

Real Men Don't Hold Their Liquor: The Complexity of Drunkenness and Sobriety in a Tokyo Bar

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This paper looks at the performance of drunkenness among primarily male patrons at a bar in an upscale Tokyo neighborhood. I look at how my experience working as a bartender and observing the drunken, sober, and sometimes performative behavior of customers initially clashed with my preconceptions of gender norms surrounding alcohol consumption—specifically the notion that to properly perform as a male drinker one must be able to 'hold one's liquor' and drink heavily but not become excessively intoxicated. Instead, my fieldwork reveals a different framework, in which men who embody characteristics of strong, dominant masculinity refuse offers to consume alcohol. Extrapolated to a broader level of analysis, I argue that an anthropology of alcohol in Japan and elsewhere must emphasize sometimes contradictory ethnographic evidence to highlight the cultural complexity of alcohol and its consumption or refusal. In short, an over-reliance on past conclusions pertaining to the role of drinking and drunkenness in Japan has concealed the cultural intricacies behind shifting norms of acceptance or refusals to imbibe.

Keywords: alcohol; drinking; alcohol policy; Japan; masculinity; Tokyo

1. Introduction

A rainy October evening brought the couple into the 'Hibiya Bar' after they spent their Saturday afternoon shopping in the high-end boutiques that fill this cosmopolitan section of Tokyo.¹ They were both just passing middle age, he likely nearing retirement, and displayed their obvious wealth in a luxury brand handbag, shoes, jewelry, and the not-so-inconspicuous pile of 10,000 yen notes tucked into his wallet. Sitting at the bar, he slid low and comfortable in his seat, pulled a new cell phone from his pocket, and began to surf the Internet, exhaling a long sigh of relaxation. She picked up the menu and began asking me a series of questions. What did I recommend to drink? How did this cocktail taste? What went best with this *zensai* (appetizer)? After more back-and-forth, she settled on a beer for him and cocktail for her to go with their appetizers, then a bottle of wine to accompany their *shōsai* (main dishes). An hour later, the wine bottle was empty and his head slumped against his chest as he succumbed to sleep. She quietly called me over and ordered a rum-based cocktail, after having as much, if not more, of the wine than he. After finishing her final drink quickly and paying the bill, she woke her companion and they left.

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1. The Hibiya Bar, like all other places and personal names in this paper, is a pseudonym. Further, descriptions of locations have been modified or withheld to ensure the privacy of informants.

Moments like this were not unusual during my nine months tending bar in Tokyo. In fact, the consistent element of my observations during this time was the diversity of behaviors, actions, confirmations, and refutations of the ‘central rules’—the ritualized and requisite sharing of drinks between colleagues or friends—which have long been framed as regulating alcohol consumption in Japan (Smith 1992: 146). These rules are now an increasingly fractured array of contemporary cultural practices, reflecting a shift in norms of alcohol consumption along gender, generational, occupational, and social lines. This paper first examines these shifting consumption norms in greater detail and then locates them within wider and culturally significant change in Japan.

Anthropologists have long sought, particularly through cross-cultural comparison, to locate the significance of often frequent and ritually-imbued intoxication (Heath 1995; MacAndrew and Edgerton 2003; Wilson 2005). Heath (2000: 183) notes that the ‘major reasons why men drink is to enjoy a subjective feeling of power, based on the interplay of physiological (a feeling of warmth imparted by alcohol), psychological (a sense of strength and superiority felt after drinking), and sociological (deference on the part of others) factors’. In Japan, the predominantly invoked social narrative has emphasized the compulsory elements in the structuring of drinking—a position that has undergone limited change or critique since the earliest Western anthropological works on Japan in the 1930s and 1940s (Embree 1939; Benedict 1946; recent and divergent works include Borovoy 2005; LeBlanc 2010).² At a wider level of abstraction, anthropological accounts of alcohol consumption have typically rooted drinking within constructions of cultural, national, and regional identity. As Wilson (2005: 3) notes, ‘drinking alcohol is a key practice in the expression of identity’, an expression evident in numerous scholarly works on Japan across a range of academic disciplines. Indeed, the strength of such constructions can be found in Ohnuki-Tierney’s (1993: 96) historical work highlighting the importance of saké as an item of consumption infused with a cultural significance that far exceeds its intoxicating capabilities.³ Drinking has recently been constructed as ‘serious business’ in Japan, a space where Japanese men ‘tend to let slip pieces of information and gossip that, in the daytime world, they keep to themselves’ (Moeran 2005: 27). As Moeran (*ibid*) adds, this information is typically divulged consciously and likely for politically motivated reasons. However, such conclusions hide a level of complexity and mute discussion concerning increasing refusals to drink and declining national levels of consumption among Japanese men, as well as negotiations and shifts to consumption norms among men and women throughout Japan, and growing discourse against the tolerance-afforded public drunkenness in Japan (Miyazaki and Otani 2004; Higuchi *et al.* 2007).

