



William R. Lindsey. *Fertility and Pleasure: Ritual and Sexual Values in Tokugawa Japan*

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WILLIAM R. LINDSEY's investigation of gender and sexuality in Japan's Tokugawa period (1600–1867) begins with an analysis of a print by woodblock artist Kitagawa Utamaro depicting a courtesan dreaming of her wedding procession. The multiple tensions of opposed female roles and conflicting values and the function of ritual as a bridging device between two disparate worlds depicted in this image is the impulse from which this groundbreaking study develops. In the “unitized society” of feudal Japan, women found themselves cast into roles of courtesan or housewife, behaviours and attitudes of which were circumscribed by ideologies of sexuality expressed in models of fertility and pleasure. Lindsey analyzes the ritual activities associated with three major stages—which he categorizes as entrances, placement, and exits, and which also comprise the core of the study—that women of Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo participated in as they made “meaningful space” (42) in the virilocal households or bordellos to which they were assigned. The practices, rituals, and symbols associated with these parallel models at times mirrored each other, at times diverged; at times they affirmed the values laid out by these models, and at times they resisted them; nevertheless, they all intensely reflected attitudes toward female sexuality embedded in each respective model (48).

Lindsey presents the conceptual framework from which he performs this “examination of actions” (16) in Chapter 2, where he constructs “value models,” drawing on disparate sources, by including a provincial lord's letter to his newly-married granddaughter, a Shinto priest's model on gender and sexuality, and an instructional text for courtesans. Lindsey attempts to not only capture the plurality of women's existence during the Tokugawa period, but also articulate the ideals governing the behavior and attitudes and guiding the ritual life of the courtesan or wife at the time.

In Chapter 3, entitled “Entrance,” the question of motivation (55) occupies Lindsey's attention as he explains how, given their lack of choice, women drew on

religious and moral structures as interpretive tools in their attempts to fulfill obligations as wives and courtesans. As for the dominant ritual activity animating this category, lively processions of brides travelling to their new homes and courtesans to their first clients constitute “rituals of celebration.” Lindsey, in illuminating the liminal status of the woman as she moved from one state to another—a blank slate upon which the hopes, desires, and demands of her receiving institutions were written—views these rituals as celebrations of the respective institution’s values. The artifacts of material culture associated with these rituals—a shell box for the bride, bedding for the courtesan—reinforced the values of each institution.

In Chapter 4, entitled “Placement,” the predominant event occurring in this stage is pregnancy, a situation that challenges the tidiness of the models. While the fertility model supported a bride’s sexuality, households routinely practiced infanticide; for the courtesan, the values of the pleasure model encouraged her to develop strictly sexually based relationships with many men, but pregnancy was common in the pleasure quarters where these women were confined. This chapter is rich with analyses of practices, symbols, and perceptions of pregnancy and the discussion of fetal Buddhahood depicted by Namura Jōhaku (d. ca. 1748), a physician and writer of a widely read instructional text for young women published in 1693; it provides a fascinating glimpse into the intersecting concerns of medicine and religion percolating in that period. Namura developed a gestational chart with each month of the fetus’ uterine life corresponding with a particular bodhisattva, selecting deities from a pantheon of thirteen associated with death and memorial rites. Lindsey ties Namura’s depiction of gestational life to major themes dominant in Japanese religions, including the development of Buddhist thought as a foreign import from China into Japan, the combinatory paradigm linking buddhas and indigenous gods (*honji suijaki*) and the concept of original enlightenment thought (*hongaku shisō*) to show how Buddhist attitudes were expressed in the Tokugawa popular imagination. Notably, Takai Ranzan (1762–1838), a novelist and culture critic, revised Namura’s text in 1847, adding his diagrams of gestational development. A salient point Lindsey notes in his comparison of the two texts is the extent to which contemporary concerns influenced the differing depictions of the fetus. Taikei, in the spirit of the nationalistic and anti-Buddhist nativist movement of the Tokugawa period, eliminated all Buddhist elements from his gestational chart.

In Chapter 5, entitled “Exit,” Lindsey focuses on “exits of communal celebration” and “exits of individual resistance” (137). Departure rites for the betrothed as she left her natal family mirrored funeral rites; according to the fertility values espoused by Namura: “the dead never return to their homes” (145). When marriage went wrong, divorce temples offered sanctuary to women. If the courtesan could not bear her circumstances (the official retirement age was twenty-eight), the options available to her came in the form of prayers to the Shinto deity Kuro-suke Inari enshrined near the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters, escape in the guise of a male, or illness (feigned or real). A fleeing courtesan, however, did not cover great distance, as contracts stipulated that those who sold her to the brothel were responsible for paying lost fees during her absence, locating her, and returning her to the bordello.

In this “so-called dark age for women”—female inheritance had declined throughout the Kamakura period (1185–1333); women exiting marriages took with them their dowries but left behind their children; women generally did not decide if their pregnancies would be terminated or newborn babies killed—Lindsey concludes that ritual practices and symbols “offered a light that could shine through sexual ideologies and their idealized values and shine on unravelled bonds of natal identity, hopes for a better tomorrow, and even secret, unapproved pathways toward that tomorrow” (175).

Lindsey’s ability to unpack an image, a scene from a novel, or a list of items for a trousseau makes the work a rich study of the practices of Tokugawa Japan. From a description of a courtesan performing the rite of washing her feet at a well near a deity’s shrine, he launches into a discussion of symbolism and cultural significance of foot washing of brides, and then on to theories guiding ritual pollution and purity, and then further on to divorce practices. Likewise, a discussion of eyebrows—shaved for wives and unshaved for courtesans—transforms into an analysis of hair symbolism reflected in the practice of tonsure in Japanese Buddhism. His reason: “Eyebrows may be small wisps of hair, but their symbolism can be comparatively large” (150–151). This exegesis is a reminder to all of us who study in the field of Japanese religions to be aware of the significance of even the most inconsequential details we read and observe.

While the theoretical arguments Lindsey develops are dense and his insights profound, I long to hear a louder female voice. We learn about Tokugawa women’s experience from a physician, a social critic, a playwright, novelists, artists, and poets—all male—but little from the women themselves. A bordello contract provides one instance where we meet real women: Watō, in 1862, sold her younger sister Yasu to a Yoshiwara bordello (148–49). Little information beyond Yasu’s period of servitude is extracted. Lindsey, whose ability to interpret a wide range of primary and secondary sources is clearly evident, states that few bordello contracts exist. I take this as a challenge for historians to unearth such sources. Not only does that snippet of information remove the subjects of this study from the abstract; it gives them names. The subject of another illustration Lindsey presents—a courtesan in the late stages of pregnancy upon whom a bordello manager is about to perform an abortion—has a story to be told that deserves to be heard. Just as Barbara DUDEN’S (1991) analysis of an eighteenth-century German physician’s diary of his patients’ complaints—he recorded entries for 1800 women—illuminates issues of gender, bodily experience, and body perception, Tokugawa period contracts, diaries, letters, and other sources of this nature can reveal another dimension to the ritual expressions housewives and courtesans utilized as they made their place in households and bordellos and experienced the panoply of life-cycle events related to women.

The author’s masterful synthesis of interdisciplinary themes covering topics in ritual studies, sexuality and gender, Tokugawa period history, and Japanese religions makes this a necessary text for specialists and advanced students of all these disciplines.

REFERENCES

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