advice about everything from new developments in hormone therapy, female fashions and news about transgender issues in Japan and abroad (McLelland 2002; 2003).

However, while newhalf have gained increased voice throughout the 80s and 90s through the development of niche publications, and increasingly through the Internet, the respectable press in Japan has largely ignored them. The relative silence of the major dailies about the newhalf phenomenon stands in contrast to the sensational interest shown by television and the tabloid press. In 2000 alone, for instance, there were numerous articles about newhalf or other transgender entertainers in magazines such as *Takarajima*, *Focus*, *Shūkan hoseki*, *Nikkan suppōtsu*, *Friday* and *Popeye*, and in the women's magazines *Josei sebun*, *Josei jisshin* and *Fujin kōron*.

With the exception of the women's magazines which tend to feature more human-interest stories, other male-oriented tabloids focus on scurrilous aspects such as newhalf fraud and the sex industry. For instance on 19 September 2000 *Nikkan supōtsu* ran the headline *'Okama ga kama horu Gotanda no NH deri SM'* which plays on the polyvalence of the traditional term *okama* - which can mean both 'effeminate homosexual' and 'backside' and shows how older terms have maintained their currency even when used alongside more recent categories. *Horu* means 'to dig' and

as a slang term is used for 'fuck' - hence the headline could be translated as 'Gotanda's newhalf SM delivery service where *okama* fuck backsides.' The article is about a newhalf SM queen (*SM no joōsama*) who anally penetrates her clients - a commonly requested service at newhalf salon (McLelland 2002: 172; 2003: 60).

Despite the development of a number of media catering to transgender interests, the attention given to transgender issues in the popular press has been largely sensationalistic and promoted the familiar stereotype of transgender persons as entertainers or sex workers. However, in 1996 this changed quite dramatically when the respectable media began to feature articles about a new kind of transgender identity - persons suffering from 'gender identity disorder'.[28]

The medical model of transgender

As noted earlier, information about sex-change operations was already widespread in the media in Japan in the 1960s and a number of high-profile castration and sex-change operations were performed on male entertainers, the first taking place as early as 1951.[29] However, from 1965 to 1996, sex-change operations were not possible in Japan since, as a result of the Blue Boy Trial, the 1948 Eugenic Protection Law (*Yūsei hogo hō*) was interpreted in such a manner as to forbid surgery that interfered with otherwise properly functioning sexual organs (Lunsing 2003: 28; Ishida 2002; Mackie 2001: 187). The result of this ruling was that Japanese doctors were reluctant to even counsel patients about sex-change procedures and those seeking sex-reassignment surgery had to travel abroad, initially to Morocco. Later, the US and then Thailand emerged as preferred venues - although there was still no counselling available in Japan either before or after the operation.

However, in 1995 four doctors at the Saitama Medical College made an application to the ethics committee asking that they be allowed to prescribe sex-reassignment surgery on behalf of two patients. In 1996 the ethics committee assented to this request, but established strict guidelines for sex-change surgery which placed the decision to proceed with the treatment clearly in the hands of medical authorities. The guidelines, in order to steer clear of Clause 28, needed to show that 'gender identity disorder' was a medical condition for which sex-reassignment was the required

'medical treatment' (*iryō*) (Ishida 2002). The first operation, a female-to-male procedure, was carried out in the hospital's gender clinic in October 1998.

Female-to-male transsexuals have been particularly active in redefining transgenderism as a medical condition that impacts upon an individual's rights as a citizen and have been able to challenge long-standing public assumptions that transgenderism is primarily a male phenomenon restricted to the entertainment world. Torai Masae, a female-to-male transsexual who underwent sex-reassignment surgery in the US in 1987, is the founder of the action group FTM Nippon which circulates a newsletter about transgender issues. On 24 May 2001 Torai led a small group of transsexual plaintiffs who filed civil lawsuits to have their family register details amended (*Japan Times* 6 May 2001). However, courts have so far failed to endorse such changes to the family register since changes can only be legally entertained when it can be proven there has been a 'factual error' (*Mainichi Daily News* 29 August 2002).

There are, however, signs that a change is gradually taking place in public sentiment that may result in a more sympathetic and flexible response from legal agencies. For instance, on 20 June 2002, the Tokyo District Court ruled that a company which had sacked an employee when she changed sex from male to female had acted illegally and ordered that she be compensated for lost earnings. The judge decided that 'it was not fully proven that the employee's presence would have damaged the standing of the company and its businesses' (*Japan Today* 23 October 2002). An employee at another company reached a negotiated settlement with her company when she expressed desire to transition from male to female. It was decided that she could keep her job but would be transferred to another department in a different city (*Asahi Shimbun News Service* 25 May 2002).

