Company Entertainment : Co-mingling Play and Work

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Anne ALLISON
Duke University

1. *SETTAI ASOBI*

Within the past twenty years, Japanese have come to play (*asobi*) often, Nada Inada[1] wrote recently in the Asahi Newspaper. Yet even as they play, work will at some point intrude. On workdays, one plays *mahjong* with customers and on week-ends, one plays golf with opponents who are bet against but allowed to strategically win. "Play," in other words, is "*settai* (business outings) *asobi.*" So while Japanese play, as Nada states it, they also work [1992].

This conflation of work and play is described in terms of "ambiguity" (*aimaisa*) by Nada—as a murkiness in both conceptual categorization (the meaning of play and work are infiltrated by each other) and pragmatic endeavor (the act of play coincides with that of work). Its stimulus he traces to the increasing tendency in Japan over the last two or three decades to commodify leisure. As it stands today, recreation is something which costs money and often in such vast amounts that it is a commodity only business or industry can afford. Nada uses the example of golf courses which now permeate Japan to such a degree that even in the city closest to Mt. Fuji there soon will be twelve courses.

While it is true that many Japanese enjoy the game of golf, Nada doubts that this reason alone can account for its incredible spread. Rather, if one couples the popularity of golf with its cost, it is immediately apparent who is paying for and thus underwriting this endeavor. At perhaps 400,000 or 500,000 yen a year to venture onto a golf course once a week, this is an expenditure that would be an extravagance at the level of a family budget. Thus when Japanese play golf, they do so increasingly on company money. It is "*settai* golf," meaning that a man uses golf in order to entertain customers and uses the entertainment of customers to play golf oneself [NADA 1992].

The fusion of work and leisure is an effect, Nada suggests, of economic forces:

1) A psychiatrist and writer.

forces which market leisure as a commodity and increasingly upgrade its price. The beneficiary is a leisure industry (*rejā-sangyō*) whose profits are greater when big business rather than families or individuals are paying the bills. The loser, implies Nada, is the individual Japanese for whom play has become not an escape from work but rather another occasion for work. Recently, for example, sararīman are spending not only their time at golf courses or bars in the company of clients during the week, but also their "family time" on Sundays in activities that demand expenditures of money as well as time. Nada writes that the campaign conducted by the mass media since 1990 encouraging Japanese to be more active in pursuing "leisure" (*rejā*) has meant that men are being ordered by their families to "go someplace and do something" on Sundays such as visiting an amusement park rather than being allowed to stay at home and nap, watch television, or read a newspaper. A man must be either producing or consuming is the message, but to do something with no overt utility—the very meaning and pleasure of napping, for example, which *sararīman* once cited as a favorite pastime on days off [TADA 1974]—is not allowed in Japan's era of advanced capitalism. Technology has denied a space for non-utilitarian play and play itself has become a product of and for technology.

The argument put forth by Nada has been voiced by a number of Western theorists such as members of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, have argued that in any society in the stages of late capitalism the realms of leisure and work, and public and private, become progressively converged [1972]. The mergence of work and play seen in contemporary Japan would be thus viewed as a condition common to any society at a similar stage of capitalism.

Japanese scholars such as Tada Michitarō [1974], however, have offered a different position. Namely that the alignment of work and play is a behavior unique to Japan and is the result of cultural rather than economic factors. Tada, for example, notes that Japanese tend to seek relaxation in places not far from where they work and in ways that resemble behaviors and attitudes they assume while also at work. Hence not only do Japanese vacation for fewer days than their counterparts in Western Europe and the United States, but they assume a seriousness in play that Westerners typically cannot understand. Culturally, Westerners view work and play as opposing categories whereas Japanese view them as more complementary. Therefore to judge Japanese play patterns as unhealthy or exploitative (of business on workers) as have observers from the West, Tada concludes, reflects a cultural bias that is ethnocentric.

2. AIMS AND METHOD

In this paper my aim is to analyse a corporate practice—entertaining workers on company expense—that has gained popularity in the build up of Japan's industrial power, but which is viewed by many in Japan, as would Tada, as a feature far more of its culture than its economy. In exploring what has become a corporate institution, my focus is on the intersection of play and work in a behavior that iden-

tifies itself by reference to both of these terms. My concentration is on the work/play mergence itself which I will examine using insights offered by those who trace this alignment to economics as well as those who trace it to culture.

