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The Agency and Motivations of Gender-Variant Women in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Japan

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Abstract

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, a small number of biological women adopted a male gender performance. Scholars have examined the strategies governments and police deployed to push said women to adopt a female gender performance in alignment with their anatomical sex, however experts have not yet taken into due consideration the points of view of the gender-variant women themselves. By critically analysing contemporary testimonies on gender-variant women who lived in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan as recounted in court sentences, miscellanies, newspapers, and magazines and by applying the practice theory developed by cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner, the paper aims to investigate the complex social, cultural, and economic motivations for which gender-variant women adopted a male gender performance. By achieving this result, the paper will advance our knowledge about the lived experiences of gender-variant women in early modern and modern Japan.

Keywords: gender history; Japanese studies; practice theory; social history; women's history

1. Introduction

This paper is an offshoot of the project on which the author is currently working. The main project is a cultural history of female cross-dressing in Japan from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. In this project, the author has adopted the interpretive technique of cultural analysis as defined by Clifford Geertz (1973, pp. 5, 9-10), according to whom cultural analysis consists in the reconstruction of the meanings that social actors attach to a given phenomenon.

By way of example, in the main project the author has applied Geertz's cultural analysis to the mid-eighteenth-century practice wherein women wore the *haori*, a jacket that had only been used by men. Following Geertz, the author has identified the meanings that different groups of contemporary witnesses attributed to women wearing the haori:

- In the case of the so-called *haori geisha*, the female entertainers who were among the first women to don the jacket, using the *haori* signalled that they had learned to sing and declaim stories from actors of *jōruri*, who had adopted the *haori* and had made it their distinctive apparel;
- Non-professional women from Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka, the main urban conglomerates

of the time, wore the jacket in winter to protect themselves from the cold and also to imitate the style of the *haori geisha*;

- Lastly, the military administrations of the three cities forbade women from wearing the *haori* and social critics loathed women's use of the jacket because it erased crucial social and gender differences among the classes that constituted the urban population (Durante, 2025, pp. 23-33).

This approach has so far been fruitful, nonetheless the author has come upon some cases in which it may be insufficient. These cases concern the life stories of a small group of what the author has called in the title and in the abstract gender-variant women and will call *otoko-onna* in the rest of the article, a term whose meaning and use will be explained in more detail below, to indicate anatomical women who took on the lifeways of men for at least a portion of their lives. According to contemporary testimonies, such biological women grew dissatisfied, for reasons and in modalities which the paper will describe more fully later, with the expectations that society cast on them in relation to their anatomical sex and thus cross-dressed to gain advantages that society reserved to boys and men.

In these cases, cultural analysis might be insufficient to examine the richness of details present in the life stories of *otoko-onna*. The author could certainly utilise cultural analysis to go to the heart of the gendering practices that *otoko-onna* adopted: by following this approach, he may propose that *otoko-onna* cross-dressed to discard female-specific roles and to assume male-specific roles and opportunities deemed as more advantageous. However, he would leave a number of fascinating questions unanswered: for example, why did *otoko-onna* refute female-specific roles? Why did they consider male-specific opportunities more appealing? How can researchers understand the ways in which the subjects negotiated societal expectations?

