

COMMUNICATION (III)

TEASE AND SYMPATHY:
Exotic Dancers and Their World

Wendy Renault
McMaster University

This paper is the result of an exercise in ethnographic investigation. Data was collected in fieldwork in a local northend strip bar. To lend support to my analysis I have used as comparison the institution of *geisha* in modern Japan. The bar is located in the north end of downtown Hamilton. This section of the city comprises several Mediterranean ethnic neighbourhoods along with light manufacturing and a thriving ethnic retail area. The county detention centre and the city's largest hospital are located nearby. It is a large building with oversized signs advertising 'EXOTIC DANCERS', and 'FRENCH TABLE DANCERS'. One can enter through the front door, the lesser-used entrance, or the back door which opens on a parking lot. When you enter through the back door, you are in a short, darkened hallway (a liminal area of transition from the normal ...) and have to go through another door to enter the bar (... to the exotic). The room is large and is generally darkened, with strategic lighting. To the right is a large T.V. screen continuously showing sports broadcasts. Further to the right is a raised section of the room with a number of pool tables. To the left of the door is the back of the stage which protrudes about a third of the way into the room. At the front of the room is a heating table for hot food service, and the bar. On the left hand wall there is a sign lit in red lights with the names of the girls as they appear in their stage routines. In the remaining space are about seventy tables, each with three or four chairs.

There is continuous music, recent hit parade for the most part, but with the occasional 'golden oldie'. At first the music seems loud but it soon becomes background. The music is interrupted by a male, French accented voice asking clientele to welcome the next dancer.

There are usually two or three waiters/waitresses serving drinks and a server or two behind the food table. The thing that makes this bar look different from other bars which serve food is that the audience is almost completely male. The few females sitting at tables or walking about are quite scantily clad and, when they walk, they do so knowing that they are being watched and respond by nodding, winking (real winks, *à la* Geertz),

waving and walking in an actively sensual way with a pronounced sway of the hips.

THE PEOPLE

My primary consultants are Michelle, Sonia and Candy. Some exotic dancers (at other bars) have elaborate stage routines involving more or less complex costumes and props. My consultants have 'routines' which are two or three songs in length in which the dancer removes her clothes and dances in an erotic and/or suggestive way. These dancers also typically do 'table dancing'. The 'table' that the dancer dances on is a box about two feet square and one foot high which the girl brings to the client's table. In this particular bar there are house girls (this is their primary place of employment) and circuit or travelling dancers. The latter travel from city to city every week or two. Some girls have agents who book them into places; others, such as my consultants, 'check out' places themselves when they wish to travel. In looking for a place to work, the girls typically check the rules and whether they are likely to be enforced. This is of higher or lower priority depending on each individual dancer. The bar where they work in Hamilton is known for the management's backing and support of the dancers.

The dancers work in shifts, from noon until six thirty p.m. and from five thirty until one a.m. They usually alternate days, which allows maximum tip opportunities for everyone (eg. Mon. evening, Tues. night, etc.; the evenings are usually more lucrative). In between the stage shows, the girls can table dance. Often a dancer is paid for simply dancing at the table, but clients also pay a dancer to sit and talk. The going rate is five dollars per song (about three minutes), and as talking is taking up the dancer's time during the business hours, it is paid time.

My consultants prefer the term 'exotic dancer' to stripper as they say that the former carries a connotation of class. They are all house girls who every once in a while 'like a change of scenery', and so travel to another place for a week or two. My consultants all agreed that they do not feel completely comfortable with other females -- who are seen as being out of place -- in the audience. They felt that they were performing for males, but could understand women coming in with men to use the exotic dancing erotically; that is, as a sexual aid. My consultants stated feeling more comfortable about my presence after I explained my unusual role as observer and analyst.

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

What is it like to do fieldwork in such a setting? It is not the 'other world' exotic of New Britain, or Vodun; nor is it the description of an entire culture. It is rather a 'subculture' of my own culture, one of which I previously had little knowledge. The little knowledge I did have came from talking to men who frequented strip bars, combined with my own guesswork.

