

Social Transformation or a New Fashion: Sexual Minorities in Japan¹

Ronni ALEXANDER*

What does the fact that the words most commonly used in the Japanese language to describe people who choose sexual partners of the same sex are 'gay' (*gei*) and 'lesbian' (*rezubian*) say about globalization? What does it say about the recognition of sexual diversity in Japan? What, if anything, does it have to do with the study of international relations?

Until recently, focusing on the situation of a particular social and/or ethnic minority within the confines of a given society was not considered to be within the scope of the field of international relations. In today's globalizing world, however, it becomes more and more difficult to justify consideration of social boundaries as concomitant with political ones. The ways in which social transformation occurs within a particular society are important not only for understanding that society, but also for looking at how ideas and social values move from one society to another. Here it is suggested that the processes of globalization have influenced the entertainment industry to use sexual minorities, although not necessarily in a positive way. More significantly, it has also helped sexual minorities in Japan to develop more positive images of themselves, both as individuals and groups.

This paper is concerned with 'sexual minorities'² in Japan. 'Sexual minorities' as a category is in itself problematic, but it is commonly used in Japanese. The closest English term would be 'queer.' Because sexuality is a private matter, and because even if each individual knew beyond a doubt what their sexuality was and also knew that it was forever unchanging, it is still impossible to know from looking what that sexuality might be. Sexual minorities are, therefore, for the most part invisible, unless they choose to be otherwise. In Japan, the assumption

*Professor, Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University.

of heterosexuality, like assumptions about the congruence of gender and sex, is pervasive. In that such assumptions limit the number of options individuals feel are available to them, they tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. Hence, the assumption of heterosexuality is frequently correct. Even so, if we were to take the sum of all the people who feel that they differ in some way from what they believe the 'norm' for sexuality is supposed to be, it might well be much greater than the number of people placing themselves within the 'normal' range. Taken as a group, 'sexual minorities' might not be a minority at all.

In fact, more than the reality of the numbers, the assumption of 'minority-ness' is significant, as it shows where individuals place themselves within society. It affects how they behave and how they see the world. As we will see, Japanese lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersexual and trans-gendered people see themselves as part of a minority, although some may also identify themselves as queer. What is of particular interest here, however, is not the contrast between group and individual identity, nor the problem of crossing from one category to another, although these are certainly topics worthy of consideration. Rather, it is the attitudes and confusions caused by the blurring of categories.

The concept of 'sexual minorities' in and of itself resembles trends of unification and fragmentation seen at all levels of international politics today. Trends toward integration are accompanied by strong trends toward fragmentation. The whole may get larger and larger, but the pieces within are getting increasingly smaller. Both of these processes are based on a dyadic conception of 'we' and 'they;' 'we' as a part of 'us' as distinct from 'them' in the case of integration and 'we' as distinct from everyone else in the case of fragmentation.

As the term 'sexual minority' indicates, people with various sexualities and sexual orientations have joined together, operating under the (most likely correct) assumption that more can be accomplished through solidarity than would be possible if each group worked alone. This is of course the 'unification' aspect. In much Western scholarship, this trend for unification and solidarity as sexual minorities would generally fall into the category of 'new movements.' Japan, like many other countries, has growing movements for self-affirmation and rights for sexual minorities that would fall into this category.

From the point of view of empowerment and social action, the idea of solidarity among social minorities to achieve particular goals is of course salient. At the same time, one must question to what extent a person's sexuality can be used as a basis for joint action. While the cry for recognition of sexual diversity may be common to all, the specific demands and needs are different for each individual or group of individuals. These differences lead to internal tensions and perhaps eventually to fragmentation.

Within a heterogeneous 'sexual minority' group, fragmentation occurs along the lines of the distinctions among the different 'types' of sexuality or sexual orientation, e.g. lesbian, trans-gender, etc. While the Japanese language and movements seem relatively content, at least for the time being, to adopt the term 'sexual minority' (*sekushuaru mainoritei*) as an overall rallying cry, other movements seem to be having trouble maintaining the group identity. As the ever-growing list of initials LGBIT³ shows, the number of distinct component parts of the 'sexual minority' movement continues to grow.

This reflects on the one hand, that for the most part, sex and/or gender are still considered as diametrically opposed, or dyads. One is either male or female; if one is female, then one is not male. This is also frequently applied to sexual orientation; one is either heterosexual (straight) or homosexual (lesbian/gay). As we will see, many people have trouble with the idea of bi-sexual because in some sense it defies this dichotomy.

Assertion of individual difference frequently leads to the separation of 'us' from 'them.' Regardless of whether this 'we/they' distinction is determined on the basis of physiology, sexuality or sexual orientation, the distinction is made. Moreover, much of the basis for that distinction comes from the assumption of two sexes and two genders.

At the same time, among the people who identify themselves as 'sexual minorities' are those who by birth, choice or both defy the two-category rule. Their bodies may reflect both sexes or neither; their behavior may be of both genders or neither one. I suggest that it is these people, the ones who live simultaneously in more than one world, who present the most profound challenges to society.

This paper introduces a number of stories about various individuals, all of whom would call themselves sexual minorities. Rather than focusing on movements, I have chosen instead to take some examples from the lives of different individuals, looking at the ways they interact with society, and the kinds of social change they desire. The examples here are stories that describe some aspects of the lives of certain individuals. It is not intended that they be taken as generalizations about the situation of sexual minorities in Japan, although they have been selected partially because they do reflect certain attitudes and/or issues faced by many people. In this sense, I believe that they are in some ways representative of more than the individual in question, particularly with regard to the ambivalence and contradictions that most sexual minorities face in their everyday lives.

Gendered Japan

Regardless of whether one looks at Japan from outside or from within, one finds a very gender-identified society, where the dichotomies of male and female are clearly expressed. In Japan, as elsewhere, the most important institution for the creation and maintenance of gender roles is the family. While the workplace may be the center of social relations for greater or lesser periods of time in an individual's life, it is the family that provides the base upon which other social relations can and do occur.