The author has thus sought for alternative theoretical tools that may best be suited to analyse the life stories of *otoko-onna* in all their complexity and he may have found them in practice theory as developed by cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner. In this paper the author will therefore give the preliminary results on the attempts he has been making to apply Ortner's practice theory to his case studies. The paper pursues an additional objective in expanding the study of *otoko-onna* in early modern and modern Japan. The paper aims to fill an important gap in the available scholarship as experts Seki Tamiko (1980, pp. 76-84), Jennifer Robertson (1991, pp. 89-92; 1998, pp. 52-53), Gregory Pflugfelder (1999, pp. 152-153, 166-168, 265), Imai Shiho (2002, parr. 28-29), Diana E. Wright (2004, pp. 22-23), Mitsuhashi Junko (2008, pp. 125-175), and Nagashima Atsuko (2017, pp. 62-65; 2023, pp. 2-49) have explored the strategies and the legal concepts governments and police employed to punish *otoko-onna* when they created perceived breaks in the patriarchal and gender- and hetero-normative order of society, but they have dedicated much less space to reconstruct and comprehend the points of view of the *otoko-onna* themselves. Furthermore, more general research on gender in early modern and modern Japan, such as the works by Robertson (1992, 1998), Katherine Mezur (2005), Yamanashi Makiko (2012), and Isaka Maki (2016), has focused on Kabuki theatre, the *onnagata*, the Kabuki actor specialised in female roles, and Takarazuka theatre, but it has not compared its findings with the information available about the *otoko-onna* population. By centering the attention specifically on the lived experiences and gender performances of *otoko-onna*, the paper aims to contribute to this academic conversation by filling the gap relative to the research on *otoko-onna* themselves. The paper also aims to contribute to the study about the lives of trans- and gender-variant people before and on the verge of modernity in different points of the world alongside the recent monographs by Rachel Mesch (2020), Matthew H. Sommer (2024), and Eli Erlick (2025).

The paper is structured as follows:

- Chapters 2 and 3 will briefly introduce the paper's methodology and its limits, the main concepts of Ortner's practice theory, the sources used and the biases they present, and the rationale behind the paper's use of the term *otoko-onna* and of the pronouns used to refer to individuals belonging to this social group;
- Chapters 4 and 5 will discuss the life stories of three *otoko-onna* to understand the motivations for which they did not want to live as women and instead preferred living as men and the ways they cross-dressed to reach this end;
- Chapter 6 will draw preliminary conclusions on whether Ortner's practice theory can be employed to analyse the selected case studies and to what interpretations it leads.

2. Methodology

The author has adopted cultural history as the paper's reference discipline: cultural history studies culture, where culture is defined, following the semiotic definition proposed by Geertz (1973, pp. 5, 9-10), as a web of meanings shared by social actors, in a specific place and period from the past and its change over time. As an analytical framework, the author has adopted Ortner's practice theory. Ortner (1984, pp. 148-149; 1989, pp. 11-14; 1996, p. 2; 2006, p. 1) has defined practice theory as a theory of the relationship between social structure on the one hand and human agency on the other hand. In Ortner's formulation, practice theory revolves around two foci of interest: comprehending how people and human activity can be constituted through the social process and comprehending how people can make changes unanticipated by the social structure. To reach this double objective, the researcher examines the configuration of cultural forms, social relations, and historical processes that move subjects to act in the ways they do and how subjects act in ways that diverge from the structure. To understand the subjects' points of view, Ortner (1984, pp. 151-153) has subscribed to the strain theory, according to which people are seen as experiencing harsh situations and trying to solve the troubles posed by those situations. The strain perspective leads the scholar to explore the system wherein the actors are located to reveal the burdens placed on them. In so doing, the researcher can access the context and understand the actors' motives and the projects they make to deal with their problems.

Before choosing to adopt Ortner's practice theory, the author had considered adopting affect studies and mobility studies. The lens provided by affect studies can be extremely valuable since it guides the researcher in exploring the pre-conscious feelings and bodily sensations that subjects experience. However, the sources do not contain material about the pre-conscious feeling and bodily sensations the individuals felt, but rather they focus on conscious and rational motivations. Since Ortner's practice theory can investigate rational reasoning, the author has deemed it more suitable for the paper. Similarly, adopting mobility studies might have been appropriate given that geographical, occupational, and gender mobility are important facets in the case studies. However, focusing on mobility would not make the most of the information available about the subjects' reasons and the burdens placed on them by the social structure, information which the sources cover in detail. Since the point of this research is to find an analytical tool capable of examining the case studies in all their aspects and Ortner's practice theory is more apt to reach this objective, the author has decided to adopt Ortner's practice theory.