The reality was exotic in the sense of being out of the realm of my normal experience, and my consultants taught me much. I thought I might find girls who were heavy drug users, used foul language, and exhibited blatant sexual behaviour. In my consultants, I found sensitive, professional women who take good care of their bodies, and are proud of their work.

I was quite nervous entering the bar for the first time; nervous about beginning fieldwork and about going into a room where men expected to see women with no clothes on. I also wondered how I would feel watching other women dance 'exotically'. During the course of my fieldwork the nervousness about beginning faded quickly, but the nervousness about going into the bar faded only somewhat. I always carried my notebook and pen quite obviously and always took a table near the front door (seldom used, where the girls sat to eat). And watching exotic dancers -- it seemed odd at first but I found that if I examined things such as kinds of movements, tempo, facial expressions, I could begin to understand more about the fascination with exotic dancers. My feelings of comfort increased each time I spoke with my consultants, because they were warm, friendly women with their professionalism evident.

COMPARISON

Liza Carihfield did her PhD. dissertation (1978) on the institution of *geisha* in modern Japan. She discusses the role and behaviours of women and some of the meaning involved in these roles; for example, why multiple aspects within the role of woman occur. As will become clear, a discussion of *geisha* provides an appropriate comparison for discussing the various roles of and beliefs about women in our own culture and the exotic dancer's part in these roles.

In Japanese culture, there are two primary aspects, or role types, of female. One is that of wife and mother. This female is in control of the private life of the home and the routines of daily life. She has little or no skill in social interactions outside the home, and usually has not had as

much formal education as her male counterpart, which is significant in terms of social standing (Crihfield, 1978:14).

The *geisha* represents the other primary aspect of female. She is socially astute and can be a definite asset to a man in terms of furthering his social standing and in entertaining business associates. So, while the wife is the centre of the man's private life, that is his home and family; the *geisha* is more or less the centre of the man's public life, although the 'back' side of that public life (Crihfield 1978:264, see also Goffman 1959:106-140).

The *geisha* in resort towns tend to double as prostitutes; in larger centres, while a *geisha* may be a mistress, overt sex is not part of being *geisha*. As their numbers decline some *geisha* lament a decline in professionalism; mastering refined social graces, the ability to aid a client in business through social engagements, competence with traditional musical instruments and avoidance of direct prostitution. This seems to be happening more with the increased popularity of vacations and resort areas, and the increase of American style 'bargirls' (bartending, waitressing, and what a *geisha* would call low class entertaining including prostitution).

The ideal for exotic dancers can be compared to the *geisha* ideal of Japan, providing a focus for the interpretation of the various roles and expectations of female in our culture. In Canadian culture, we do not admit to having such a definite role dichotomy in our image of 'female'. We do, however, tacitly maintain some degree of adherence to this dichotomy. It seems to be largely unwitting and something which (some) people would like to overcome. Some evidence of this division can be seen in the way we conceive of 'mother'. A mother is a mother first, not a female or even at times a full person. It is not normal, at least until lately, for one's mother to wear a bikini or to be thought of as attractive to other men, even pursued by them. While it is acceptable for a father or husband to go to a strip club, especially for lunch or after work, it is definitely not as acceptable for 'Mom' to go to see the male strippers. I heard several stories from mothers who did. Male and female children were generally preteens and teenagers and their reactions varied from moral indignation -- "how could you go to such a place?", to a tittering comment such as "what a naughty thing to do". The message in this seems to be that mothers are not supposed to be interested in overt sensuality, at least not in public.

A 'good' wife/mother is expected to be socially adept, in terms of business and social entertaining, although perhaps not a cultivated entertainer (for example, singing or playing the traditional instruments,

as do the *geisha* of Japan); is expected to be at least a competent cook and household manager, and is not primarily seen as a sensual person.