Gender roles, while more flexible today than in the past, are clearly defined and are important in the construction of both individual and social identities, the most significant being the family. In modern Japan, one out of every 5.4 people is over the age of 65.⁴ Increasingly, the focus of gender roles is growing to include not only the roles of women as wives or as those who bear and raise children, but also their role as caretakers for the elderly. This takes place in the context of the family; the expectation, for example, that a married woman will care for her male partner's aging parents. These expectations do not at present take sexual minorities into account, and the pressures for marriage and all that social institution entails remain very strong. For sexual minorities, this can mean choosing marriage, or having marriage thrust on them, regardless of the

sexual identity and/or orientation of the individuals involved. It should be noted, however, that the discrepancy between marriage as a social/economic institution and marriage as an expression of individual desire is not limited to sexual minorities. The difficulty of making a living as a single woman, particularly as a single mother, coupled with strict divorce laws, make divorce difficult, if not impossible for many couples. It is not unusual to find heterosexual couples who, outside of occupying the same living space and fulfilling certain joint family obligations, have little to do with one another.

The outward manifestations of gender dichotomies in Japan are numerous. In modern Japan, public toilets and baths are all divided into male and female. Application forms for almost everything require the applicant to circle either male or female; in few cases is the choice optional. Although Japan does have an equal employment law, in reality many jobs continue to be divided on the basis of gender. Until very recently, even classified ads were gender-specific. Many books, magazines and comics have recognized gender-specificity, and people are encouraged to read along gender lines. Gender is also applied to food; women are supposed to like sweets while men are supposed to prefer savory foods. People do not necessarily follow these gender stipulations, but everyone is aware of them.

One of the most obvious outward signs of gender divisions is clothing. On the one hand, some young people are wearing clothes that are not gender-specific. In addition to unisex clothing such as the ubiquitous jeans and T-shirts, the gender-borders of fashion are changing. More and more men are wearing jewelry and using make-up and other cosmetics. Some men wear skirts, while some women wear leather and other extremely 'macho' clothing and footwear. This can be seen as a blurring of gender-based styles, and to a certain extent does make it easier for people who might not want to assert their gender identity every time they get dressed. At the same time, in breaking away from the traditional male and female styles, designers are maintaining the masculine/feminine dichotomy. While the content of what constitutes 'masculine' or 'feminine' styles may have changed, both extremes are clearly visible. Moreover, along with the pervasive influence of US mass culture, one can also see an attempt to counter-act that influence with 'Asian,' 'ethnic' or 'Japanesque' styles. Interestingly, while this

clothing may change the cultural dynamics, the clear female/male gender dichotomy remains in tact.

In contrast to the freedom of individual attire, virtually all school children wear uniforms that are distinctly gender-specific. This begins in kindergarten and continues through high school and frequently begins again with employment. For men, except where a uniform is required, the norm for almost all professional activity is a coat and tie. For women professionals, there may be a greater element of choice. At the same time, many women working in offices, banks and other professions are required to wear uniforms, while their male counterparts might not have to do so.

Gender-typing at school is not confined to uniforms. It encompasses the way in which education is conducted, as well as the content of what is being learned. Many schools are working to eliminate at least some of the visible aspects of gender-typing. For example, some schools have instigated such measures as using a single, combined roll call list, rather than the traditional separation of males and females into two lists, with the females coming after the males. If, however, one looks at the choices relating to higher education, the effects of gender are still clearly visible, both in terms of the choice of the type of institution (university, junior college, vocational school, etc.) and in terms of the content of the chosen course of study.⁵ Traditional notions of marriage, support of a family, life-time employment and useful skills for married life still play an important role in educational choices made by, and for, young women and men.

While Japan has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and has instituted measures such as an equal-employment law and a domestic violence law, there are still vast discrepancies in the wages and jobs available to women and men. It takes dedication and endurance to be a woman working on a par with men in Japanese society; if a partner and children are involved it is even more difficult. As a result, many women choose not to work full time. Part of this is due to the emphasis from a very early age on both a romanticized vision of marriage (a girl's dream/a boy's responsibility) and on the requisite skills for life as a wife or husband. While the content of that list of skills is changing, very few of the skill lists for boys

include cleaning house. Socialization for young women might include social drinking, but education for young women and men about the rules of all-male social drinking as a part of the workday have not yet been accommodated to the fact that those drinking sessions may now include women. Girls and young women are encouraged to gain domestic and other skills that will contribute to making them good wives and mothers; boys focus on good jobs to support their families-to-be. While many couples, for practical and/or biological reasons, do not have children, the expectation for marriage leading to children is still the norm. In fact, many couples who are unable to have children experience discrimination, and in that sense can also be included within the broad category of 'sexual minorities.'

While changing social relations, coupled with much less job security due to the prolonged recession and economic restructuring, have led to fewer and fewer people choosing to follow idealized gender-roles, the reality does not deter from the importance of these roles as ideal types. Moreover, while the legal structures for gender equality are beginning to be put into place, social values and legal structures associated with marriage still govern a wide range of life experiences, including such aspects as decisions regarding medical care for those unable to make decisions for themselves, inheritance and distribution of personal assets, as well as everyday work and family related decisions.

Human Rights and Minorities in Japan

The struggle for acceptance of sexual diversity in Japanese society is not necessarily conducted in the context of the recognition of human rights. One gay person interviewed for this paper, for example, is strongly opposed to the application of human rights thinking to sexual minorities, and believes there should be limitations on other minorities as well. At the same time, the concept of human rights provides an important forum for discussion of the rights of all minorities, including sexual minorities.

Japan has many minorities, some more visible than others. Some of the less visible ones live in two worlds, although the legal and administrative structures of the modern state strongly encourage choosing one or the other. For example,

people of Korean origin may retain their original nationality or elect to become Japanese. The former may entail some limitations in terms of their choice of jobs or lifetime partners (marriage included), while the latter might require the individual to forfeit some of his/her non-Japanese identity. Sexual minorities face different legal problems. Since as a group they are relatively new in Japan, they may offer a different, and perhaps useful, perspective on the issues and problems of Japan's more traditional minorities.