Unlike those writers I have mentioned already, however, and the many more who have researched practices of leisure that are linked to relations of work in various contexts, I will take two perspectives in my study that are infrequently taken. The first is to look specifically and empirically at what actually takes place in an event doubly marked as play and work. The second is to consider the factor of gender in behavior that most writers implicitly regard as primarily male. As worker is a position regarded and studied as being more commonly male (than female), the tendency is to treat those who play at work or work at play as being more representatively men (than women). Questioning how the component of maleness itself is factored into a behavior structured as both play and work, I look at a very specific channel for this interaction—a hostess club where co-workers and clients are brought on company expense—and consider how work and play are produced out of interchanges that occur between men and between men and women in the hostess club.

3. COMPANY ENTERTAINMENT

Entertaining employees or clients on company expense is a practice that is common and acceptable in corporate Japan. Referred to by three terms: *settai* (company reception), *tsukiai* (get-togethers or friendly connections), and *kōsai-hi* (company expense), this is a system which is not only customary but also institutionalised by a number of corporations. It is engaged in most often by corporations of certain categories—trading companies, securities firms, and pharmaceutical companies;[2] by companies that are large rather than small—Mitsui Bussan and Mitsubishi Shōji, for example, are typically the biggest spenders; and for workers with the following profile: white collar, permanent employees, working in a medium or large sized company, at adequate or high rank, and male.

The *sararīman* or salaried worker, as this profile denotes, is the primary beneficiary and target of the *kōsai-settai-hi* system. As such, he is the one who is the subject of and for an institution which, I will argue, is grounded in contradiction. Intended to be both a recreation from work and an extension of work, corporate entertainment positions the *sararīman* in a subjectivity that is both other than worker and work-related. In a hostess club, one site for company-paid outings and the context I will examine here, customers explained that the outing was about work but also play; and, by implication, their roles in the outing were as

2) According to a ranking of the two hundred top spending companies of *kōsai-hi* that has been issued by the magazine *Shūkan Daiyamondo*, since 1979, the ten biggest spenders invariably are trading companies and other top spenders are securities companies, construction businesses, and pharmaceutical companies [TABE 1986].

worker but also player. Oscillating between what Roland Barthes has called a "constantly moving turnstyle of meaning" [BARTHES 1972: 123], both these agendas and subject positions are structured most significantly, I argue, by gendered performances and rituals in the hostess club. Dramas of masculinity structure work as well as play, and the worker as well as the player. And when these dramas invoke sexuality/ a sexuality that is stimulated by gestures, innuendo, and talk but ultimately deferred in terms of sexual acts, its construction is one that both displaces work and can be accommodated to it, and places *sararīman* as men by contradictory codings of masculinity.

My analysis here is based on three sources of data: l) participant-observation as an anthropologist and hostess in a Japanese hostess club for four months,[3] 2) interviews with hostess club personnel, clientele, and other Japanese commenting on this phenomenon, and 3) Japanese scholarship.

4. THE IDEOLOGY OF *SETTAI*

Kōsai-settai-hi, as a practice, generates and consumes vast sums of money. Expenditures for it in some companies can reach $6,000 per white collar worker per year and consume as much as 5% of annual operating expenses [TABE 1986]. Between the years 1954 and 1982 the government endorsed this practice by allowing most money spent for corporate entertainment to be written off as tax deductible. Even after the Corporate Tax Law was restructured, however, companies have continued to entertain on company expense conditioned somewhat by company style (Mitsui Bussan, typically the biggest spender, for example, is known for its "*hade*" or flashy style), category of business, and financial health. Expenses incurred can be tremendous, ranging anywhere, per person, from maybe $50 at an inexpensive *akachōchin* or *yakitoriya*, to hundreds of dollars for a half-day of golf, to a thousand or thousands of dollars for evenings that include fancy restaurants, nightclubs, and top-class hostess clubs in Akasaka or the Ginza. These charges, by some Japanese, are considered to be "an indispensable expense of industrial profits" [TABE 1986: 204] and one that is calculated to increase profits even in depressed times.

The principle of *settai* is that those working together or negotiating for a business transaction cannot fully trust one another until they have associated together outside the workplace. Transplanting themselves to a location marked as unofficial—a pub, restaurant, golf course, hostess club—the aim is threefold: 1) to open up (*uchitokeru*) to one another in ways that would be impossible at the office, 2) to relax individually (*kutsurogu*) and relieve stress (*kinchō o yurumeru*) that has accumulated at the office during the day, and 3) by effects of number one and number two, to build the *ningen kankei* or human relations so essential to the suc-

3) In 1981 at a club in the Roppongi district of Tokyo which I call, by the pseudonym, "Bijo".

cessful and smooth operations of Japanese industry.