The exotic dancer gives expression to this last aspect of female. She is alive, immediate, and very much a sensual being, in contrast to derivative, mass marketed forms in publications such as *Playboy* or *Penthouse* and sex films, which may produce the same results (titillation, provoking erotic fantasies, confirming masculine self-identification), but which are removed temporally and spatially. The exotic dancer is not (at least ideally) to be used as a tangible sex object, but rather can be seen as being a part of the client's imaginative world or fantasy. While she is right there, she is not actually available. She may even be seen by her male audience as an idealized woman. One comment I heard while doing my research was that "you go to a strip bar when you hate women". Some discussion elucidated a meaning other than the obvious one. A strip bar has a kind of 'men's club' atmosphere and the dancers act in the way a woman (not a mother) is supposed to act. She is scantily and sensually dressed, she lavishes attention on her clients (for remuneration), and her whole purpose -- at last superficially -- is to arouse them. The arousal does not always have to be a sustained sexual arousal, but rather a kind of escape into the exotic -- a completely different world from the real one where women are often seen as being demanding, aggressive, and generally not attractively feminine, whether available or not.

Michelle told me of table dancing for a man in another city. He had her dance for him and talk with him:

He was a nice, ordinary man, he had a happy marriage, and liked his children. He showed me pictures of his family that he carried around with him. I guess I am just part of a fantasy for him.

It is perhaps this need for different and at times, opposing -- virgin versus the whole -- aspects of woman to answer 'different' needs in the male that accounts for much of current literature which is in evidence (especially in places like supermarkets). Stories with titles such as *How to be a Better Lover for your Husband*, *Why Husbands Cheat*, and *How to Keep Your Husband Satisfied*, are putatively designed to help the wife become a more sensual/sexual being for her husband. Mother is not seen as a sensual being but perhaps would like to be. This notion is embodied in the traditional prescription to "be a lady in the livingroom and a whore in the bedroom".

My consultants felt that a part of their role (job) was to listen to their clients, to be a kind of listener/supporter/friend/confidant (partial mother ...) fulfilling the nurturing aspect of female. That the dancer takes off

her clothes may provide an alternative to long term commitment in providing a sense of intimacy (... and partial whore). While the man cannot touch the dancer (a very basic rule in such establishments) he has seen her with no clothes on. This may reduce imagined, or 'felt' barriers to intimacy, which may in turn allow the client to tell the dancer intimate details of his life and to ask the dancer for help in solving some of his personal problems, implicitly or explicitly.

CODES OF BEHAVIOUR AND DANCERS AS PROFESSIONALS

A basic across-the-board rule in bars where girls dance is NO TOUCHING. The client may not touch and the girls may not touch, although it is thought to be acceptable for the dancer's hair (not pubic) to touch the client on his face or arm. This rule -- no touching -- partly explains the stiff, often strained-looking posture which I observed in several individual men having girls dance for them, especially when this was for an extended period, sometimes up to an hour. I have seen fifty dollar bills on the table, and had reports of one hundred dollars on the table at a time.

The following details specific behaviours with some of the meanings the dancers attach to them.

BEHAVIOURS

While doing routines or table dancing, some dancers move in seductive, erotic ways.

Other dancers spread their legs and separate their labia while licking their lips, or even bouncing on stage.

MEANINGS

This is suggestive of further sensuality, in fantasy.

This is done in such a way as to make it appear that they are having sex. Michelle called this 'banging', and put it into the category of unnecessarily crude behaviour which is more often than not resorted to by girls lacking in talent and/or looks. This is an aspect of another (unwritten) rule which deals with what constitutes appropriate behaviour.

Michelle told me of a time when she and Sonia heard another dancer 'talking dirty', saying, "I want to fuck you", to a client. The same dancer was, while table dancing, spreading her legs and labia.

The girls complained and the dancer in question was fired.

This dancer had also broken the rule of not having men upstairs in the girls' sleeping quarters. Not only were men upstairs, but it was a different man each night.

The question of personal safety is a common one among modern women in our culture. The prevalent way of responding to it is to act in such a way as to minimize risk ...

Michelle also spoke of personal standards. She expects people to respect her as a person. This respect is not obvious to her when a man is being rude. Not rude in the sense of ignoring, but rather in the use of impolite or unacceptable language. Michelle's example of this is the time two men asked her to dance for them.