To examine the subjects' gender performances, the author has adopted the concept of gender performativity developed by Judith Butler (1988, pp. 519-523), according to whom gender is rooted in the adoption of culturally and socially defined behaviours, actions, and visual signs such as clothes and hairstyles. As Butler has concluded, it is the repeated performance of said actions and the wearing of said signs that establish gender. In this paper, Ortner's practice and strain theories and Butler's gender performativity complement each other because the former

provides guidance and hypotheses on how the social structure shapes gender expectations on a social, cultural, and historical level and the reasons and the ways gender expectations burden the individuals, whereas the latter provides hypotheses on how a given subject can shape their gender performance to reject certain gender expectations and instead acquire advantages correlated with other kinds of gender performance.

The author has selected the case studies through purposive sampling, thereby choosing three cases that contain the deepest and most pertinent information on the lived experiences of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese *otoko-onna* and the reasoning behind the adoption of their gender performances. The author has found the testimonies relevant for the study in four types of written sources: court sentences and a "miscellany" (*zuihitsu*) for the first case study, newspaper articles for the second case study, and a magazine article for the third case study. The author has used different types of primary sources to triangulate the information conveyed by the texts and thus ensure that the knowledge produced is accurate. Since the sources report on the activities and motivations of *otoko-onna* in the form of biographies, the author has adopted as an analytical method the life history method, which guides the researcher to examine the life of an individual as a story, i.e. a narration where the events in the existence of a person are told in chronological and causal order, to understand how an aspect of the individual's life which is relevant to the study was shaped by the historical, social, cultural, economic, political etc. context. The author has also analysed the case studies intersectionally by comparing the subject's backgrounds in regards to geographical provenance and to the status/classes to which the individuals belonged.

Concerning the transcription of Japanese words, the author has adopted the Hepburn system, the transcription method most commonly used in modern Japanese studies, according to which vowels are written and pronounced following the Italian writing and pronunciation system and consonants are written and pronounced following the English writing and pronunciation system. Regarding the translation of Japanese words, the author has adopted a literal translation method and has chosen English equivalents that are commonly used in everyday English conversation, e.g. *otoko* "man," *onna* "woman," *shinbun* "newspaper." Instead, the author has transcripted and not translated Japanese words which are generally known by English speakers, e.g. *sake*, or, on the contrary, terms that are so culturally specific that a literal translation would not be easily understood without an explanation, e.g. the names of the hairstyles *sakayaki* and *sanbatsu* and the names of the *haori* and *hanten* jackets. In these cases, the author has not provided a literal translation, but he has rather explained what these words indicate.

It is important to note that the methodology adopted presents the following limits:

- As Ortner (2006, pp. 107-153) herself has observed, practice theory relies on notions of culture, subjectivity, and agency that originated from historical, social, and cultural contexts and philosophical and religious debates that took place in the Western world; for this reason, these concepts may not be suitable for studying populations outside the Western geographical and cultural sphere and applying practice theory to early modern and modern Japanese history might unwillingly introduce a Eurocentric bias;
- The sample size, which includes three individuals, is very small: while on the one hand this aspect of the study allows to extract very deep data, on the other hand it produces knowledge that is valid only in relation to the case studies and hardly generalisable;
- The sources consulted may be biased:

  In the sentences they emitted, judges might have misrepresented the motivations and the actions carried out by the accused because they needed to justify their judgments

and may have been influenced in this endeavour by personal experiences and social, cultural, economic, philosophical, religious etc. worldviews;

In miscellanies, authors often wrote down anecdotes, stories, and rumours for their unconventionality and shock value; in the case of *otoko-onna*, it is possible that they sensationalised the events occurred to them and that they misrepresented the individuals' points of view by twisting them to fit their and their audience's gender-normative worldview;

Similarly to authors of miscellanies, newspaper journalists reported on stories, often, as Alistair Swale (2022, 2023) has shown, in a sensational manner, for their social and political importance, if they featured violence, and depending on whether they exhibited human behaviours that went beyond what was considered common sense; news about *otoko-onna* usually fell under this last category and journalists wrote them to shock readers and to instill fear that civil society was collapsing; for these reasons, again analogously to authors of miscellanies, journalists may have misrepresented the actions and the points of view of *otoko-onna* to increase the unconventionality of their lives and the sensational value of the news and might have twisted the motivations of *otoko-onna* to fit their and the readers' gender-normative worldview;

Magazine journalists might have misrepresented the events in the lives and the points of view of *otoko-onna* to fit the angle favoured by the editorial staff. In the case of the magazine *Woman's World* (*Fujin sekai*), from which the third and last case study is taken, it is important to note that reporters wrote the articles on the base of material received by the readers; in other words, the last *otoko-onna* in the sample supposedly wrote their life story and sent it to the editorial team of *Woman's World* and then an anonymous journalist rewrote and commented on the original submission. In this series of passages, part of the story may have been lost, the reporter may have reinterpreted the applicant's message, and the life story may have been invented in full or in part for inclusion in the magazine.

3. Notes on Important Terms

The author would like to clarify how and why he has used gender-variant in the title and abstract and *otoko-onna* in the paper. He has used the adjective gender-variant in the title and abstract for the following reasons:

- To make the topic of the paper clear to the contemporary audience;
- To connect the paper to comparative research on gender-related topics;
- Because *otoko-onna* is used in historical and contemporary Japanese to also refer to the relationship between men and women and its meaning in relation to gender variance is a historical usage of which even specialists in Japanese studies may not be aware; therefore, writing *otoko-onna* in the title could have created misunderstandings about the paper's content.

However, it goes without saying that gender-variant is a modern English word that did not exist in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese, thereby using it introduces an anachronism. To avoid this, the author has chosen to employ in the paper *otoko-onna*, a compound which combines the words for "man" (*otoko*) and "woman" (*onna*) that was used in the Edo (the old name of modern-day Tokyo) and Tokyo dialect from the early eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century to refer to biological males who took on the lifeways of females and females who took on the lifeways of males (Kokusho kankōkai, 1969, p. 476; Komine & Minami, 1985, pp. 276, 283, 292-296). Although the primary sources do not use *otoko-onna* in connection with the sample of individuals under research, the author has chosen to employ it

since it is the closest equivalent to gender-variant and similar expressions available in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese.

Writing a paper on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese *otoko-onna* poses a crucial problem about the pronouns to use regarding the subjects. Unfortunately, the primary sources do not reveal what pronouns the *otoko-onna* used for themselves nor do the writers of the texts use any pronouns. Only a small number of different sources which discuss the life stories of one of the individuals who belong to the paper's sample and other *otoko-onna* reveal some clues on how the writers of the texts and the gender-normative population referred to *otoko-onna*. In the miscellany *The Spider's Reel* (*Kumo no itomaki*, 1846, 1850), Santō Kyōzan (1769-1858) writes about a biological man named Jinkichi (dates unknown) who dressed, behaved, and talked like a woman by using the male third person pronoun *ka*, short for *kare* (Kōbunkan, 1929, pp. 645-646). In the book's English translation, Gerald Groemer (2019, pp. 213-214) has referred to this person as "he/his" presumably based on Santō's use of *ka*. In the miscellany *Night Stories of the Kasshi Year* (*Kasshi yawa*, circa 1821), Matsura Seizan (1760-1841) reports on the main events in the life of Takejirō (circa 1814-1838), the first individual in the paper's case studies sample, referring to Takejirō by the female third person pronoun *kanofu* (Nakamura & Nakano, 1983, p. 116). In the miscellany *Proceedings of the Bunny Garden Association* (*Tōen shōsetsu*, 1825), Kyokutei Bakin (1767-1848) recounts on a biological woman, named Yoshigorō (dates unknown), who dressed and behaved like a man and apparently claimed to be an anatomical man. According to Bakin, people from Shinjuku, the neighbourhood of Edo where Yoshigorō lived, referred to Yoshigorō by the male third person pronoun *kare*, probably in connection with Yoshigorō's stated biological sex. However, Yoshigorō's female sex was the object of rumours among the people of Shinjuku and it was later revealed when Yoshigorō had a baby. In the same miscellany, Bakin also writes about a biological man, named Okatsu (dates unknown), who dressed and behaved like a woman whose anatomical sex was, however, known by the people in Okatsu's community. To refer to both Yoshigorō and Okatsu, Bakin employs the noun and pronoun *mono*, which, unlike *ka(re)* and *kanofu*, does not explicate a person's anatomical sex (Sunaga, 2012, pp. 112-114). Based on these testimonies, it is possible to state that outside witnesses indicated *otoko-onna* by the pronouns appropriate for their (purported) anatomical sexes and not their genders. These sources present precious information on how contemporaries talked about *otoko-onna* and they might provide a justification for the paper to indicate *otoko-onna* by their anatomical sex. However, it is also plausible that, by indicating the sexes of the *otoko-onna*, these contemporary witnesses enforced a gender-normative bias on the individuals of whom they discussed. To avoid perpetrating such gender-normative bias, Bakin's use of the neutral pronoun *mono* stands as an important alternative whose use is also justified by the sources. For this reason, the author has decided to imitate Bakin's *mono* pronoun by using in English the gender-neutral singular pronouns "they/them."