As Tsuda Masumi has related in his 1987 book *Shinsedai Sararīman no Seikatsu to Iken* (The Lives and Opinions of Modern Generation Japanese), the first two needs served by outings outside the workplace—opening up to one another and unwinding, are generated by pressures to perform according to Japanese codes of labor while at work during the day. Interviewing three generations of *sararīman*, Tsuda records the testimonies of men who work as much as 150 hours overtime typically per month without extra pay in jobs where the expectation is to devote as much energy, passion, and identity to their company as is possible.

Those who internalise this ethic are called *kaisha ningen* (company person), whose complaints, when voiced in this book, tend to be two: 1) work is so all-consuming it leaves too little time for anything or anyone else, and 2) the structure of hierarchy in the workplace is oppressive. Significantly, it is the second rather than the first of these complaints that inspires more anger. Workload, even when bemoaned, is treated as inevitable: a fact of the system over which the worker, given that he wishes to rise in the company, has little choice. The second issue, however, is both more pertinent and personal. An authoritative or insensitive boss, as the example most commonly given, can make a man feel worthless particularly when he is continuously ordered around and called such demeaning epithets as "*omae.*"

As Tsuda cites the commonly mentioned survey given to Japanese workers about which type of boss they would prefer—Type A who is rational, even-tempered, and consistently fair about workloads, or Type B who is temperamental, often demanding, but willing to look after and take care of his workers—the vast majority of the Japanese workers continue to select Type B. "Looking after" (*mitomeru*) in this context means taking responsibility or covering for a worker's mistakes; cushioning a subordinate against hostile elements in the workplace; making sure that an employee is emotionally and psychologically okay; and generally noticing, reconfirming, and appreciating the worker as a worker but also as a man. To this end, some *sararīman* exemplified a good boss as one who takes them out drinking at night. And given such gestures of *ningenmi* or humaneness by a good boss, many workers expressed their willingness and ability to work hard.

Going out to a place like a hostess club at night, by such logic, becomes a means to both replenish the bruised and fatigued egos of overworked men and to assure, by this human and psychological replenishment, the continued output of workers' labor. Relieving tension, opening up to one another, and building human relations—the three objectives already mentioned for company outings—are supplemented or established therefore by that of a fourth: making individual workers feel valued, appreciated, and somehow whole. What is exacted or extracted from them on the workplace—the effects of alienation in Marxist language or the price of entering the (corporate) symbolic in that of Lacan—must be disavowed or sutured over in order for the industriousness of Japanese white collar workers to continue. When a *settai* or *tsukiai* takes place at a hostess club, it is my thesis, this production

of a *sararīman*'s self-confirmation is ritualistically rehearsed and performed by interactions coded primarily as both gendered and sexual.

5. ROPPONGI "BIJO" AND ITS "MAMA"

The hostess club where I worked in 1981 was situated in the Roppongi district of Tokyo, was a *niryū* or second class club in a ranking of about eight classes, and was called, for the purposes of this paper, Bijo. The woman who ran and owned the club was then thirty-three and a veteran of this world called the *mizu shōbai*, literally the water business of bars, clubs, and entertainment establishments. Mama, as she insisted to be called, was considered a *bijin* or beautiful woman, a shrewd business person, and an expert in managing the club to the precise tastes and desires of her male customers. Most of the men I asked, in fact, cited the Mama as the primary reason they frequented the Bijo because, as they said, she gave the type of *sābisu* or service they wanted.

These services included: designing the club herself in a manner judged to be elegant and expensive; appearing every night beautifully dressed in a costly *kimono* and perfectly groomed; sending every customer in this member's only club chocolates on Valentine's Day and a present on his birthday; calling special or frequent guests up routinely on the phone to ask how they were doing; seeing each customer off personally when they left the club; singing duets with two or three lucky customers per night, during which time a waiter would take a so-called "memory photo"; and conversing at each party's table for a few minutes, where she would speak intimately with usually the highest ranked among them and act as if she were romantically interested.