One was wearing a nice suit and was very polite. The other one was in jeans and a shirt, and seemed O.K., but while I was dancing he said 'Hey baby, show me some pink'. I thought this was very rude but decided to make it humorous, so I turned around and stuck out my tongue! He was angry but his friend laughed. I left their table. There is no reason for people to be

The actions of 'dancing' (spreading labia and legs) were said to have been done excessively.

This is an example of some dancers attempting to maintain certain standards in their profession.

This is considered not only to be bad form, but it also makes the place unsafe for the other girls. This lamenting of improper behaviour is reminiscent of the declining professionalism felt by many *geisha*.

while not restricting oneself too much

rude to me; I am friendly to them and I expect the same treatment in return.

Michelle made a distinction between vulgar and sexual as opposed to sensual and sexy, or blunt versus subtle sexuality. The former involves excessive spreading of legs and labia to clients, and 'banging'. The latter involves using slow movements aimed at relaxing customers and putting them at ease, and maintaining professional behaviour, keeping the routine clean and tasteful. This line is drawn in slightly different places depending on the dancer, just as it is drawn in different places by individuals in the culture as a whole. From my observations, the girls with whom I spoke seemed to have a more rigid code (meaning) of behaviours than some others I saw performing (behaviour).

Another aspect of professional behaviour deals with alcohol and drug use. Dancers who abused drugs were looked on by my consultants with something like pity:

It's too bad that they waste their money like that, they could have a nice apartment, a car, or even a small house. Besides you really can't do a good job if you are stoned or drunk. You can't be the same person every day, and you really can't talk or listen to your clients.

CONCLUSIONS: SUGGESTIONS

One interpretation of the motivation for exotic dancing is that the girls like looking good and being attractive and seductive with various men. Another interpretation is that the girls are removing their clothes for men as a socially acceptable (the Japanese "back door" acceptability) way of receiving a lot of attention. Dancing may also be seen as an art form. It is a way of expressing one's feelings and/or creativity. For some girls, dancing might be just a job -- it pays the rent and can easily pay very well. Yet another avenue open to discussion is that perhaps some women like to be seen as sex objects. Or perhaps they simply enjoy the pampering of their body which comes with looking one's best all the time in order to make a living. Some of these suggestions will undoubtedly seem repulsive to some people in our culture which is not, I believe, a reason for not including them in possibilities for further study. On the contrary, there is good reason to examine what is 'repulsive' and why. These kinds of 'meaning' discussions can be expanded to yield rich and fruitful ethnographies.

One potentially upsetting occurrence in fieldwork is the 'surprise'. After I finished my fieldwork and was writing this paper, a fellow student said something to the effect that "all the strippers and strip bars in this town are run by the bikers". Had I missed the whole aspect, or was it an overgeneralization? Through further questioning of acquaintances whom I knew had contact with local bikers, I got information which allowed me to feel comfortable with my data for this paper. It seems that the bikers are involved in most strip bars in this city, but the bar I chose has the least involvement. The bikers control many exotic dancers through their (the dancer's) addiction to drugs; in particular, cocaine. Apparently it is mostly younger girls, often runaways, who begin to use cocaine, and then are forced into exotic dancing or prostitution to pay for their drugs. If I were doing prolonged fieldwork, however, I would examine this aspect of the subculture of exotic dancers in greater detail.

It would also be fruitful to examine how the meanings of exotic dance reflect the roles of women as they relate to other forms of the dance, drama and theatre; the use of intimacy and sex as power tools; and to incorporate further comparisons such as the courtesans of various historical periods, and perhaps cult or temple prostitutes. Each would provide for rich studies of meanings.

It is the combination of two opposing views of woman -- the articulation of tease and sympathy -- which make the world of exotic dancers, and of their audiences, a complex web of meanings and countermeanings. The exploration of these webs in settings right next door to where we live and work offers anthropologists access to daily workings of complex cultural codes in the commonplaces of our own 'cultures of the exotic'.

REFERENCES

Crihfield, L.

1978 *The Institution of the Geisha in Modern Japanese Society*. PhD dissertation, Stanford University. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.

Goffman, Erving

1959 *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday.