

NHH10. The Beautiful Way Homosexuality in Japan

WC 3318

There is a potter in Japan, now a Living National Treasure, called **Shimaoka Tatsuzo** who decorates his world-famous pots by impressing cords into the surface of the still wet clay. When he does this, he is using a method which was invented by the world's first potters now known as the *Jomon*. "Jomon" means "cord marked" ...



*Incipient Jomon pot
from Himizo site*

Although some ceramic figurines found in Europe date back to 29-25 KYA, it was the Jomon who were the first people to use fired clay to make storage vessels and they did this ~ 16,500 years ago. This was not only several thousand years before pottery was invented anywhere else in the world, but it was also several millennia before anyone else invented agriculture.

The ancestors of the Jomon entered Japan about 40,000 years ago, about the same time as the first humans entered Europe. However, these Jomon peoples were not the ancestors of the modern Japanese. The remote ancestors of the majority of the modern Japanese came to the archipelago only about 300 BC bringing with them a knowledge of agriculture and metallurgy, in particular the cultivation of rice and the working of bronze



*Late Middle Jomon ornate vessel (~3,000 –
2,500 ya.)*

Many scholars¹ attribute much of the

¹ See, for example, *Nature Man & Art*, Symposium at The British Museum 6-8 September 2001; publication: *Perspectives* - The Japan Foundation London Newsletter, Issue 5: October 2001

emphasis upon craftsmanship, design and beauty in Japanese culture to the Jomon people who, unlike most cultures in the world, experienced many thousands of years of uninterrupted and peaceful existence during which they developed a remarkable partnership with Nature. Much of this sense of affinity with Nature lives on in "Shinto", one of the three official religions of contemporary Japan. In this religion, almost everything that is wondrous has a spirit, a "*kami*" — people, natural events and places, even domestic utensils and packaging, can have one of these "*kami*" living temporarily in it and is therefore worthy of respect and appreciation².

Confucian and Buddhist teachers first arrived in Japan (in 513 and 522 AD respectively), mostly again from Korea, and with them, the art of writing. However, written records don't exist until the 7th century. Significantly, although the Yamato court of those times adopted Chinese writing, the Chinese calendar and a Chinese form of government, a Constitution imposed by Prince Shotoku in 604 AD effectively made Buddhism the state religion. Japan thus became a nation with three religions, Confucian, Buddhism and their ancestral Shinto.

It was in the Buddhist monasteries during the latter part of the Classical age, the **Heian** period, 794-1192 AD that a form of institutionalised homosexuality emerged. This was known as **nanshoku**³.

Nanshoku and the Buddhist monks:

The moral position of homosexuality in old Japan was well summed up in what appears to be a term paper for an English class written by an anonymous Japanese student:⁴

Shinto and Buddhism..... do not regard homosexuality as a sin. Shinto is a creed that teaches harmony, sanctity of human life and nature and respect for people and their individuality. It has no developed theology or sacred scriptures, and thus there are no clear-cut tenets on sexuality..... They do not consider wrongdoings as "sin", but as actions which dirty one's purity, to be cleansed to preserve one's inner peace. As far as Shinto was

² These beliefs are what anthropologists call "animism", a term taken from the Latin "*anima*" meaning the *breath* or *soul*. The concept was first introduced by British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his book "*Primitive Culture*" (published in 1871). the term was widely criticized in the Nineteenth Century but has since gained general acceptance. Animism is believed to be the oldest form of religion, coming to us from at least the Paleolithic and possibly well beyond.

³ From the Chinese "nanshe", written with the same characters and which has the same meaning although the Chinese did not have the same altruistic overtones as the Japanese.

⁴ <http://www.tabulas.com/~syzygy/content/18124.html>

concerned, homosexual activity was acceptable as long as it did not disrupt the community, an aspect of human living which the religion also places in high regard.

Mahayana Buddhism in the Japanese context also does not classify deeds as “good” or “evil” by themselves, but by their intention and outcome. This Japanese understanding of Buddhism considered an intention as either “skillful” or “unskillful” in lessening attachment to our world of suffering, which we are born into..... Buddhism did not concern itself with procreation, as it reinforced the cycle of rebirths; however, in Mahayana Buddhism, sex was used as a religious symbol and Japanese Buddhism separated sex from procreation, seeing sex as a good in itself.

One of the most important figures to emerge in Japanese history — at least from our point of view — was a Buddhist monk called **Kukai (774-835)** who studied for a long time at monstries in T’ang Dynasty China and from there, brought back to Japan a form of Buddhism called “True Words” or, in Japanese, *Shingon*. This became the most influential form of Buddhism in Japanese culture. In explaining this, Richard Hooker⁵ wrote:



Statue of Kukai

Kukai believed that the True Words transcended speech, so he encouraged the cultivation of artistic skills: painting, music,

and gesture. Anything that had beauty revealed the truth of the Buddha; as a result, the art of the Hiei monks made the religion profoundly popular at the Heian court and deeply influenced the development of Japanese culture that was being forged at that court. It is not unfair to say that Japanese poetic and visual art begin with the Buddhist monks of Mount Hiei and Mount Koya.

⁵ Richard Hooker: on “World Civilisations – an Internet Classroom and Anthology”, Washington State University at <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/YAYOI.HTM>

It is commonly believed that it was Kukai himself who introduced a form of homosexual activity which became institutionalised within the Mt Koya monastery he founded on his return from China. This was called *nanshoku* which literally means “male colours” but is generally used to mean male-male love and specifically refers to the practice of monks forming sexual alliances with their younger acolytes or *chigo*.⁶ Whether it was true or not that Kukai himself was responsible is open to question, but the monastery at Mt Koya became a by-word for same-sex love, the monks rationalising their affairs with younger *chigo* on the grounds that the vow of chastity applied only to sex with women and not to sex with males because it was not procreative. A whole literature evolved of stories about love relations among monks and their young acolytes known as *Chigo Monogatari*.⁷ Although these began in the Ninth century, the practice of *nanshoku* persisted, becoming more idealised as time went by. So, for example, when the first Portuguese traders made contact with Japan in the 15th Century, the Jesuit priests who accompanied them reported home in horror that sodomy was plentiful in the Buddhist monasteries.

The Love of Warriors — The Beautiful Way

In the early days of battles between *uji* or clans, the war chiefs led the men of the clan into war, much as we might understand battles between the Scots clans. In the early “Classical” era, during the Nara period (710-794 AD), a system of local militias of mounted horsemen was established. Although originally these men were the servants or **samurai** of the Emperor, gradually the militias evolved into private armies owing loyalty to the great aristocratic families.

These early *samurai* were not the noble and cultured professional soldiers who followed the code later called *bushido* or “the way of the warrior” but men drawn from the lower classes who spent most of their time earning a living as farmers and became soldiers only when their lords called upon them to fight opposing armies. The samurai who lived according to the *bushido* did not emerge until the Tokugawa shogunate which began in the 17th Century. By then the Samurai had become a class of highly trained, disciplined professional soldiers who hired themselves out to clan chiefs and great houses during the middle ages in Japan.

⁶ Gary Leupp: *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

⁷ There were other references to homosexuality in other literature of the times: see, for example the 11th century *Genji Monogatari* or *The Tale of Genji*.

It was among these later, far more sophisticated and socially elevated samurai that the most famous Japanese homosexual institution was to emerge.

If, like me, you are a fan of the movies made by the Japanese director, **Akira Kurosawa**, you will be familiar with the ways of the Samurai but in none of Kurosawa's movies will you see even a hint of one of their great driving institutions, the **wakashudo** (the way of youth) or **bi-do** (the beautiful way).

Writing in the 2004 Androphile Project⁸, an unsigned author commented:

....one of the fundamental aspects of samurai life was the emotional and sexual bond cultivated between an older warrior and a younger apprentice, a love for which the Japanese have many names, as many perhaps as the Eskimo have for snow.