Post-war Japan is publicly committed to the institutionalization and application of human rights, as well as to the elimination of all forms of social violence. Work is progressing to eliminate various forms of discrimination on the basis of ethnic and/or historical background. New groups of immigrants such as Brazilians and Vietnamese have created new tensions, but have also served as a catalyst for the implementation of new services for foreign residents. Japan is painfully making the transition toward partial recognition of its ethnic minorities, at least with regard to the more visible ones.

Visibility is of course a major concern for sexual minorities in Japan, but it is also important for others, particularly people of Korean origin who were brought to Japan themselves, or are the descendents of people brought forcibly to Japan in the pre-War period. For a Korean born and raised in Japan, if s/he makes no mention of his or her background, no one will be the wiser, as long as the relationship is limited to superficial interactions. Once marriage or employment come into the picture, it might not be so easy.

'Coming out' is an issue for Koreans, just as it is for many sexual minorities. The psychological and social advantages of coming out may or may not outweigh the disadvantages of declaring difference in a society where at least superficial sameness is highly regarded. At the same time, maintaining secrecy can be a truly difficult task, particularly if it also entails social isolation.

The details of the decision regarding 'coming out' are different for each group, but the general situation is similar. Not only are there risks involved at the outset, but once a person has 'come out' it is virtually impossible for them to revert to their former stance of secrecy. Secrecy can be very lonely. It is hard to find a same-sex partner, for example, if you feel you have to spend your time

convincing people your sexual interests are limited to people of the opposite sex. Many people therefore opt for some form of 'coming out,' whether it be in a small circle of trusted friends, or in a broader context.⁶

A superficial glance at mass culture in Japan will tell one that sexual ambivalence is trendy. Television and comic books, particularly those directed at young women and girls, frequently have heroes whose gender is not immediately clear, although most turn out to be male. Crossing gender boundaries is also popular, although most of the portrayal is not particularly positive. Using sexual minorities for comic relief on television, for example, is not a politically incorrect thing to do, although the voice in opposition may be growing stronger.⁷ Do fancy clothes and, in particular, male-to-female (MTF) cross-dressing and behavior represent a real change in Japanese society, or are they just another fashion trend? Let us have a look at the stories of some sexual minorities, and see if they give an indication of the answer to this question.

Diversity in Physiological/Biological Sex

Like Western culture, Japan has a deep commitment to the idea of two biologically distinct sexes: male and female. While the Japanese language does not have the same level of linguistic distinction as does English (she/he, him/her, etc.), as we have seen above, the structure of society itself relies heavily on the dyadic idea of two sexes and, concomitantly, two genders.

Recent work on the physiological and/or biological manifestations of sex, however, have revealed a tremendous breadth of diversity, most of which has generally been ignored, hidden and/or 'cured.' This diversity occurs at many levels: visible physiology, internal organs, genetic variations and combinations thereof. Anne Fausto-Sterling, based on her study of intersexuals or hermaphrodites, has suggested that in fact there should be five sexes rather than two, although she also argues that, "sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories."⁸

A Japanese intersexual who would agree with Fausto-Sterling's conclusion, if not her thesis of 5 sexes, is HASHIMOTO Hideo (Hasshi).⁹ Hashimoto argues for at least ten sexual variations, based first on genetic variations, and charts

the differences and similarities between those with xx chromosomes and xy chromosomes - and a myriad of combinations in between.

Hashimoto's story is similar to that of many intersexuals. At birth, it was difficult to tell whether he was male or female. In Japan, children must be entered into the family register within two weeks of birth; leaving the column for 'sex' blank is not an option. So, based on the physical evidence of what turned out to be an enlarged clitoris, it was determined that he would be 'male.'

One can imagine his confusion as he grew up in a body that did not feel 'male,' and which by the end of primary school had begun to look distinctly different from those of his male classmates. His penis remained tiny, he started to develop breasts, and his voice did not change. Confused and no doubt embarrassed and frightened, Hashimoto had no one to turn to for advice. His mother was aware of the problem, but chose not to discuss it. Sex education in school did not mention the existence of intersexuals. It was not until he was in his early thirties that Hashimoto found out about others with similar conditions and realized that he was neither male nor female. He left his job and now works full time as an activist for intersexuals.

Today, Hashimoto lives as a male, mostly out of habit, but claims to be neither male nor female. He says that the issue regarding intersexuals requiring the most serious attention now is the question of the necessity of deciding whether a baby is male or female at birth, particularly in cases where the sex is not immediately apparent. These decisions are often accompanied by surgery and/or treatment with hormones or other drugs, making them virtually irreversible.

Intervention to 'assign' the sex of a baby when it is not readily apparent is of course done with the best of intentions; it is difficult enough to live in society as either male or female. The idea of living as neither, or both, is quite radical. Even if a child were blessed with understanding parents and teachers, think of the trauma every time s/he used a public toilet or a locker room. If her/his school had separate physical education classes for boys and girls, which would s/he join? The list is endless.

Until meeting Hashimoto, I believed that it would be easier for the child to

have her or his sex determined one way or the other. Hashimoto's story changed my mind. It is only easier for the child if her/his body grows in the same way the 'assigned' sex develops - and there is no way of knowing that in advance. Hashimoto asserts that it is better to know about your situation and make an informed decision about your own body when you are ready to do so, rather than to have it decided for you at birth, especially if that decision means you spend your youth wondering why something feels 'wrong.'

The ability to determine one's own sex and gender can be considered within the range of reproductive health, although it is not generally used in that context. Whatever the rationale, however, Japan still has a long way to go towards recognition of this right of an individual to control her/his own body through determining her/his own sex.

Crossing Biological and Social Boundaries of Sex and Gender

Unlike intersexuals who are biologically both sexes (or somewhere in between), trans-sexuals are people who physically alter their body to align it with their perceived sex.¹⁰ The terms 'trans-gender' (TG) or 'trans-sexual' (TS) are not frequently used in the Japanese language, except by some sexual minorities and their supporters who use the term '*toranzu*.' In general, a wide range of TG people are described by the term '*sei douitsusei shougai*' (the Japanese translation of the English gender identity disorder, GID).¹¹

Sex reassignment surgery has been legal in Japan only since 1998. Before that time, people desiring surgery had to travel abroad to places such as Thailand, Holland or the US. Going abroad for surgery is not only difficult and expensive, but also dangerous in that follow-up care is difficult. For those who could not travel, an even more risky option was to use the clinics in Japan that were willing to perform the surgery in spite of the danger of being caught. Today, even though surgery and hormone treatment are legal, treatment is a costly and time-consuming procedure. For those who, for whatever reason, cannot wait, there are still clinics willing to provide services. These are of course costly, and are not covered by medical insurance.