4. Case Studies

Case 1: Takejirō. Sources: two court sentences emitted by the High Court of Edo in 1832 and 1837 and the miscellany *Fujiokaya's Diary* (*Fujiokaya nikki*, circa 1804-1868)

During their childhood, Takejirō lost their parents and thus was not socialised as a girl. They spent time playing with boys and came to "hate girls/women's activities" (*joshi no shogyō wo kirai*) and instead "appreciated boys/men's activities" (*otoko no shogyō wo konomi*). During their adolescence, Takejirō assumed a male appearance by shaving the top of their head in the *sakayaki* style, the hairstyle worn by adult men, and wore male clothes such as the *hanten*, a jacket similar to the abovementioned *haori*, and took the name Takejirō, where the suffix -jirō was often used in adult men's names. They also enjoyed typically male activities such as going

to the men's section of public bathhouses and going to bars and drinking *sake* with male friends. For an unspecified period of time between 1832 and 1837 they irregularly worked as a retainer, a job reserved to men of the warrior class (Nagashima, 2023, pp. 6-7, 14-15, 22-24, 30-31).

Case 2: Tokijirō (born circa 1855). Sources: one article in the newspaper *Osaka Newspaper Illustrated* (*Osaka nishikiga nichi nichi shinbunshi*) no. 23/1875, two articles in the newspaper *Asano Newspaper* (*Asano shinbun*) no. 527/1875 and no. 530/1875, and one article in the newspaper *Reading Newspaper for Sale* (*Yomiuri shinbun*) 24/3/1886

As a child, Tokijirō deeply missed their father and brothers who often travelled for work. They wished to go with them but could not as for a girl it was considered hard to travel to distant places, especially if unaccompanied. During their adolescence, Tokijirō took a job in another house, but again they missed their family because they could not travel freely. They wished to be a man so to solve this problem. To this end, they prayed to the *kami* of Takao Mountain, a divinity to whom they were devoted, to be turned into a man. Eventually they did on their own: they cut their hair short in a style called *sanbatsu* and deemed masculine, took the man's name Tokijirō, and worked as a rickshaw driver, a job usually performed by men. When not working, they went to bars and drank *sake* with their male colleagues ("Meiji hachi nen go gatsu," 1875, p. 1; "Nise-otoko," 1886, p. 3; Umehara, 1929, pp. 169-170).