This paper attempts to incite debate on contrasting, and—as I argue—recently emergent, patterns of alcohol consumption in Japan. I look at the role of drunkenness and sobriety among bar patrons in Tokyo, both from the perspective of bartender and customer as well as the social science literature concerning alcohol consumption in Japan. The Hibiya Bar, located near Tokyo’s Roppongi neighborhood and popular with a diverse and economically privileged clientele, is certainly an idiosyncratic space from which to draw the bulk of my ethnographic data. However, the examples below highlight moments relevant to the shifting norms of drinking practices in Japan that transcend the Hibiya Bar’s

2. Hendry (1994: 175) gives an excellent review of this position and some of the larger, mitigating cultural elements.

3. Barclay (2003: 77) has a relevant and revealing historical article as well that tells of a Japanese police officer’s refusal in 1930 of an offered drink during a Taiyal (one of Taiwan’s aboriginal populations) wedding ceremony. This refusal eventually led to an uprising that killed 134 Japanese soldiers and police stationed in the area. The uprising was put down by ‘aerial bombardment, infantry sweeps, and local mercenaries’ who reciprocated in gross disproportion by killing over one thousand Taiyal men, women, and children. While the context of colonial occupation in which this incident took place must be considered, it is important to note the significant role alcohol, and the refusal of an alcoholic drink, played in instigating this violent historical episode.

distinct qualities. My goal is descriptive, seeking to introduce greater diversity and nuance into primarily the ethnographic work on drinking and drunkenness in Japan. Past observations of tolerance for intoxicated individuals highlight the importance given to social drinking in Japan (Allison 1994: 46; Ōyama 2000). I suggest, however, that revisiting conclusions concerning Japanese alcohol consumption patterns and drunken comportment is necessary to emphasize recent and significant shifts. In the 1940s, Benedict (1946: 285) noted that ‘Japanese men enjoy being tipsy and there is no rule which bids a man carry his liquor well’. My contention here is that anthropologists have only recently begun to problematize this stance and reevaluate past findings to highlight the complexity surrounding and governing alcohol consumption in Japan. As LeBlanc (2010: 81, 87) recently noted, the importance of drinking, and the potential damage from not drinking, has lessened in recent years or at the very least shifted, albeit in a manner contingent on other social and political factors.

Men and women in Japan are engaging recent social shifts in part through their acceptance or rejection of norms surrounding alcohol consumption. The means to abstain from or reject offers to drink is particularly noteworthy, as the impossibility of such actions has marked previous scholarly observations. Instead, I offer here the position that as refusal or declining of invitations to drink becomes a possibility, it does so in sometimes unusual and unexpected ways. An example below notes how the traits stereotypically associated with hegemonic masculinity—control, dominance, and strength—are also often evident in individual patrons who eschew alcohol consumption, thereby introducing male patrons who both wish to abstain from alcohol consumption and rely on a strongly masculine gender performance to do so (Hunt *et al.* 2005). Through observation and a review of relevant literature, I position this paper as a contribution to ongoing work concerning ‘whether or not cultural expectations about drunken comportment can be changed’ as it pertains to Japan (Marshall *et al.* 2001: 155).

Frequent mention of the strong link in Japan between alcohol consumption and sociality has marked social science discourse pertaining to drinking (Embree 1939; Benedict 1946; Edwards 1989; Allison 1994; Roberson 1998; Moeran 1998, 2005; Borovoy 2005; LeBlanc 2010). However, the social sciences must now incorporate the recent rise in consumption levels among Japanese women, the emergence of greater resistance to consumption norms at both the individual and societal level, and the perceived rejection of drinking by young Japanese men into the established picture of a Japan tolerant of alcohol consumption as a fundamental component of sociality. Suzuki (2000: 380) notes that drinking among women in Japan has risen markedly since the 1970s, and recent advertisements overtly demonstrate the increased attention and range of alcoholic drinks deliberately targeting women in Japan (Higuchi *et al.* 2006: 360; Christensen 2010a: 42, 44). Connections can also be made to other and larger social concerns in contemporary Japan, such as the declining birthrate or delaying of marriage, as they point to the changing demographics of gendered alcohol consumption.

As discussed in detail below, resistance in Japan to the tolerance-afforded alcohol consumption and public drunkenness is increasing. Recent changes in drunk driving legislation and efforts to thwart the spread of new alcohol vending machines unless they are equipped with an identification scanner to ensure the purchaser is of legal drinking age highlight a growing frustration among some in Japan with the lenience shown to public intoxication. Further, the recent ‘panic’ concerning the rise of ‘herbivorous men’ who reject past pillars of masculinity—including alcohol consumption and sex—for a quieter lifestyle is equally important to consider as it highlights declining alcohol consumption levels among young Japanese men and the construction of this trend as detrimental to national masculinity (Higuchi *et al.* 2006: 360; Bardsley 2011: 133).

Data were gathered in Tokyo from October 2007 to June 2008 stressing the wide and divergent range of characteristics and actions pertaining to alcohol and its consumption. Specifically, the means

to refuse offered drink, primarily by men, as well as other shifting demographic patterns of consumption are emphasized. I advance the position that alcohol consumption focussed scholars of Japan must emphasize contradictory ethnographic evidence, as such an approach highlights the cultural complexity behind shifting norms of acceptance or refusal to imbibe. This paper is structured into three thematic sections: ethnographic data that support previous work on alcohol consumption as a requisite component of Japanese socialization and masculinity (sections three, four, and five), followed by ethnographic examples that offer contrasting evidence (sections six and seven), and finally a look at organizations in Japan working to upset or disrupt the social embeddedness of alcohol and change-prevailing attitudes towards its consumption (section eight).