Even for those trans-sexuals who have gone the route of legal reassignment

surgery, the successful operation does not mark the end of their troubles. While it is legal to change one's *medical* sex, it is not yet possible to change one's *legal* sex. In other words, it is not possible to change the family register, unless it was mistaken to begin with. Thus the legal evidence of one's identity such as passports, health insurance, birth certificates, etc. remain in the former sex, even after a legal operation.

A-san is a Japanese trans-sexual. He says that from the time he was a young child, he felt that he did not belong in his female body. At the very least, he wanted to look 'male.' He had his breasts removed and began taking male hormones. The surgery was performed at a clinic specializing in plastic surgery in an urban center in Japan. The surgery was successful, but A-san must continue to take male hormones for the rest of his life. A-san is still very young, and does not know what specific effects the hormones will have on his body, but he knows it will shorten his life. Now that reassignment surgery is legal, he knows that it is technically possible to change the rest of his body, but since his legal status will remain the same, he is reluctant to undergo the necessary operations.

One of A-san's concerns is about marriage. He sees himself as a heterosexual male and would like to find a woman to be his marriage partner. As the law stands, however, even if he has surgery, he will still be unable to marry legally, unless of course his partner is another trans-sexual. Another serious concern is about medical care. Since he is legally female, if he were to be suddenly taken ill or to be in an accident, he would be treated as a female at the hospital. Some hospitals and clinics cater to trans-sexuals, and people become very dependent on them. In particular, some clinics provide hormones and other services for trans-sexuals. Although these services are technically within legal boundaries, many small clinics are having financial difficulties and some are walking a very fine line in trying to provide services to trans-sexuals and trans-gendered people who might otherwise not be able to receive their desired medical care. Recently, one such clinic was closed down for a malpractice investigation. While malpractice is certainly not to be condoned, the trans-sexual patients dependent on that clinic suddenly found themselves without access to medication. A-san was among those

affected, and said that it left him feeling very vulnerable and helpless.

Gender Diversity and Trans-Gender

The above examples have demonstrated some ways in which what are generally seen as being two distinct sexes are in fact on a continuum. What about gender? Where the determination of sex has a biological and physiological basis, gender is a social category, which does not necessarily have a physiological component.¹² While it is generally assumed that there are two genders corresponding to the two sexes, the following examples will show that in fact we can find a whole range of femininities and masculinities, as well as everything in between.

Unlike trans-sexuals who feel they must change their bodies physically to be in harmony with their sex, some trans-gendered people want to be recognized as a particular gender, but do not feel the need to physically adjust their bodies. For example, B-san has a body that is physically female, but knows that he is really male. He first began to feel that he was 'different' in junior high school, but nothing he learned at home or school could help him to determine what the 'difference' meant. He found himself attracted to girls, and thought that perhaps he was a lesbian, but that did not really feel right. When he was in high school, B-san learned about GID for the first time, and immediately realized that this was the root of his feeling of 'difference.' He did not feel that he could discuss it with his parents, and there was no one else around to help him. As a result, B-san spent the rest of his high school years wearing a skirt and acting like a girl. Every time he engaged in such everyday activities as using public toilets and baths, changing clothes or showing his ID card, B-san felt as if he was lying to himself.

B-san chose a university far enough away from his home that he needed to live on his own, and for the first time he was able to be his male self.¹³ Soon after starting university, B-san ran into trouble as a 'male.' His most pressing concern was his name. B-san has a very gender-specific first name; anyone seeing it would assume unquestionably that the person to whom it referred was female. As an entering first-year student, B-san's name appeared on numerous lists showing class divisions and other important information. If he responded to the

name on the list, everyone would know that he was supposed to be female. He wanted to know if something could be done to allow him to use a different name.

While changing one's legal sex is virtually impossible in Japan, it is possible to change one's name. In B-san's case, however, since he was not yet twenty years old, he would need the consent of his parents. If he were to try to do it without his parents, he would also need a diagnosis of GID, something that he does not have. These procedures take time, and if B-san were to successfully make his way as a male in the university, he needed more immediate help.

To the credit of the faculty and the university administration, B-san's problem was solved relatively easily. An appeal to the faculty resulted in approval of the use of his preferred name on everything except official documents, most of which are internal. All of the lists and postings use the preferred name, although his student ID card, transcripts, etc. are in his legal name. There are still difficulties, but the immediate issue at hand has been successfully solved.

The current university policy, based on a recommendation from the medical school and coming directly from the office of the president, is to try as much as possible to accommodate the needs of GID students. The question of names is interesting because many Korean students use Japanese names, rather than their 'official' Korean ones. If trans-gender students are allowed to use their preferred name, then surely the same must apply to ethnic minorities. Here is an example of how the newer 'minority' is helping to change the situation of older, more established minorities.

Adolescence is a time of searching, and the process of finding oneself is never easy. For many young Japanese, it is a time when they must make decisions that will seriously affect the way they live the rest of their lives. For many trans-gendered youth, B-san among them, there is little or no support or help available at this important time. This makes a difficult situation that much worse.

B-san is now leading a full and productive life as a university student. He has 'come out' in some situations, but not all, and has earned the understanding and respect of many of his professors. He is also involved in various activities for trans-gendered youth, some of which he has organized himself.

Like B-san, C-san is trans-gendered, but male-to-female (MTF). C-san began to feel that there was something 'different' when she was in primary school, and found that she liked to wear girls' clothes and preferred to read books and magazines for girls, rather than those for boys. C-san did not like the uniforms and the insistence on being 'male' at school, and by the upper grades of primary school had pretty much stopped attending. I first met her when she was a third year junior high school student, but she rarely attended school.¹⁴ C-san is bright and likes to study, and has done a lot of studying on her own. Not only is she very well-read, but she is also an extremely good writer. However, since she does not go to school, she has found it difficult to meet people and to make friends her own age.