Transsexual visibility was also given a boost in 2002, when the Japan Speedboat Association changed its rules so that Ando Chinatsu, who had developed a reputation as a female racer, could continue to race as a man after undergoing sex-reassignment surgery and re-entering competition as Ando Hiromasa. Another encouraging sign of transsexual acceptance was the recent election of Kamikawa Aya to the Setagaya local assembly, the first case of a transsexual elected to public office in Japan. [30]

The issue concerning transsexuals that has attracted most attention in the Japanese media is the official change of sex recorded in the family register. Since this document is widely used for establishing personal identity when starting a new job, obtaining a mortgage, claiming medical insurance or renting a house - post-operative transsexuals and individuals who live in their newly assigned gender are often faced with awkward situations - especially at work. An example of the kind of problems the family register can cause occurred in September 2001, when Carrousel Maki was arrested for possession of drugs. Despite the fact that she had undergone a widely publicized sex change in Morocco in 1972, since she was listed in her family register as male, she was detained in a male ward for 41 days (*Asahi* newspaper 26 May 2002).

Media response to transsexualism has, then, largely centred on orchestrating those legal changes that are necessary for transsexuals to fit back into the sex and gender system as 'normal' representatives of their newly assigned gender but has overlooked wider issues of how transgenderism might challenge taken-for-granted ideas about Japan's sex and gender system itself.

Questioning the medical model

The medical model of transsexualism, popularly understood as a man or woman 'trapped inside' a body of the wrong gender is reminiscent of early post-war understandings of transgenderism which considered *danshō* and *gei bōi* to have 'innate' feminine characteristics. But as Lunsing comments, 'the various categories of transgender that a cultural discourse provides are never adequate to fully describe actual transgender experience' (2002: 21). Even in the post-war period, transgender individuals could not all be neatly explained in these terms, as the existence of unruly categories such as the 'reversibles' (*dondengaishi*) made clear. The more recent emergence of newhalf, whose 'half-way' status is often emphasised, has proven even more problematic for this model but the media, in their new enthusiasm for discussing transsexual issues, have shown little interest in questioning whether binary categories such as 'male' and 'female' are natural or cultural.

Consequently, now that sex-change operations are once again being performed in Japan, there has been a shift both in the more respectable media and in popular understanding away from indigenous or 'folk categories' (*minzoku hanchū*) such as *gei bōi* and *nyūhāfu* to a more medical and arguably pathologising discourse of 'sexual identity disorder' (*sei dōitsusei shōgai*) – more usually referred to in English as gender identity disorder – which seeks to itemize and describe a series of discrete physical and psychological problems which can be detected and corrected by appropriate medical interventions. Yet, as Whittle points out, the designation gender identity *disorder* is problematic in that a 'disorder,' at least according to the American Psychiatric Association, is associated with 'present distress or a significantly increased risk of suffering, pain, death, disability, or an important loss of freedom' (2002: 20). This model clearly does not fit *all* transgender individuals, particularly those who are *not* traumatised by their transgender status, yet, in order to qualify for treatment 'patients' need to conform to the medical model which expects to find significant signs of distress.

The increased visibility, acceptance and respect accorded transsexual people in Japan since the promulgation of the medical model of transgender in the late 1990s is clearly to be welcomed. However, according to Yamaushi Toshio, a psychiatrist at Saitama Medical School and head of the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology's special committee on gender identity disorder, less than 10 percent of the patients seeking treatment at the Centre wish to completely transform their bodies through surgery, instead preferring to live between the sexes (*Japan Times* 20 June 2001). While the designation of 'sexual identity disorder' as a medical condition has undoubtedly proven enabling for some, in Japan as elsewhere 'the transsexual discourses that medico-psychological practitioners have made available are too frequently applicable only to a small minority and are agenda-laden' (Cromwell: 1999: 24). Many transgender individuals, especially those who locate themselves in the entertainment world, are more comfortable with the indigenous folk identities overlooked by the respectable press and medical authorities alike. For instance, Misaki, the Web mistress of *Trans Sexual Stars*, and spokesperson on newhalf issues writes:

> Recently, the term 'sexual identity disorder' has popped up and it might be easy to think of this together with newhalf, but this…is a separate issue. Among newhalf there are also lesbians (*rezu*)[31] and bisexuals (*bai*). There are those who have no balls (*tama*) but have a penis (*sao*) remaining, there are also those who, although they want abundant breasts, want to keep their balls and penis.[32]

Here, Misaki is arguing that the term newhalf is more complex and ultimately more flexible than the term transsexual which is associated with the pathologising discourse of 'sexual identity disorder'. Unlike transsexuals who wish to have their outward appearance altered to correspond with their inner gender identity, the term newhalf includes a wide range of individuals who, although starting off as biological men, employ a range of transgender techniques - some developing breasts through hormones, some through implants, some maintaining both their testicles and penis, others having their testicles removed and others having vaginas created. Newhalf can also have a variety of sexual identities, not necessarily directed at men, including both lesbian and bisexual.