Finally, ethical concerns factor prominently and appropriately into all ethnographic fieldwork, and I faced an unusual and sometimes ‘challenging’ set of criteria while conducting this research (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 198). Numerous Hibiya Bar customers knew of my researcher role and that they might anonymously appear in something I later wrote. Coworkers, academic advisors, and the University of Hawai‘i’s Institutional Review Board office were also aware and approving of my methodology. Additionally, all accounts in this paper come from groups of customers wherein at least one patron knew of my role as an anthropologist. While this limited the available data pool, it also ensures that my work does not drift into the realm of eavesdropping.

In keeping with anthropology’s standard methodological practices, all personal names in this paper are pseudonyms, and distinguishing characteristics beyond the minimum necessary for description are absent or disguised. These steps ensure that individuals unaware of their exposure to ethnographic observation are protected. Following from Spradley (1980: 23), it is my position that like baseball stadiums, community meetings, concert halls, subway cars, and other public or semi-public sites of frequent ethnographic observation, the bar offers ethnographic opportunity that must be measured against careful ethical protocols. These spaces afford opportunity to ‘make cultural inferences about patterns of behavior’ (*ibid*). Yet like the consent process, the ‘dynamic and continuous’ nature of such spaces necessitates the use of ethical guidelines to protect involved individuals while allowing for data collection (AAA Code of Ethics 2009: 3). As Punch (1994: 84) neatly outlines, ‘a strict application of codes will restrain and restrict a great deal of informal, innocuous research . . . that are unproblematic but where explicitly enforcing rules concerning informed consent will make the research role simply untenable’. My application of the above framework allows the bar as a site of ethnographic inquiry to be approached in a rigorous and ethically grounded manner. As such, it is the position I maintained during my time at the Hibiya Bar.

2. Setting the Scene

For nine months, I was employed at what I have already called the Hibiya Bar, a popular establishment in the Roppongi area of Tokyo. While the Hibiya Bar is on a quiet side street, the neighborhood is marked generally by the presence of foreign embassies, multinational corporation headquarters, and trendy shopping centers. As a customer I also frequented two bars in the Shinjuku area during the research period to diversify the overall ethnographic picture, one popular with university students and the other catering primarily to male employees on their commute home. My duties at the Hibiya Bar included tending bar, waiting tables, and providing customers with bilingual service. I worked three nights per week, arriving at 4:30 pm for our staff meal and typically leaving a little before midnight. While the work was often monotonous, ‘a bartender is a kind of naturally occurring ethnographer . . . observ[ing] and participat[ing] in the events that happen all around . . . in the course of a

day's work', and this job offered an optimal setting for observation (Lindquist 2002: 54). The Hibiya Bar is medium-sized and able to accommodate about 40 customers spread across 10 small tables. When I worked there, it was—and remains—popular with many of the numerous expatriates living in the immediate vicinity as well as with Japanese clientele from across Tokyo. Mimicking the owner's taste, the bar's alcoholic offerings borrowed heavily from the Americas, with Mexican margaritas and Brazilian caipirinhas among the more popular cocktails. However, draft Ebisu beer was the most frequently ordered item and grounded the Hibiya Bar solidly within Japan, albeit a predominantly cosmopolitan Japan wherein a mug of beer costs nearly 1,000 yen.⁴

As a bartender, I existed very much in a liminal space, 'betwixt and between' the expected and often friendly interactions with customers and my duties as a paid employee (Turner 1987: 3). The bartender is both socially essential and invisible, dispensing advice or knowledge at one moment and tacitly disappearing when orders are completed and customers turn inward for conversation. It was work that sometimes required I stand within several feet of an arguing couple, silently washing glasses and carefully evading eye contact, or avoid embarrassing a regular customer on a date by not mentioning the two other women he had brought to the bar earlier that week. Bar work is, in short, defined by service and the dispensing of alcoholic drinks but marked by observation and attention to interpersonal details. Finally, and as already noted, this results here in the omission of sensitive or potentially damaging observations.

3. Confirmations

On 22 November 2007, a group of 10 Japanese co-workers that included a smattering of ages and discernible income levels gathered at the Hibiya Bar to celebrate a birthday. Throughout the evening, their group grew increasingly drunk as they sampled different beers, cocktails, and shot glasses of liquor. At last call, one of the men ('patron A') asked for a final round, shot glasses of an expensive tequila for everyone. When another man in the group ('patron B') protested, patron A barked loudly, 'You're a man!' ('*Omae, otoko yaro!*'), clearly implying that patron B's reluctance to drink was both emasculating and unbecoming. Patron B relented, and as I delivered the drinks he grimaced but gamely swallowed the liquor and suppressed a slight gag as patron A roared with approval. Several hours later while writing notes on the evening at home, I remained struck by this scene's confirmation of previous anthropological work regarding coerced consumption as well as its marked divergence from other intoxicated interactions observed during the course of fieldwork. Ethnographic realities had made problematic my Western-rooted anticipation of a culturally sanctioned masculinity marked by sometimes-prodigious alcohol consumption and unimpeded lucidity, the need for men to 'hold their liquor'.