C-san's parents know that she does not go to school, and she has told them about her feelings about her sex and gender. They have not acknowledged her concerns, and C-san says she thinks they are in a state of denial about it. She says that perhaps if she had been able to wear a skirt to school instead of the required slacks, she might have gone more often, but finds the general ambience and emphasis on gender in school very hard to take. Even so, C-san mustered up her courage and attended junior high school for the last few months, graduating with her class. She also told the principal and head teacher about her concerns, and suggested that students be taught about GID and sexual minorities in school. The response of the principal was that the teachers needed to learn about it first, and C-san was invited to give a talk to the teachers. She has not taken them up on the offer, but it does show a willingness on the part of the school to change. C-san says that perhaps when she has learned a bit more herself, she will be ready to go back and educate her former teachers.

Both B-san and C-san are bright and motivated. Their ability to access the internet and to use the information they found there has been very important in enabling them to find help and support. They have used internet resources to get in contact with support groups and others. However, using the internet is not always possible and even when it is, there are problems. For example, C-san had to always be careful to erase all traces of the sites she had accessed from her family computer so that her parents did not find out which sites she had been

using. Moreover, many people do not have internet access, and even for those who do, it can still be very difficult to overcome the isolation, fear, anxiety and self-hatred which can accompany being trans-gendered, especially in a society which frowns on difference in general and which does not recognize sexual minorities.

For many trans-sexual and trans-gendered people, the focus of their attention is not on the idea of only two categories of sex or gender but rather on the idea that they should be in one category rather than the other. For people like B-san who could not behave in the 'feminine' way he felt his mother wanted him to behave, the idea of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' is troublesome. However, most people in this group are more concerned with crossing from one gender to the other, rather than on focusing on what is in between. As such, they do not reject outright the idea of two complementary genders or sexes. In fact, many help to maintain not only the idea of the sex/gender dyad, but also its content through their portrayal of sex/gender extremes.

In that many trans-sexual and/or trans-gendered people tend to act in ways that emphasize their affiliation with a particular gender, they are not overly threatening to social norms for sexual/gender behavior, because they are not necessarily asking that those roles be changed. Conversely, intersexuals, because they defy the assumption of two sexes, and trans-gendered people who blur the borders between the sexes and/or genders present a significant challenge to those roles and the values that accompany them.

Some people live in two different gendered worlds. For example, D-san is a transvestite. The bulk of his time is spent as a heterosexual male. He is recently married, having met his partner through the internet. His associates at work do not know about his transvestite side, and he is anxious that it remain that way. On special occasions, D-san dresses as a woman. He enjoys it immensely, but says he does not feel the need or desire to do it all the time. He says that his partner knows and that she is supportive of him.

D-san was born and raised in Japan, but he is not Japanese. Just as he can, if he chooses, disguise his gender identity, so he can disguise his ethnic background. In D-san's case, he is more open about his ethnicity, and is involved

in various causes supporting minorities in Japan. Revealing his sexuality would no doubt make his life even more complicated.

A final example is E-san, a person who lives the extremes of two different gender roles. Unlike D-san, E-san would prefer not to have to balance the two, but feels there is no choice. E-san is married and has a partner (female) and two children. During the week, s/he works as a salaried worker in a financial institution. However, whenever s/he gets a chance on Sundays or holidays, s/he goes to a small downtown locker and extracts her high heels, skirts and cosmetics, transforming herself into a woman, sometimes only for a few hours. Before going home, she returns her 'real self' to the locker and goes back to being a husband and male worker.

One night, E-san and I walked to the train station together after a party. It was a very cold night, and the wind cut through her mini-skirt and tights. As we walked, she told me that she was wearing heels for the first time in a long time, and her feet hurt after standing up at the party, and also that she now had to go back and remove her nail polish. I told her about how in the seventies, I had struggled as a young feminist for the right to be a woman and not have to wear heels and mini-skirts and nail polish. I asked her why it was so important to her to wear those symbols of femininity. She replied that for some of her friends, it was just enough to know who they were, but in her case, she wanted to dress the part and to be accepted socially as a woman. I can understand her feeling the need to represent herself as undeniably female and can see that she is responding to social pressures which define 'woman' in Japan. Many people reject some or all of these pressures; trans-gendered people often feel less freedom to do so.

As we stood waiting for the train, I asked E-san what would be the meaning of 'peace' in her life. She replied, "To be able to tell my family who I really am and have them accept me, and to be able to live my life as a woman at home and at work." The image of E-san walking through the cold night to her locker to 'change' stayed with me for a long time after she left. That very simple desire - to have the understanding and acceptance of those we love - is so easy to say and often so difficult to achieve.

Lesbian, Gay and Bi-Sexual

Like all other human beings, individuals who choose people of the same sex as their sexual partner in Japan come in all different shapes, forms and beliefs. There are terms in the Japanese language referring to *okama* (queen or fag) or *homo* (queer male) or *lezu* (dyke), which are generally used in a disparaging way, although some people adopt those terms to describe themselves. These terms are used quite frequently, and I suspect that the majority of Japanese using them do not realize that they are discriminatory. It is more difficult to guess whether they would use them even if they did know. In a society where the overwhelming expectation is that everyone is heterosexual, these terms can be very damaging, especially to young people who may in fact be having some confusion over their sexuality.

The demands of marriage and family put very strong pressures on all Japanese. Sexual orientation is not generally a sufficient reason for exemption from those pressures, although many people manage to resist. For others, the choice is to marry and then live a dual life. Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting an interesting family consisting of a couple (gay and lesbian) and their young daughter. The couple, friends for many years, chose marriage to satisfy the demands of aging parents. The daughter has just started primary school. She understands that her parents are 'different' from other couples. At home, her father is 'mama' and her mother is 'papa' but at school, she calls her mother *okaasan* (Japanese word for mother) and her father, *otoosan* (Japanese word for father). So far, it seems to be working. The couple say that their in-laws and other relatives do not necessarily approve, but it is better than not being married at all. This family seems happy, but it is an unusual arrangement. It is not uncommon for gay and lesbian people in Japan to be married, but rarely openly to each other. In fact, married lesbian and gay people generally feel they must keep their sexual orientation a secret from their partner.