While this *sābisu* was considered personalised, the Mama granted it, of course, to everyone who was a customer. And yet the effect was highly flattering, the men said. One stated that to be in the company of such a classy woman made a man feel classy himself. Another explained that the charm of the Mama made him and any customers he would bring here feel manly and important. And many others described the pleasure of fantasising and imagining Mama as their mistress; an illusion which Mama fostered by flirting with the customers individually and by keeping the fact of her patron a secret from them all.

In short, the gift and value of the Mama was reflecting back to the men an elevated image of themselves. She would tell them they looked good, were excellent singers, and exuded a masculine appeal she could hardly resist. And as one customer explained, the men do not totally believe nor totally disbelieve the Mama's remarks. They understand that it is play, a performance that is unlikely to lead to an actual sexual liaison with the Mama at any time. Yet that possibility is not entirely closed off and a sexual tension infuses the heterosexual exchanges between Mama and man at the same time that the predictability of her flattery assures the man of an autoerotic stimulation. No savvy *mizu shōbai* woman, after all, will ever react to a customer as if he were unappealing. To stress or manufacture his ap-

peal, in fact, is her job, for which she is paid at times exorbitant sums of money. And when it is corporate Japan that is paying these sums, it is precisely this service of filling, soothing, and massaging egos that is being primarily bought, I would argue, with the money.

6. TREATMENT OF CUSTOMERS

At Bijo, the Mama utilised basically two techniques for crafting and recognising this masculine ideal in her customers. The first was more generic and entailed registering and identifying a man in terms consistent with that of being a successful but typical *sararīman*: references to how his expensive suit and Pierre Cardin tie revealed his success, how his late arrival at the club indicated his hard work and devotion to the company, how his white pallor showed a disregard for his own personal health, and how his frequency to her club marked his status. The second technique was more specific to the individual man, remarking on and eliciting aspects of his person that would be difficult for him to express certainly at work and perhaps even at home. These details resulted from Mama's professional skills in drawing customers out in conversation and then recalling the particulars of these conversations as much as months or even years later. A man was asked how his stomach was doing six months after he had complained of stomach pains to the Mama, another was questioned about his stamp collection, a third about a trip eight months earlier to Paris, and a fourth about his dream to write a book about Japanese linguistics. Careful never to judge or distrust a story that was told or inquire after a fact that was kept silent, the Mama allowed each man to recreate himself through discourse as it were: to become something other or in addition to what he was at work or home. Further, the Mama would then eroticise this particular image smiling coquettishly at the man as if his stomach ailment or stamp collection was precisely what turned her, a beautiful and desirable woman, on. Yoda Akira, who has written the book *Otoko ni totte Onna to wa Nanika?* (To Men, What Are Women?), uses the word *jikokenji-yoku* or the desire for self-exposure to refer to this particular skill of *mizu shōbai* women. Explaining, in his words, "male psychology," he writes that all men have the desire to be noticed, respected, and confirmed by others and that the satisfaction of this desire in front of a woman makes a man particularly happy [YODA 1981: 28]. According to Yoda, Japanese men cannot fully express themselves at work because this would bring criticism from co-workers nor at home because one's wife and children know a man too well to indulge this. But in clubs and cabarets, hostesses are paid, much like psychiatrists in the United States, to elicit from and listen to clientele speaking about themselves. And in the case of the Japanese hostess, the aim is to satisfy and please customers by accepting, as Yoda states it, the surface expression of what is spoken even if the man has made a fool of himself or the hostess can see through a lie [YODA 1982: 28].

In such an atmosphere, where women inflate the self-images of men, bosses

take their employees for a few drinks and executives form the relations that will turn into contracts and negotiations the next day. Yet the female's role in this male business is not limited to being an attentive and flirtatious tape-recorder. It also includes the following four services which were the responsibility more of the hostesses than the Mama at Bijo: 1) continuously replenishing the drinks and lighting the cigarettes of the men, 2) making sure that conversation starts at a table, involves all the members of a party, and is maintained, 3) monitoring the "opening up" and "unwinding" imperatives of the night by insuring that everyone drinks and gets up to sing at least one song in front of the room, and 4) allowing, even encouraging, the men to become lecherous and lewd.