Beyond the overt example above, other significant moments confirmed gender norms of alcohol consumption, notably the tendency among men to imbibe at a greater level than women. On a Tuesday evening in February, a couple sat together at a corner table on a first date. He stiffly asked a series of introductory questions in polite language, to which she offered equally polite responses as I delivered their first round of drinks. An hour later, he was laughing and joking while finishing a fourth beer, having by now removed his shoes and suit jacket, loosened his tie, and assumed a slouched posture. She was drinking her second cocktail and, while far less visibly relaxed than he,

4. The exchange rate as of writing (September 2011) was approximately 77 yen to the US dollar. Thus, 1,000 yen is just under \$13.00.

laughed and flirted back with a casualness that had been absent when they first arrived. His accelerated consumption, and her declining a final drink near the end of their date, further illustrated the presence of conventional and gendered consumption norms at their table. Below I offer challenges to these same norms of gender and alcohol consumption that have shaped our understanding of drinking in Japan, but they are also not wholly under attack in this paper. Instead, and largely because recent ethnographic evidence demands such a shift, I advocate challenges to convention, a call to look beyond the previous two examples.

In a similar fashion to the tendencies observed in previous works on Japan, patrons at the Hibiya Bar often drank to the point of intoxication, either of the performative or undeniable variety (Embree 1939; Befu 1986; Linhart 1986; Edwards 1989; Moeran 1998, 2005; Partanen 2006; Iwata and Inoue 2008). Further, the expectation among many drinking groups at the Hibiya Bar was a consistent level of consumption and intoxication-induced socialization, following from the conclusion of Dalby's (1983: 140) work among Kyoto's Geisha that 'it is impolite to be sober when others are not, so newcomers to a party are encouraged to get drunk as soon as possible'. Finally, beer was the consistent beverage of choice for a hearty round of '*kanpai*'s! (cheers!) to begin a drinking session, only then followed by individual transitions to other drink choices. Despite the Hibiya Bar's distinct qualities—inflated prices in an economically privileged and disproportionately bilingual area of Tokyo—it is an illustrative space regarding shifting and increasingly contradictory consumption practices as well as the confirmations of established drinking norms in Japan.

4. Beyond the Bar

Patterns of alcohol consumption at the Hibiya Bar reveal larger recent societal transitions within Japan towards individual appropriations of multiple and varied social roles. Examples of women consuming more alcohol than men—as noted in the narrative at the beginning of this paper—and couples or small groups of close friends drinking heavily, but showing little or no discernible change in behavior, reflect comportment shifts among Japanese drinkers. The failure of alcohol to immediately change individual dispositions is particularly noteworthy, as the ritualized sharing of drinks in order to 'eliminate barriers of hierarchy between the participants and ... create a frame of egalitarian relations' marks alcohol as the means by which such change is possible and perpetuates an inaccurate view of persistent and overly formal social interactions in Japan (Partanen 2006: 191). Close friends or couples who enjoyed an established intimacy frequently drank without any evident changes in disposition. During a chilly Tuesday in November, two young Japanese men drank heavily at the Hibiya Bar for several hours while the volume or tone of their voice remained unchanged. They were co-workers, one of slightly higher rank within the corporate hierarchy, and were also friends long before their employment with the same company. As friends, any differences in occupational status or fearful concerns of appropriate conversation topics were absent, and alcohol consumption acted not as an eliminator to social barriers but as an auxiliary to the already present homosocial intimacy.

While absent in the example above, connoisseurship of alcohol must also be considered, as it increasingly drives change in the gendering of Japan's alcohol consumption patterns as well as the resulting comportment. In addition to working as a bartender, I frequented a small bar popular with university students near Shinjuku station that kept a large array of spirits and offered a greater range of cocktails than typically found at Tokyo bars. This emphasis on diversity came from Masa, the young owner, and his attention to what he described as a growing connoisseurship around drinking in Tokyo. Tasting nights were a common fixture at his bar as was the use of social networking

websites like mixi.jp to attract customers who are also members of groups interested in ‘trying many different types of alcohol’, ‘sampling different cocktails’, or other similarly named online collectives. Further, these groups fueled a new, and largely emergent, way of drinking in Japan popular with younger adults, particularly women.⁵ Experimentation, often with spirits not commonly found at other bars, was and continues to be emphasized. As such, taste must be appreciated, and while intoxication often occurs, it demonstrates a comportment shift from the oft-noted jovial socialization of the salaryman.

Past gender norms of consumption are also undergoing dramatic change in Japan recently. Traditionally . . . Japanese society was relatively tolerant of alcohol consumption by middle-aged men, while disapproving of such behavior among young people and women. In addition, a significant difference in the amount of alcohol used persisted between genders at all ages: women in general drank less than men. These norms and patterns, however, have been changing in recent years (Higuchi *et al.* 2004: 1).

Notably, the rates of alcohol consumption are rising markedly among Japanese women while holding steady or even falling slightly among men (Higuchi *et al.* 2007: 1852). This emergent demographic pattern speaks to recent larger shifts in Japan, including the population’s collective aging, changing attitudes towards drinking and gender, and unaddressed social problems stemming from ‘hazardous drinking’ (Osaki *et al.* 2005; Higuchi *et al.* 2007). Anthropologically, these demographic shifts also speak to the growing demand for increased attention regarding changing patterns of alcohol consumption, particularly in how they relate to larger social shifts in contemporary Japan.