Case 3: Hattori Haruko (born circa 1865). Source: article in the magazine *Woman's World* (*Fujin sekai*) vol. 6 no. 6/1911

As a child, Hattori regretted being born a girl and spent their time playing with a group of boys. They found that, being a girl in a farmer household, they had too much work, whereas boys, according to their testimony, had more free time which they spent playing outside. In the 1870s, their grandfather was assigned to work in Tokyo; Hattori wanted to go with him, but could not as they were a girl. Around 1882, Hattori attended a missionary school where they developed a passion for English and cross-dressed to go abroad and learn the language. As they did not manage to go abroad, they came back to their home region, Okayama, where they worked as a flower-seller in cross-dress from the end of the nineteenth until the early twentieth century (Iwami, 2001, pp. 40-42).

Intersectional Factors in the Case Studies

If analysed intersectionally for region and class/status, the case studies present interesting points of connection and differences. While Takejirō was native of Edo and lived there all their life, with the exception of the time they spent in prison, Tokijirō was born in Shimada, in present-day Shizuoka Prefecture, an area in between Kyoto and Tokyo, and apparently they worked to and from the two cities. Hattori, instead, was born in Okayama Prefecture, an urban zone in western Japan, but they moved for a time to Tokyo and cross-dressed to get there and also after they came back to Okayama. While the sample is too small to draw any secure conclusions, it is interesting to note that the subjects lived as *otoko-onna* regardless of their geographical provenance and converged to Edo/Tokyo for educational and occupational opportunities, reflecting the importance of the area in the cultural and economic life of the country. As concerns the subject's classes/statuses, Takejirō probably belonged to the *hinin* social group. The *hinin*, literally "non human," formed a group of socially undesirables who were shunned from the other classes, i.e. commoners, who were "farmers" (*hyakushō*) if they lived in rural areas and "townspeople" (*chōnin*) if they lived in cities, and "warriors" (*buke* or *bushi*) who were at the top at the social ladder and held military and bureaucratic posts. Takejirō was probably a *hinin* because their father was a firefighter and firefighters were commonly recruited among the *hinin* population and a *hinin* person passed this status to their offspring. Furthermore, Takejirō was sentenced for homelessness and homeless individuals, if they had

belonged to other classes, were automatically downgraded to *hinin* status, suggesting the possibility that Takejirō was *hinin* either at birth or became one later in life. On their part, Tokijirō's father held a prestigious post in the military government, thus they presumably belonged to the warrior class. Lastly, Hattori explicitly stated that they came from a farmer family.[1] In summary, the subjects came from different segments of the population of the time.

5. Case Analysis

In the case studies, the subjects found that the expectations society cast on them for their biological sex restricted:

- their sociality: they wished to spend their time in the company of boys and men, both family members and persons outside their families;
- their leisure: the subjects wished to engage in activities coded as masculine such as playing outside during childhood and attending bars and drinking alcohol in their youth;
- their mobility: they were forbidden from travelling to distant places, a prohibition which also prevented them from seeing their loved ones;
- their ability to perform certain jobs.

These four burdens were all tied to the *ie*, the family/household.

As for their sociality and mobility, girls and women usually stayed in their home in the company of their family and commonly with members of the same sex. When they left home, they usually stayed in their neighbourhoods, where they were escorted by family and/or servants, often of the same sex. When they made long distance journeys, they usually went on pilgrimages to main places of worship and always in the company of family and/or servants, often of the same sex (Yamakawa, 1992/1943, pp. 16-17, 35-36, 58, 75-78).

Similarly, girls and women's activities were usually performed within the household and in favour of the domestic economy. Generally speaking, girls and women performed four main kinds of economic activities:

- Sewing;
- Farming;
- the production of small objects for sale, generally made with paper.

Women usually conducted such activities within the *ie*, i.e. the space of the household and/or working with other family members (Uno, 1991, p. 31; Walthall, 1991, pp. 44-46; Yamakawa, 1992/1943, pp. 15, 19-20, 22, 31-36, 39-42, 47-48, 86, 96; Yonemoto, 2010, p. 46; Walthall, 2017, pp. 64-67, 71; Kimbrough, 2019, pp. 51-52).