7. HOSTESSES

Typical hostess behavior that would include all these four services would be for a hostess to sit down at a table and immediately start pouring drinks for all the men. She would light any cigarette that was pulled out of a man's pocket, ask them all questions or talk about herself in order to keep conversation rolling, and listen to any man with interest as he expounded on college degrees, golf, or visiting China. She would needle a man who was not drinking and insist, repeatedly if necessary, that each get up and sing a song. And when the men quizzed her about her bust size, commented that she was chubby, wondered when she lost her virginity, and propositioned her to go to bed with each and every one of them that night, she would good-humoredly tell them that they all were extremely good-looking and far too attractive to be with a plain and mousy woman such as herself.

A good hostess then has two agendas: to make a man feel good in his company with other men as well as good about himself as a man. At Bijo this meant that the hostesses were both like and unlike the Mama. Like the Mama, they flattered customers and acted as if sexually and romantically interested in them all. Unlike the Mama, however, they directed this attention more to a group of men than an individual man, and unlike the Mama who rarely poured a drink, lit a cigarette, or received an explicitly lecherous remark, the hostesses serviced men continuously in all three of these latter ways. Positioned as structurally subservient, hostesses could be used and valued for this alone.

Occasionally ignored at a table, for example, they would serve and be expected to serve men all the same. And when spoken to, a hostess was usually called upon to use not only her hands for adding flame to a man's cigarette and alcohol to a man's drink but also her entire body to feed another consuming desire of the male–sexual interest. Referring, most commonly, to the hostess's breasts—"your breasts are little," "your breasts are big," "have you given your breasts the night off?", "are your breasts real?","are your breasts hard?", "are your breasts soft?", "why aren't your breasts bigger?"—men would refer to themselves as *sukebei* (dirty old men), and laugh uniformly at this reference which positioned them all as uniform men. A good hostess would allow and even encourage such usage of her

body, which would in all but a few cases remain at the level of talk. Flirtations might be added and become more involved and/or apparently serious, but rarely would these lead to sexual liaisons outside the club. As men explained this particular pleasure of the hostess club routine, "males are all *sukebei*" and even if a heterosexual interaction does not lead to an act of sex, a hostess's willingness to receive lecherous remarks allows that part of a man to be expressed. This sexual/sexist expression, they rarely pointed out however, depends on the fetishised role and subordinate status of the female, over whom the institution of the hostess club and its institutionalization by certain corporations for company outings allows men to exert dominance and control. Hence while the position of the man is to be served and flattered by the woman, the position of the woman is to make the man feel both better about himself and better than her.

8. CONCLUSION

Why would Japanese corporations use such a place and system to entertain their male white collar workers on company expense? One answer is obvious–to humanise work, so to speak, by allowing men to add a human element to their work experience and relations that work during the day, with demanding schedules, demeaning pressures, and exacting bosses, depletes. This is the explanation most often given by Japanese themselves. A second reason is suggested by the work of such Marxist-feminists as Karen Sacks [1974] and Heidi Hartman [1984], who argue that in a society with a largely masculinised work force and a capitalist mode of production, males who are given little control in a workplace are "bought off" so to speak, by being allowed to dominate and control a hierarchically inferior other someplace else. This other is woman who, in the context of the hostess club, ritualistically sends men a message that they are dominant, superior, and great.

And the third reason, which is a combination of these two and the one I adopt here, is that companies use this as a mechanism both to extend work and to reward work that has been well done. Workers who are sent on such an outing are thus being recognised for their labor as well as exhorted and expected to labor further. Complaints, inadequacies, alienations built up at the workplace are expressed and relieved, but the corrective takes place in an arena which is paid for and controlled by the workplace itself. Rather than home, for example, where a relationship of understanding and sexual satisfaction could be established on a regular basis and without money, a place such as a hostess club continually defers sexual culmination but guarantees a masturbatory high based on a pleasing and masterful reflection of the self.

This imaging, while seductive, is also contingent. For only as long as the *sararīman* continues to work at a certain level or achieve a certain rank, corporate outings at exclusive hostess clubs continue. When a man's productivity slips, however, or his retirement is imminent, jaunts to fancy clubs on company expense also end. Then the ego strokings and stroked ego a man has received at the hands

of paid women, are revealed to be mere commodities purchased by money that few men can afford or afford often, on their own.

The corporate system of company entertainment in such places as hostess clubs is founded on this principle and contradiction. It makes men feel better and more than mere workers, yet the condition of this production of personhood and masculinity is work itself. One might ask therefore, once a *sararīman* loses his status as white-collar worker, does he lose his status, in one sense if not many senses, of "man" as well?

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