5. Other Sites of Consumption

Tucked into a corner of land now nearly encircled by the piecemeal expansion of a major Tokyo train station is a cluster of small bars and eateries popular with a range of commuters. Two alleyways, one long and the other short, intersect to form this rectangle-shaped collection of bars brimming with a cramped intimacy that the confined space encourages between patrons. Salarymen in suits swap cigarettes, jokes, insults, and toasts with construction workers, the recently retired, university students, and anyone else in search of inexpensive food and drink. On any evening, intoxicated commuters fill the alleyway and bars, many smiling happily as they lean against companions for support and shuffle unsteadily to their next drink or back to the station for trains and subways home.

The location is a far cry from the cosmopolitan setting of the Hibiya Bar. Prices dwell in the 500-yen range instead of the 1,000 or more charged for a drink at the Hibiya Bar. Further, variety is offered not in cocktail and wine lists but takes the form of different saké, *shō chū*, and Japanese beers from any number of prefectures and brewing techniques. These bars, like other similar spaces throughout Tokyo and across Japan, are the setting for the ‘*social dimension*’ of alcohol consumption (Moeran 2005: 37, italics in original). The prominence and pervasiveness of these bars and the drinking they contain contribute to the centrality and significance given alcohol consumption in scholarly and popular accounts of Japan. As noted during my regular visits to these bars, or other similarly situated settings throughout Tokyo, alcohol and drunkenness result in exchanges that are impossible

5. The manga ‘*Kami no Shizuku*’ (Drops of the God), which began publication in 2004 and was given a television adaptation in 2009, is an example of this trend in popular literature. The manga’s story revolves around wine and the protagonist Tanzaki Shizuku’s quest to follow his late father in becoming a renowned sommelier. The popularity of the manga has also impacted the global wine industry as mentioned bottles and vintages immediately spike in demand across Japan and others parts of East Asia (New York Times, 21 October 2008).

when sober. However, while these sites are significant locations of social interaction, other examples from this paper demonstrate erosion to the previous acceptance of social preeminence they and other similar bars commanded.

6. The Complexity of Drinking

One of my contentions in this paper is that a tolerance of drunkenness in Japan is noted among anthropologists in part because it differs from prevailing Western notions of masculinity. As Lash and collaborators (1998: 190) note in their work among US military veterans in Virginia, 'since the male role stresses physical adequacy and being able to hold one's liquor . . . men appear more vulnerable to the belief that they should be able to control their substance use'. Peralta (2007: 750) adds that among American undergraduates the notion of 'real men' is positioned as those who can 'hold their liquor'. Consequently, anyone identified as less than a 'real man' find this construct stemming from either their inability to 'hold' their liquor or a refusal to consume alcohol.

Gadamer (2004: 305) states that 'the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past', necessitating that we understand the traditions shaping the masculinity of anthropological observation as dictating an approach to the study of alcohol consumption and comportment that blurs the degree of complexity on display at varying drinking occasions. Hunt and colleagues (2005: 225) suggest that social structures situate 'men in relation to similar others so that collectively they experience the world from a specific position and construct cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity, namely dominance, control and independence'. Control of one's intoxication is noteworthy, as the construction of being able to 'hold one's liquor' is a defining masculine characteristic among Western men taught to control their body, even while simultaneously and deliberately working to impair this control through consumption. Returning to Peralta's (2007: 751) work among American undergraduates, we note how 'heavy drinking embodies exalted masculinity'.

In Japan, however, such preconceptions of gender role and alcohol use begin to erode when confronted with contrasting contemporary paradigms. Sitting both figuratively and literally at the margins of the bar are the non-drinkers, men who through characteristics cited as strongly masculine refused unwanted alcoholic drinks. On 7 February 2008, Hibiya Bar hosted a large private party for a real estate firm. The approximately 30 guests were charged 3,000 yen each for food, with drinks calculated separately, and over the course of their three-hour dinner, the drink bill grew to exceed 100,000 yen (approximately \$1,300). The bulk of my notes from that evening document their prodigious alcohol intake, noting the finishing of a small keg of Ebisu and approximately 50 bottles of beer as well as entire bottles of rum and tequila.

During the party, co-workers, the majority of whom were men, wandered between tables toasting and encouraging each other to drink more, until many had become thoroughly intoxicated. In many ways it was a recreation of ethnographic scenes captured in other anthropological accounts documenting the homosociality that surrounds drinking in Japan (Embree 1939; Smith and Wiswell 1982; Smith 1988; Yano 2002; Moeran 2005). However, other cultural components were evident beneath the palpable surface layer of observation. Seated at the far end of the bar was one of the company's higher-ranking members and next to him throughout the dinner was a woman who ordered all of his non-alcoholic drinks, itself an ethnographic snapshot capturing the hybridity of traditional and contemporary norms of socialization. After her initial order, I made the mistake of handing the alcoholic piña colada to him and the non-alcoholic strawberry shake to her. She quickly changed the glasses and again confirmed that his drink did not contain alcohol. This lack of alcohol consumption

by a high-ranking member of the company was not rooted in an illness or 'allergy', and it was only mentioned once during the dinner. The exchange in which it took place also involved one of the few in attendance of discernibly higher rank within the company, a vice president who casually inquired how the Hibiya Bar's non-alcoholic drink offerings tasted. More importantly, his sobriety was treated as well founded, instead of something to be admonished or disruptive to the party's festive mood. Throughout the evening, he happily entertained a steady stream of junior employees seeking to laud their recent corporate success, all of whom appeared aware of and untroubled by his choice of drink.