The fourth source of income for girls and women was "contractual work" (*hōkō*), such as the job Tokijirō took, which girls and women conducted in other houses and often in different regions, but they were considered as part of the employer's *ie* and thus were restricted in their mobility and sociality within the employer's household, kin, and live-in staff (Smith, 1977, p. 93; Uno, 1991, pp. 27-28, 34-35; Walthall, 1991, pp. 48-50; Kojima, 2003, pp. 120-121). Tokijirō's testimony attests to this point in that they stated they could not leave their employer's house while under contractual labour.

As regards leisure, in their testimony Hattori alluded to the fact that girls were required to work more, while boys spent more time playing outside. The available Japanese scholarship has so

[1] The class system was abolished in the years following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, thereby class should have ceased to influence the lives of Tokijirō and Hattori. It is however possible that, in practice, class consciousness continued for a time to exert influence on the socio-cultural roles of the population and probably still impacted on Tokijirō and Hattori's lives as well.

far not noticed any difference in the workload boys and girls were expected to perform. On this regard Anne Walthall (2017, pp. 69-71), in analysing the activities of both young boys and girls in the household of scholar Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843), has written that both boys and girls made copies of texts for Atsutane which were sold to disciples or presented to patrons. In this way, Walthall (2017, p. 69) has remarked, children "earned their keep, but in ways that contributed to their education." Evidence of an unequal distribution of workload, with girls expected to be more productive for the domestic economy and boys expected to work less and enjoy more time and opportunities for leisure, has not been found in the study of premodern and early modern Japan and thus Hattori's testimony cannot be corroborated at this point. Other evidence, however, supports the claim that men and women had unequal access to pubs and bars and to the consumption of alcohol, an activity to which Takejirō and Tokijirō partook in cross-dress, suggesting that usually men attended these establishments. In fact, according to further sources of the modern period, a few girls and young women dressed as men to access these places and have fun, sometimes in the company of groups of boyfriends ("Zangiri Okume," 1904, p. 3; Tsuchiya & Tsuganesawa, 2004, p. 112; Hirayama, 2009, pp. 20-25). This suggests the possibility that, while women were not formally forbidden from entering these places, there existed at least the social expectation that it was men who mainly attended these establishments.

In summary, the subjects, as biologically female persons, faced certain restrictions in their sociality, mobility, leisure, and job opportunities, restrictions that were imposed on them for their sexed body and not on anatomically male individuals. To circumvent these restrictions, the subjects saw a solution in cross-dressing and adopting a male gender performance, in other words by living as *otoko-onna*. Men of the time, in fact, while still being tied to the *ie*, enjoyed relatively more freedom in travelling, they could play outside the household during childhood and could attend bars and drink alcohol once of age, and, additionally, had access to jobs that could be performed outside the household. Such is the case of Takejirō, who irregularly worked as a retainer, a type of labour that was reserved to men of warrior status. Particularly ingenious was the solution devised by Tokijirō, who chose a job performed by men which also allowed them to travel more freely.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the author has shared the results of an exploratory study he has conducted applying Ortner's practice theory to the life stories of a small sample of *otoko-onna*. He has conducted this research to find an integrative approach to cultural analysis, which, if used on its own, may not take into account the subjects' agency and an exploration of the ways the historical, social, and cultural context bounded *otoko-onna* and how this social group reacted to the restrictions put on their sociality, mobility, leisure, and jobs.

As expected, applying Ortner's practice theory has helped analyse the case studies as the author wished it would: it has helped understand:

- The subjects' positions: the use of the strain theory has led to better comprehend the difficulties *otoko-onna* faced;
- The historical, social, and cultural context behind the hardships the subjects encountered: with its emphasis on social structure, practice theory has led to study how gender expectations created the difficulties with which *otoko-onna* met;
- The reasons and the ways the individuals acted differently from societal expectations: the author has gained a much richer comprehension of the actions *otoko-onna* carried out, of how society did not put the same burdens on men, and how the subjects adopted a gender performance specifically to ease those burdens.

In conclusion, practice theory has indeed proven to be a theoretical approach valid for the exploration of the life stories of *otoko-onna* and it might be worth considering using it for future research projects.

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