F-san is a lesbian. She realized that she was a lesbian when she spent a year of college in North America. She found a partner, and the relationship lasted for a while after she returned to Japan, but she is now living with a Japanese partner. F-san says that she does not have any problem with her sexuality, and

that is has not been particularly difficult for her. At the same time, F-san is not open about her sexual orientation at work or with her friends or family. She says that she does not want to 'come out,' and that even if she did, she does not think that anyone would be supportive. She and her partner live together, but they have separate mailboxes, each using an assumed name. At work, they share stories about their (non-existent) 'boyfriends.' F-san says that now she is happy, but she does have some concern about the future.

G-san is gay. He is open about his sexuality in his private life, and has told a few good friends at work, but otherwise keeps it secret. He does not have a steady partner, and uses the internet or goes to gay bars in the city to look for partners. He is worried about getting older. He wants to find someone and settle down with them, but so far he has not been able to find anyone. He has told some of his family members that he is gay, but says that it is hard to take their asking him if he really isn't going to marry. He also has trouble at work when he goes drinking with his colleagues, because the subject they discuss most often is sex. His boss and some colleagues try to 'help' him by introducing him to women, and he finds this difficult, too. He says that he really hopes sexual diversity becomes more socially acceptable soon, because it would make his life much easier.

H-san is a bi-sexual woman. Since her student days, she has had both male and female sexual partners, and has many gay friends. She was a very active child, and says she was often mistaken for a boy. I doubt that she is mistaken very often any more, but she is still a very active person, physically and mentally. She now lives in Tokyo and when she has time, works as a volunteer for the Tokyo International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and other activities for sexual minorities.

H-san is currently involved with a man, but says she is happy to have either men or women as sexual partners. She says, "I like a person for who s/he is, not for what their sex might be." H-san appears on the surface to be very happy, but she has a very serious concern. Because she does not choose her sexual partners on the basis of sex, she finds that it is hard to find understanding and support from other sexual minorities. She is seen as not really being a sexual minority

because she is someone who, "when push comes to shove, can always move over to the other side and be straight." While the rules may be different, the lesbian/gay world recreates the dichotomy of male and female in society as a whole through the creation of a dichotomy based on sexual preference. Japanese intersexuals and bi-sexuals find that people generally have a hard time dealing with the blurring of these distinctions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to take a look at some individual cases of sexual diversity in Japan, with a view to how social transformation is (or is not) occurring on a personal basis. The forces of globalization and the needs of the popular entertainment industry for something new and different have certainly had an effect on Japan. Sexual minorities are definitely more visible, and have a place in society as 'sexual minorities.' The question is more whether there is yet a place in Japanese society for individuals with diverse sexual desires and needs. This in turn is related to the question of how much of a place there is in Japanese society for the expression of individual diversity, of any ilk.

With the exception of authoritarian regimes that use force to implement social standards, societies cannot function without a certain degree of contentment among their citizens. Most Western cultures link contentment to the expression of individual freedom, but it can also be linked to the well-being of the community, rather than the freedom of a particular individual within that community. Japanese culture and society have traditionally placed the harmony of the community before the satisfaction of individual needs. Both systems function as efficient methods for governance as long as individuals comply with the freedoms and responsibilities required of them within their particular system.

The idea of the social institution of individual choice was introduced to Japan through the establishment of a democratic government after World War II, but post-war Japan had no time, money or energy for individual difference. Over time, as Japan grew more wealthy and people had more time and energy for different things, the idea of individual expression and choice began to take hold, although often it was not accompanied by the concomitant idea of individual

responsibility. Instead, people who were assertive about their individual needs and desires were seen as self-indulgent, irresponsible and unwilling to cooperate with the group. This created a new dichotomy: 'selfish (individual) indulgence' as opposed to the 'proper assumption of social responsibilities.' Since the formulation of social responsibility in Japan is not based on individual desires, there is of course a certain amount of truth in this view of individuality as selfishness.

The situation is further complicated by the egalitarian approach taken to equality in Japan. Equality is seen in terms of the expansion of 'sameness' rather than the recognition of difference. The Japanese saying that 'a nail that sticks out must be pounded in' is still the rule, although the definition of permissible 'sticking out' has expanded. At least on the surface, everyone is supposed to be the same. In some ways, this view allows for tremendous freedom. Individuals can do virtually anything they want, as long as they appear to be following the rules. In practice, if one is breaking and/or bending gender rules, it can be very difficult to appear to be following social convention. As a result, the expression and/or assertion of individual difference in Japan can be truly an act of defiance. Even if the expression of difference is limited to a single area, the person can be branded as a 'non-conformist' or discontent, a label s/he may have to carry for life. This is true for ethnic and other minorities, as well for members of the Japanese 'majority' who may choose to be different.

Japanese society today is grappling with how to integrate individual difference into the social framework as a whole. The guarantees of lifetime employment and financial stability are fading quickly, so the incentives for compliance have lost much of their old attraction. Many young Japanese question why they should comply with social norms, many of which they find confining, when there is nothing obvious to be gained on a personal basis. One can hardly blame them, although the value of social stability, as well as the relative costs of its maintenance, is perhaps only something that can be determined in retrospect or by hindsight.

Japan's minorities have for the most part been relatively 'invisible.' The indigenous Ainu people or Okinawan people were originally physically distinct, but persecution and an aggressive policy of 'integration' have done much to blur

the physical differences. In recent years, increased efforts have been made to revive their cultures, but most of the people involved in these efforts live far away from the centers of Japanese political, economic and cultural life. The traditional outcast class, *Burakumin*, was an artificially created underclass, distinguishable on the basis of what they did or where they lived, rather than on physical appearance. Class distinctions were extreme for Koreans and Chinese, in most cases the by-product of Japanese colonialism, but certainly today, members of those groups born in Japan who, at least on the surface, want to 'pass' as Japanese are, for the most part, able to do so. What is far more difficult is to establish one's ethnic visibility while at the same time fitting into Japanese society as a whole.