This was not an isolated incident. Other men who commanded power and prestige within their dining circle found their refusals to drink both easy and accepted, a foreseeable observation noteworthy for its contradiction to past conclusions concerning the social forces governing drinking occasions between men in Japan. As Smith (1998: 289) noted in his work on Japanese drinking practices, 'a nondrinker is problematic, a social albatross'. While this position was periodically evident during my time at the Hibiya Bar, it overlooks a level of complexity that anthropologists studying alcohol must engage. Furthermore, Japan's ongoing demographic changes, notably an aging citizenry that now counts a quarter of the population as over 60 years of age, influences these changing patterns of alcohol consumption (Sugimoto 2010: 82). The conflating of work and its ancillary after-work drinking with the conceptualization of a proper and dominant masculinity is becoming increasingly problematic (Allison 1994: 91; Borovoy 2005). The connection between refusals to drink and the outright dismissal of once fundamental social institutions reflects both Japan's changing population structure and attitudes towards work.

Gill (2003: 158) writes of the 'predicament of mainstream men' in Japan, the pressures to provide financial support for a family when economic realities make this increasingly tenuous, as being contributory to the 'high rates of alcoholism, crime and early death' among marginalized Japanese men who perceive their life course as deficient. The population of day laborer communities, particularly in Tokyo, Osaka, and Yokohama, attest to these struggles. However, I offer here an additional wrinkle to this complex cultural picture as some men resist calls for consumption as a component of employment. The obvious limitation of this position stems from many Hibiya Bar patrons having already achieved comfortable social positions that allow their circumvention of established practices. Their material and social accumulation acts as insulation against the harsh forces of marginality many other Japanese men confront. Further, the role of poverty or homelessness in accelerating alcohol consumption and alcoholism is a significant component of drinking in Japan that Hibiya Bar customers need not consider (Fowler 1996; Ōyama 2000; Gill 2001; Christensen 2010a). However, as LeBlanc's (2010: 81) work highlights and men at the Hibiya Bar demonstrate, the possibility to refuse a drink is now a reality, at least for some men in Japan.

As noted above, such questioning of drinking norms is evident in the changing national consumption patterns that show women drinking at markedly increasing levels while the rates for men remain stagnant (Higuchi *et al.* 2007). The bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s continues to ripple outward in challenges to older views of drinking, ideas about masculinity, and the possibility to upend once basic and assumed social conventions. The ethnographic picture reveals some of this rippling in men's manipulation of gender norms to refuse unwanted offers to drink at the Hibiya Bar. As is explored in section eight, some in Japan increasingly see 'traditional' drinking practices as problematic and use their social position and prestige to voice an opposition. Furthermore, it is important to note that the gendered norms of drinking in Japan that dictated limited consumption among women are also problematic and worthy of criticism. As Embree (1939) as well as Smith and Wiswell (1982: 7) noted, 'heavy drinking' by women in rural prewar Japan was both commonplace and regarded by others outside village life as 'backward and primitive'.

7. Problematic (Non)Drinkers

While the non-drinking ‘social albatross’ cited above can be problematic, the opposite can also be true (Smith 1998: 289). On 15 November 2007, a group of three men sat at the bar shortly after 8:00 pm. All three were middle-aged dentists and the individual seated to my far left was the evening’s host, asking the others what kind of food they would like and projecting a nervous energy, I imagined, generated from his concern for their overall enjoyment of the evening. When I asked what they would like to drink, he quickly ordered a beer for himself before turning to the others and repeated my question, referring to both of them as ‘sensei’. The host looked panic-stricken as they ordered an iced tea and mineral water, the first individual offering no justification while the second casually noted that he had to drive home later that evening and did not want to drink anything alcoholic. As I delivered their drinks, the host led them in a loud ‘*kanpai!*’ before quickly finishing his beer and ordering an iced tea for himself. Alcohol at this table was taboo instead of requisite because those in positions of power elected not to imbibe. More importantly, any feelings of obligation on the part of the two non-drinkers, or recourse for the host to coerce them into drinking, were absent. We find then that rules of drinking and socialization are increasingly governed by intricate, varied, and shifting standards that no longer mandate acceptance of a host’s ‘strategy’ to ensure that offered saké is accepted and consumed (Befu 1986: 116).

Greater ethnographic detail that documents an increasingly shifting set of diverse practices is necessary to understand the role and place of alcohol consumption in Japan. For every contrasting example like the one above, I also served drinks to groups whose conduct conformed neatly to past conclusions on the role and place of drunkenness. In late May, a large group of employees from a multinational office gathered to bid a co-worker farewell. As the evening wore on, everyone fractured into smaller clusters, and a group of Japanese and Japanese–South Africans found their way to the bar and multiple mugs of beer. As they continued to drink, one commented ‘work’s over, let’s drink’ (*‘saa, nomou, shigoto ga owattakara’*), and everyone raised their glass before taking a long draught. Their evening was defined by their oft-invoked idiom ‘let’s drink ourselves silly’ [*‘omoshirokunaru made nomou’* (lit. ‘Let’s drink until (we’re) funny’)], heard as frequently as the casual and blustering dismissals of tomorrow’s pending workload. Alcohol for these men was very much the item around which ‘homosocial masculine ties’ and intimacy are made possible, the enabler of the evening’s socialization (Yano 2002: 225).