The folk categories such as newhalf that are considered problematic by the medical community work against the common assumption that gender and sexual orientation should reflect biological sex and that any asymmetrical relationship can and should be corrected through medical intervention. As Cromwell points out 'the goal for many transsexuals embedded in the ideology of the Euro-American sex and gender system is surgeries that will result in legally being seen as nontranssexual men or women' (1999: 20). It is not, then, surprising that Japanese society is increasingly accommodating transsexuals who, after gender reassignment, re-enter society as a 'normal' member of the other sex, while leaving the heteronormativity and gender polarity of the overall sex and gender system unchallenged.

Individuals who opt to develop intersexual characteristics, however, cause problems for this system through problematising the supposed congruence between gender identity, genitalia and sexual orientation since medical authorities are yet to recognize 'transgender' as a diagnostic category (Cromwell 1999: 21). As Ishida (2002) points out, those transgender individuals who resist the 'dominant story' that positions them

as 'patients' often come in to conflict with medical 'gatekeepers' (*monban*) who control access to such treatments as hormone therapy.

Newhalf and other transgenders in Japan therefore have a complex relationship with medical authorities - if sex-change surgery is conceived as a medical treatment for a diagnosed condition, then newhalf and other transgenders who make selective use of medical technologies to construct bodies that refuse to fit into categories of 'male' or 'female', clearly fall outside the paradigm of 'patient'. As a consequence, a large number of transgender individuals in Japan are still denied the basic respect that is increasingly accorded Japan's transsexual community.

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this paper has been to show that, contrary to some media reports in English,[33] discussion of transgender issues did not suddenly appear in Japan in the late 1990s as a consequence of renewed medical interest in sex-change procedures. Indeed, a variety of transgender identities and experiences were represented in Japanese media of the 1950s and 60s at a time when such discussion was seriously circumscribed in Anglo-Saxon cultures by fear of censorship. I have attempted to show that contemporary Japanese people who are variously transgendered represent a community with a long history and that the recent discovery of ‘sexual identity disorder’ is not a panacea which is going to provide a solution to the marginalised position in society to which many have been relegated. As important as recent developments are for some, researchers should not overlook the variety of transgender experience in Japan, nor reduce the lives and the history of Japan's 'other' transgenders to a footnote leading up to the development of the medical model.

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NOTES

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[1] I choose to translate *minzoku* here as 'folk' deriving from its use in the term *minzokugaku* or 'folk studies'.

[2] Female-to-male transgender identities are, of course, equally important but I do not address them here for two reasons. One is lack of space; much of the history reported here is not elsewhere available in English and I needed to restrict my focus in order to include as much detail as possible about m-t-f transgender experience. Secondly, information about f-t-m transgenders is much harder to come by and I am not able to offer, at this stage, a complete history. Readers interested in this topic, however, are advised to consult Jennifer Robertson's (1998) book on the Takarazuka and Toyama Hitomi's (2000) collection of f-t-m life stories.

[3] Rubin cites an official history of Occupation intelligence operations as saying that 'The Civil Censorship Detachment held, rightly, that it had no concern with material that was obscene or pornographic, providing that material was not detrimental to Occupation objectives' (1985: 99).

[4] *Kasutori* literally refers to cheap liquor made from sake lees.

[5] See Joseph Hawkins' translation of sections from this discussion available on the Web at: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/education/jlemke/lavender/Hawkins_japanese_roundtables.htm (28 October 2002). The complete article was published in the December 1953 edition of *Fūzoku zōshi* as *'Sodomia dai zadankai'* (pp. 164-178).

[6] I avoid use of the term 'transvestite' when translating the term *josōsha* (female-dresser) since many cross-dressers consider it to be pathologising and pejorative (see Cromwell 1999: 22).

[7]One reader describes how, during his honeymoon, he and his wife enjoyed swapping roles, and walked about town each dressed in the other's clothes. Mishima Yayoi '*Watashi no "josō" no hanseiki*,' *Fūzoku kitan*, March 1961, pp. 180-183.

[8] See, for example, page 163 of the February issue of 1961.

[9] Nealon points out that although there was also an explosion in pulp literature in post-war America, its treatment of homosexuality was unremittingly negative since 'the prevailing language for homosexuality in the 1950s was a toxic mix of psychopathological and the criminal'. Homosexuality appealed to the publishers of pulp literature which focused on the '"dark side" of American life' (2001: 148-9) and it was rare to come across non-pathological descriptions of homosexual people.