The influx of Asian workers to Japan in the 80's helped to change the 'invisible' status of Japan's minorities. The problems and discrimination faced by those groups were found to be true for Japan's other minorities as well. At the same time, the experience of Korean and other minorities has been used to help newer Asian minorities improve their situation. International trends toward recognition of the rights of minorities have also helped to put pressure on Japan. One example of this would be the recognition by the Japanese government of the Ainu people as an indigenous minority.

Sexual minorities are a relatively new addition to the discussion about the rights of minorities in Japan. The discovery and spread of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980's was accompanied in Japan by the designation of 'high risk' groups, among which were gays and foreigners. This of course did nothing to improve the status of gay people, although it did in some ways make it more difficult to continue to deny the existence of gay people in Japan. As in other countries, however, the 'threat' (perhaps one should really say the 'benefit') of sexual minorities is that they are so 'invisible' that they can be, and are, anyone and everywhere. Once the assumption of 'sameness' is broken, sexual diversity becomes a reality; recognition is a separate issue. It is both a threatening and empowering discovery.

Recently, the owner of a bar in Okinawa was arrested for employing a 14-year-old boy who had dressed as a woman and claimed he was 18.¹⁵ This incident

provoked some discussion among some of the members of a mailing list of sexual minority educators to which I belong. The initial reaction seemed to be concern for the young man as a trans-gendered person. It was soon followed by skepticism, however. Perhaps he was just trying to earn money and it had nothing to do with his sexuality. Next came some speculation about the bar owner. Did he really not know the true sex and age of the young man? This was followed by various examples, most given by people who are themselves trans-gendered to some degree, about TG people who have been successful in the sex industry as 'new-half' (primarily MTF) workers. Is the problem one of age (14 being too young) or one of sexuality? The eventual conclusion of this discussion can be summarized in three points: (1) most agreed that fourteen is probably too young for sex work of any kind under any circumstances, (2) cross-dressing (MTF) is trendy so there is money to be made if one is physically attractive (and young) enough, (3) regardless of what the sexuality of this particular individual may be, there are relatively few job options outside of the sex industry for people who are visibly trans-gendered. The general consensus was that there ought to be more job opportunities and role models for young people, in order to provide alternatives to sex work.

This discussion reflects what I believe to be the answer, at least for the time being, to the question posed by this paper. On one level, the increasing visibility of Japan's sexual minorities is creating social transformation with regard to not only sexual diversity, but also to some extent with regard to Japan's other minorities. At the same time, the bulk of interest in sexual minorities is as something new and different for popular culture. The individual stories addressed here reflect these trends. On the one hand, I was able to meet most of these people either through an organization for sexual minorities or through activities in which I personally am involved. On the other hand, the reluctance to 'come out' is indicative of the difficulty of survival as a sexual minority in Japan on a personal level.

There is one final aspect regarding minorities in Japan that deserves mention. While geographically Japan is not a large country, there are significant cultural differences among the different regions. As in many other countries, sexual

minorities are more likely to feel comfortable and to find support in large cities where they can be relatively anonymous. Japan's largest metropolitan areas are Tokyo and Osaka. While there are active movements in both cities, the size, activities and mentality are very different. On the whole, Tokyo is much more active, open and free than Osaka or other parts of the Kansai. In other words, it would seem that it is easier to be a sexual minority in Tokyo than in the Kansai.

Why? I would suggest the following answer. In comparison with Tokyo, traditional minorities (Korean, Chinese, *Buraku*) are very strong in the Kansai. This is, I believe, a result of demographics. Traditionally, people have moved to Tokyo to try to lose their identity as a minority. In the Kansai, moving is not really as much of an option, so people have instead sought empowerment through identification as minorities. These minorities do not necessarily have an understanding attitude toward sexual minorities, however. Thus as a sexual minority, it is easier to be open in Tokyo, where there are all kinds of people with all kinds of diversity, rather than in the more rooted and traditional Kansai. The examples here are all examples from Kansai. They are no doubt representative of people in Tokyo as well, but I suspect there are also some significant differences.

The transformation of recognition of sexual minorities as interesting social abnormalities to acceptance of sexual diversity within society is a lengthy and difficult process. Japan has embarked on that journey, but is still at the beginning stages. In some ways, the assumption of 'sameness' in Japan makes it easier for sexual minorities to live their lives without 'coming out;' most people will assume 'sameness' until it is proved otherwise. As long as 'sameness' remains the rule, assertion of difference is optional. If, however, the assumption of 'sameness' were to be replaced by that of 'difference,' then personal choice becomes mandatory in a whole variety of situations. Within the 'culture of sameness,' Japan has historically had a variety of tools to deal with a certain degree of difference. Modernization has made many of those tools obsolete, and others have been lost. The acceptance of sexual minorities, like that of other minorities in Japan, will only truly be possible if difference becomes acceptable.

It has not happened yet, but perhaps some day it will.