Drawing from Room’s (2001: 194) position that a complex series of cultural nuances about drunkenness lies ‘behind the phrases about “time out” and the “within-limits clause”’, the straightforwardness used to anthropologically explain drunken comportment is increasingly problematic. The ‘time out’ label has frequently found its way into anthropological descriptions of drinking practices in Japan, emphasizing that what is said while drunk is forgotten or dismissed when sober the following day. Such conclusions betray the complexity of drunkenness and the social dynamics of refusals to drink. In my work with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in Japan, this cultural sanctioning of consequence-free drunkenness was consistently criticized (Christensen 2010a, b). It was often stated in sobriety group meetings that past co-workers of alcoholics frequently found ways to avoid invitations to drink, as they wanted to avoid the typically chaotic scenes that ensued. Where cultural conventions become problematic is then found in the co-worker’s reluctance to confront my informants about the previous evening’s drinking. Thus, AA members spoke instead of the dangers inherent in rewarding ‘time out’ drinking, as their co-workers clearly remembered past drunken episodes and often took steps to avoid similar future encounters but did not offer assistance or intervention regarding increasingly destructive individual drinking patterns. What we find then is an increasingly intricate range of factors in contemporary Japan—including changes to

ideas about employment, leisure, responsibility, and gender norms—that influence individual decisions to abstain or drink and to what level of intoxication. This questioning of social conventions by a growing number of individuals in Japan allows a previously unmatched array of social roles or positions to emerge.

8. Oppositional Voices

I have elsewhere (Christensen 2010a: 66) argued that through a historical connection to religion, ceremony, and the spiritual, alcoholic beverages are viewed in Japan as idealized and unproblematic items of consumption. Advertisements in the postwar era for beer and other alcoholic beverages drew legitimacy from this connection, evident in two consistent tropes: the frequent depictions of beer as rejuvenatory (rapidly drinking beer followed by expressions of reanimation as a favorite theme of television commercials) and the movement of consumption into previously ill-advised social spaces (recently introduced non-alcoholic beers as items of consumption when it is contraindicated to drink alcohol—while driving or during pregnancy—instead of as an alternative to alcohol consumption). It is a historical process established under late capitalism and Japan's postwar economic growth the 'culturally constituted idea that *alcohol is a man's reward for labor*' (Singer and Baer 1995: 309, italics in original). Indeed, as Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) and Edwards (1989) note, the sacredness of saké, as a consumable item made from rice, positions alcohol consumption as an exchange of commensality between drinkers with an often far greater symbolic exchange of meaning and importance than just the sharing of a drink. Inversely and consequently, the Japanese government, in their capacity as the nation's regulatory body, has been schizophrenic in its approach to alcohol-related statutes. As Higuchi and others (2006: 365) recently noted, 'legislation related to alcohol control has not been well enforced, with some exceptions (Road Traffic Law) . . . [and] there are virtually no restrictions on advertising or sponsorship'. Several organizations and individuals introduced in this section have stepped into the space between the Japanese government's haphazard alcohol policy and drinking's still prominent social position.

While in Tokyo, I met several times with 'Nobuki' for interviews on his views regarding patterns of alcohol consumption in Japan. Now in his early sixties and retired, Nobuki was a former section president of a major highway bus company based in Tokyo. His days are now spent as an activist and volunteer with several non-governmental organizations in Japan dedicated to strengthening the country's drunk driving laws and enacting other alcohol-related legislation. Nobuki came to question his heavy alcohol consumption, and those of Japan generally, after several traffic accidents involving highway buses from his own company.⁶ He said that the accident he remembers in greatest detail occurred in 1984 outside Kobe. In Nobuki's retelling, the bus in question was speeding and started to sway as it entered a turn before rolling over. While no one was killed in the accident, the driver had been drinking and the ensuing media attention brought intense, even vicious, public scrutiny to drunk driving. Following the accident, he also watched in astonishment and frustration the ways that drivers casually circumvented new regulations enacted to ensure drivers had not been drinking. The accident, beyond cracking his confidence in the moral moorings of his employer, initiated Nobuki's questioning of the importance given to alcohol consumption in Japan. He came to see alcohol's fundamentally important social position as both dangerous and impossible to ignore.

6. Nobuki is not a member of AA or Danshūkai (Sobriety Association, Japan's largest self-help group for alcoholics) and does not identify himself as an alcoholic. He has, however, stopped drinking entirely and been sober for many years.

Nobuki knew that many drivers drank heavily following a shift, and that they explained these actions as being a means to quickly induce sleep after the hours spent driving had left them anxious and jittery. Unknown to him before accidents became increasingly and publicly scrutinized for the possibility of alcohol consumption among the drivers was the duration of impact that could result from such consumption practices. Drivers, he stated, were often still in excess of the legal driving limit in the morning when reporting to work, despite showing few, if any, outward signs of intoxication. He added that the new regulations demanding the use of breathalyzers to ensure that a driver was fit to operate their bus also proved ineffective. Drivers circumvented these rules by asking a friend who had not been drinking the night before to blow into the machine for them in order that they could work that day. Despite a growing level of evidence demonstrating the compromising position that drivers were creating for passengers, other motorists, the company, and even themselves through their consumption, the directives were viewed as a nuisance against something unworthy of regulation.