[10] *Okama* and *danshō* were sometimes used interchangeably - *rubi* (*hiragana* supertext used to aid pronunciation) being printed alongside the characters for *danshō* instructing the reader to read the characters as *okama*, as in Kogura Genji, *'Onna demo otoko demonai otoko: [danshō] okama dekameron*' (Men who are neither women nor men: an *okama* Decameron), *Kibatsuna kenkyū* (Extraordinary Research), August 1952, pp. 22-30.

[11] Cross-dressed male prostitutes can still be seen in Ueno Park today after dusk - although they now seem to prefer western women's clothing.

[12] Examples of articles discussing various homosexual and transgender types include Kabiya Kazuhiko '*Danshoku kissaten'*, *Fūzoku zōshi*, July, 1953, pp. 26-30; Shibukawa Tetsuo '*Sodomia hōrōki'*, *Fūzoku zōshi* October 1953, pp. 71-77; as well as the regular advice columns '*Sodomia tsūshin*' in *Fūzoku zōshi* and '*Homo no peiji*' in *Fūzoku kagaku.*

[13] The term 'homosexualist' was occasionally used in the reports of regulatory agents such as police, doctors and private investigators in the US prior to World War II (Chauncey 1994: 15).

[14] The origin of this term is obscure but it was already widespread in Europe before the advent of Le Carrousel. One likely derivation is from a Gainsborough portrait entitled *The Blue Boy* which depicts a very feminine aristocratic youth dressed in blue satin.

[15] See for example the article *'Dansei no "josei" kashū wo memie'* (Debut of a male 'female' singer), *Fūzoku kitan*, February 1961, pp.174-5; and '"*Yōroppa no yoru" wo utau seitenkan*' (Sex-change sings 'Europe by night') *Shūkan bunshun* 23 January 1961, pp. 86-90.

[16] 'Black ships' or *kuro fune* refers to all the Western ships to visit Japan from the 16th century until the end of the Edo period (1868). The image of the ships, when used as a

metaphor, expresses the sense of disorientation generated by the sudden arrival of a totally new, alien culture.

[17] An article in the April 1963 (pp.138-9) edition of the magazine *Ura Mado* (Rear window) refers to the 'touristization' (*kankōka*) that was sweeping through Japan's gay bars at this time wherein 'homosexuals' (*homo*) were being displaced by 'ordinary customers' (*futsū no kyaku*) including many women.

[18] Lunsing is incorrect when he says that 'the terms half and newhalf have nothing to do with each other' (2003: 34, n.5) - he seems not to have heard the story about Betty.

[19] Lunsing (2003: 26) reports contradictory responses when he inquired into the difference between newhalf and Mr Lady. He concludes that 'the fluidity between the various categories must be stressed' (2003: 27).

[20] The show ran the Mr Lady segment for one year, from 1988 to 1989.

[21] http://www.newhalf.net/photo (26 November 2002).

[22] *Rezu* is a broader term than the English word 'lesbian' from which it derives since it can refer to sexual interactions between cross-dressed and transgendered men as well as biological women.

[23] Lunsing reports that the circulation of *Queen* is about 7,000 and *Himawari* 3,000 - 4,000 (2003: 22).

[24] For information on the Elizabeth chain of clubs, see their Web site: http://www.elizabeth.co.jp/ (28 October 2002).

[25] Since May 1998 (issue 24), *Newhalf Club* has been running a series of essays on the history of cross-dressing in Japan by Mitsuhashi Junko to which much of the material in this paper is indebted, especially for the leads to other sources.

[26] http://www.newhalf.com/nhl/ (18 May 2000).

[27] For a discussion of the use of mobile phones for Internet access in Japan see Gottlieb and McLelland (2003: 7-8).

[28] According to Cromwell (1999: 20) and Whittle (2002: 20), the term 'Gender Identity Disorder' as a diagnostic category did not enter the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until its fourth edition in 1994.

[29] The first recorded male-to-female sex change in Japan was carried out on hostess and singer Nagai Akiko (b. 1918) one year *before* the case of Christine Jorgensen made the procedure internationally famous.

[30] Kamikawa won a seat on the Setagaya local assembly in 2003. See Kamikawa's website for details of the campaign and her platform: http://ah-yeah.com/index.html (16 May 2003).

[31] Here Misaki is not referring to women-born lesbians but to newhalf who are attracted both to biological women and other newhalf.

[32] http://homepage1.nifty.com/Newhalf/newhalf.htm (29 July 2002).

[33] For example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* report of 4 May 2003 (p. 23) entitled 'Transsexual stands proud in a land of conformity' assumes that transgender activism is a recent phenomenon in Japan whereas, as I have illustrated, it has its roots in Japan's post-war 'perverse' culture.