Notes

- ¹ The author is grateful to the members of G-Front Kansai for interviews and contributions between December 2001 and August 2002. In order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved, names will not be used. Unless otherwise stated, all examples come from members and/or people affiliated with G-Front Kansai. More information on G-Front Kansai is available from their web site: <http://gfrontkansai.fc2web.com/>
- ² The term 'sexual minority' is generally used in Japan to refer to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, intersexual and trans-gendered and/or trans-sexual people and will be used as such here. The term 'minority' refers to essentially 'public' sexuality; the aggregated total of the personal and private sexualities of all individuals is so varied that the idea of 'majority' and 'minority' becomes essentially meaningless. Another group of people who can be considered to be sexual minorities, but whose situation is not addressed here are those whose sexuality is not generally recognized by society, such as disabled or elderly people.
- ³ LGBT: Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, intersexual, trans-gender. This began as gay, became LGB, later became LGBT and now some are using LGBT. There are also arguments over the proper order for these initials.
- ⁴ *Asahi Shimbun*, Osaka edition, 2002/09/15.
- ⁵ In 2001, the number of young women attending high school exceeded the number of young men, 96.7% as opposed to 95.0%. However, only 32.7% of the women went on to four year colleges, as opposed to 46.9% of the men. An additional 15.8% of the women went to junior colleges, making the aggregate total of women in higher education greater than that of men. In general, parents want their sons to be useful to society, and their daughters to be caring. (*White Paper on Equal Participation for Men and Women 2002*, (男女共同参画白書), www.gender.go.jp/whitepaper/h14/1_8.html, accessed 20 October 2002).
- ⁶ One indication that more and more sexual minorities are making the decision to be 'out' is the number of people participating in the Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Parade (TLGP). The first parade, held in 1994, had 1100 participants. There were no parades between 1996 and 2000, but a total of 2,700 people marched in TLGP 2002. (www.tlgp.org/frames/html accessed 17 October 2002. Also the Official Guidebook for TLGP2002, published by the organizing committee).
- ⁷ Organizations such as OCCUR (www.gb-sos.com) and Sukotan (www.sukotan.com) are active in not only promoting rights for sexual minorities, but also in watching the media and trying to promote better coverage. According to gay activist FUSHIMI Noriaki, the 1990's marked the beginning of a sudden 'gay boom,' where authors, Fushimi included, and others began to 'come out' publicly. The Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (now held annually) was begun, and the number of lectures and other events dealing with gay/lesbian issues increased dramatically. (See Fushimi Noriaki, *Queer Paradise: Welcome to the Labyrinth of 'Sex'*. 1995, p.18).
- ⁸ Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," in Williams,

Christine L. & Arlene Stein, *Sexuality and Gender*, Blackwell Publishers, 2002, pp.468-473. Quotation is from page 469.

- ⁹ With the exception of Hashimoto, who is a public figure working on intersexual issues and from whom permission has been obtained, names of people interviewed will be withheld. Japanese names will be written with the family name first, in capitals, followed by the given name. Hashimoto has published several books on this topic, including *Sei no Gradation - Haninyouji wo Kataru* (*Gradiations in Sex: the Story of an Intersexual Child*), 青弓社 2000.
- ¹⁰ There are various ways to distinguish between trans-sexuals and trans-gendered people. For the purposes of this paper, trans-sexuals will be defined as those who have altered their bodies, or plan to do so, in line with their perceived sex, while trans-gender will refer to all people who cross gender boundaries with regard to their sexuality and/or sexual orientation. In this sense, transgender is a very broad category that encompasses trans-sexuals as well as others.
- ¹¹ There is some debate about the appropriateness of this translation, as 'shougai' translates literally as 'disability.' Moreover, the term has achieved a fairly high level of popular usage, referring to a broader spectrum of gender identities than would be indicated by GID.
- ¹² The first formal definition of gender role was published in 1955, in the context of defining sex. Dr. John Money, working on hermaphroditism, defined 5 prenatally determined variables of sex, and two postnatal determinants, the sex of assignment and rearing (surgically or otherwise assigned) and that of 'gender role.' Gender role was "used to signify all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively. It includes, but is not restricted to sexuality in the sense of eroticism." (Money, John. *Gendermaps: Social Construction, Feminism and Sexosophical History*. New York: Continuum, 1995, p.21).
- ¹³ One reason that B-san chose the university he did was that a faculty member had publicly 'come out' as a sexual minority. When B-san began to have difficulties, he was able to consult that faculty member and to have understanding and assistance in resolving his problems. It is impossible to determine what his situation would have been without support from that person; he might have been fine. At the same time, the reasons he gives for his choice of school, coupled with the success of his appeal, show the importance of role models and people in positions of authority who are 'out.'
- ¹⁴ In Japan, 'compulsory education' refers to the responsibility of the parents to send the child to school, not the responsibility of the child to attend. If the child does not attend, the parents are held responsible and can be (but in practice rarely are) fined. There are presently many cases of children refusing to attend school. Counseling and other methods are employed, but even if the child does not return to school, s/he matriculates from one grade to the next through junior high school.
- ¹⁵ *Yomiuri Shimibun Web*, (www.yomiuri.co.jp, accessed 19 September 2002, 23:03). Also *Mainichi Shimibun*, 19 September 2002. The conversations took place on the STN21 Mailing List between 20-22 September 2002.

References

English

- Blasius, Mark, ed. *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Money, John. *The Adam Principle: Genes, Hormones and Gender: Selected Readings in Sexology*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993.
- Money, John. *Gendermaps: Social Construction, Feminism and Sexosophical History*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Summerhawk, Barbara, Cheiron McMahill, Darren McDonald, eds. and translation. *Queer Japan: Personal Stories of Japanese Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals*. New Victoria Publishers, 1998.
- Williams, Christine L. & Arlene Stein, *Sexuality and Gender*, Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

Japanese

- 小倉千加子 (OGURA Chikako) 『セクシュアリティの心理学』 (*The Psychology of Sexuality*) 有斐閣選書 2001年
- 上野千鶴子 (UENO Chizuko) 『発情装置 エロスのシナリオ』 (*The Erotic Apparatus*) 筑摩書房 1989年
- サイモン・ルベイ著 伏見憲明監修, 玉野真路・岡田太郎訳 『クィア・サイエンス—同性愛をめぐる科学言説の変遷』 勁草書房 2002年
- 関修・木谷麦子編 (SEKI Osamu & KITANI Mugiko, eds). 『知った気でいるあなたのためのセクシュアリティ入門』 (*An Introduction to Sexuality against your knowing looks*) 夏目書房 1999年
- 橋本秀雄 (HASHIMOTO Hideo) 『性のグラデーション 半陰陽児を語る』 (*Gradations in Sex: the Story of an Intersexual Child*) 青弓社 2000年
- 伏見憲明 (FUSHIMI Noriaki) 『クィア・パラダイス「性」の迷宮へようこそ — 伏見憲明対談集』 (*Queer Paradise: Welcome to the Labyrinth of 'Sex' - Conversations with FUSHIMI Noriaki*) 翔泳社 1996年
- 吉永みち子 (YOSHINAGA Michiko) 『性同一性障害—性転換の朝』 (*Gender Identity Disorder: The dawn of sex change*) 集英社新書 2000年