As a section president, Nobuki was also frequently required to drink heavily at company parties to facilitate a sense of ‘drinking fellowship’ (*nominakama*) and ‘*nomunike-shon*’⁷ among his employees. At these gatherings, he moved around the room or tables, stopping briefly to chat with each employee over a glass of beer or saké. After exchanging a few words, they would toast each other before Nobuki moved to his next destination. Despite typically drinking more than 30 glasses of beer or saké in the course of a single party, he was careful to never appear overly intoxicated in front of his employees. Instead, a carefully calibrated balance was maintained between happy revelry and his view of appropriate decorum befitting a man of his rank. This conceptualization of ‘holding one’s liquor’ differs from the Western version in that Nobuki must be intoxicated but also maintain his drunkenness within the socially appropriate range of behavior befitting an employee of his status. His performance illustrates a management of drunkenness along the lines of social position and standing in Japan. He added that to many Japanese men a refusal to drink is odd because consumption is only problematic when people become dark, violent, or aggressive while drunk.⁸ The dearth of problematization surrounding drunkenness, as well as the popular conflating of violence among a minority of consumers with abnormal comportment, results from the tyrannical position of normality drinking enjoys in Japan (Smith 1998: 288).

Frustrated by the frequent hangovers he endured while working and by his belief in a continued lack of concern or critique among many Japanese of their alcohol consumption level, Nobuki now volunteers his time promoting social occasions bereft of alcohol as a possibility for Japanese companies.⁹ In his volunteer work, he stresses the health benefits companies can potentially gain by limiting their employees’ alcohol intake. He is attempting to link a company’s view of the responsibilities it maintains to employees with a policy that limits, or at least de-emphasizes, alcohol consumption among individual workers. The results of these efforts by Nobuki and other volunteers have been mixed. Japan’s drunk driving laws are among the most stringent in the world, and ASK (*Arukōru Yakubutsu Mondai Zenkoku Shimin Kyōkai*—Japan Specified Non-profit Corporation to Prevent Alcohol and Drug Problems), a non-profit organization where Nobuki volunteers his time, has attempted to expand the national opposition to drunk driving into a re-evaluation of the controls on

7. ‘*Nomunike-shon*’ is a term that combines the Japanese verb ‘*nomu*’ (to drink) with the English word ‘communication’. The word has appeared in several recent English language news reports, including a 4 March 2009 Bloomberg story (<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aVP4fzljyhyc&refer=home>), as well as scholarly works (White 2002: 94).

8. ‘*Nihonjin ni totte no inshū mondai wa kurakunari, abare, sore kara osake guse ga warui*’.

9. ‘*No- arukōru kai*’.

the age of sale and other aspects of alcohol-related legislation. Yet beer and other alcoholic drinks are still sold in vending machines and the restrictions on sale—particularly the legal drinking age—are often treated as a nuisance to be ignored by cashiers. Nobuki acknowledged that while previously inconceivable changes in consumption patterns are occurring, alcohol retains an often fundamental importance in socialization, especially among males.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that anthropologists looking at alcohol and drunkenness, both in Japan and generally, must emphasize ethnographic variety and nuance in studies of alcohol consumption and drinking norms. In short, anthropology must ‘test all our prejudices’, in this instance those pertaining to the consumption of alcohol in Japan, if we are to craft a relevant picture of the present (Gadamer 2004: 305). Beginning with Heath’s (1988: 359) influential work in the 1950s, anthropological studies of alcohol use emphasized cultural aspects of drunken comportment. The focus has tended to be how ‘different beliefs and attitudes about alcohol and its effects . . . [are] directly related to the frequency with which problems are associated with drinking, and to differences in the nature of such problems when they occur, in various cultures’ (*ibid*). In recent works on Japan, this approach has begun to shift the focus into new and unexplored places of inquiry, including the ‘numerous problems associated with alcohol abuse [that] are kept hidden in Japan, including child abuse and domestic violence. These abuses are only gradually becoming the focus of social service intervention and the object of popular discussion’ (Borovoy 2005: 49). As this paper has shown, refusal of drink is another emergent object of popular discussion. This is particularly evident among men who increasingly use their social position as a means of refusing offers to drink instead of a directive for consumption. The position of alcohol in Japan as the ‘culturally validated reward for living up to the stringent requirements of the male role in capitalist society’ still exists but in a far more problematic and nuanced form reflective of larger social, cultural, and economic transitions (Singer and Baer 1995: 312).

Emphasis on the emerging dialogue around resistance and the alternatives present in Japan to the oft-cited conclusions of persistent societal tolerance for heavy consumption and public drunkenness, particularly by Japanese men, is a crucial future direction of research. Writing on the anthropological perspectives and possibility surrounding the study of alcohol and drugs, Room (2001: 196) asked, ‘how readily can cultural expectations about drunken comportment be changed?’ While he proceeds to note that the answer is likely ‘not readily’, ethnographically evident shifts in observed alcohol consumption patterns necessitate a re-evaluation of past conclusions and new work that considers the social, economic, and demographic changes currently taking place in Japan. In short, by seeking other forms of encounter with alcohol in Japan, anthropologists must be open to new possibilities and conscientious of our ‘inherited outlook and presupposition’ (Moran 2000: 252). The significance of anthropology is rendering discernible often-invisible diversity and societal complexity. In Japan, this includes making visible the performative and gender-based components of contemporary drunkenness and sobriety, how some individuals reject or accept offers to drink and in the process defy prevailing conventions of socialization.

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