With the advantage of being in the right place at the right time, another writer, Ijiri Chusuke⁹, argued in 1482 that:

“In our empire of Japan this way flourished from the time of the great master Kobo. In the abbeys of Kyoto and Kamakura, and in the world of the nobles and the warriors, lovers would swear perfect and eternal love relying on no more than their mutual good will. Whether their partners were noble or common, rich or poor, was absolutely of no importance...”

Fortunately, we can get a glimpse of the “beautiful way” at the movies with the 1999 film, released in Australia under the title of “Taboo” but originally called “Gohatto”, directed by Nagisa Oshima (*Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, *In the Realm of the Senses*, etc). In this sensual and dream-like movie set in 1865, three years before the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, we see the havoc a very beautiful if flirtatious youth creates when he joins a group of samurai, several of whom then compete with each other for his favours.

The same anonymous Androphile author also writes:

⁸ Androphile Project 2004, <http://www.androphile.org/preview/Culture/Japan/japan.htm>

⁹ Ijiri Chusuke, 1482 "The Essence of Jakudo" in *The Love of the Samurai, A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality* by Tsuneo Watanabe and Jun'ichi Iwata, 1989, London, The Gay Men's Press, p. 109.

*Known also as wakashudo, “the way of the youth”, it was a practice engaged in by all members of the samurai class, from lowliest warrior to highest lord. Indeed it has been said that it would never have been asked of a daimyo, (or lord), why he took boys as lovers, but why he didn’t.*¹⁰

Although in many ways like pederasty in Ancient Greece, *wakashudo* — usually abbreviated to *shudo* — differed in one major respect in that in Japan it was the adolescent youth who sought out and wooed the older man, and not the other way around as in Greece. However, as in Greece, the sexual part of the relationship customarily ended when the youth reached manhood, usually around age 19 or so. Of course that did not mean the men ceased to know each other: most commonly a close friendship lasted for the rest of their lives and, in some cases, the men continued the erotic relationship long past the conventional time. As in Greece, this *shudo* relationship did not rule out marriage because most Samurai married but generally, later in life than was common among other classes.

As in Greece and as we have seen in other parts of the world also, it was firmly believed that the relationship between man and youth was essentially a way of transmitting the manly virtues from one generation to the other and that this was done, not only by the older man serving as a good role model, but also through sexual intercourse of one form or another. Just as the monks on Mount Koya argued that sex was itself a means of exploring the spiritual world, so too the physical relationship between man and youth took on a spiritual meaning in the *shudo*. In 1653, in a book called , “*A Dog’s Idle Hours*” (*Inu Tsurezure*) an anonymous author wrote:

*“It is natural for a samurai to make every effort to excel with pen and sword. Beyond that, what is important to us is not ever to forget, even to our last moment, the spirit of shudo. If we should forget it, it will not be possible for us to maintain the decencies, nor gentleness of speech, nor the refinements of polite behavior.”*¹¹

¹⁰ Gary P. Leupp, 1995, *Male Colors, the Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkely, The University of California Press, p. 53.

¹¹ William Scott Wilson, trans. 1979. *Yamamoto Tsunetomo, Hagakure, The Book of the Samurai* New York and Tokyo, Kodansha International, p. 58.

Honoured and indeed, revered as it was, *shudo* was not to be entered into lightly. A boy was admonished to seek out and observe a man for at least five years before he approached him and requested the apprentice-like



Male couple on a futon: Early 1680's; One of the very first examples of hand-colored ukiyo-e prints in the shunga (erotic) style. Moronobu Hishikawa (1618-1694); Ōban format, 10.25" x 15"; Sumi ink and color on paper; Private collection.

relationship. This meant that boys, some time before they were of an age to enter *shudo*, would have had to be considering the available adult men because they generally underwent the coming-of-age ceremony when they were about 18-19 years old. It was at this time that the youth received the tonsure in which his hair was shaved back from his forehead to emulate a receding hairline and thus appear older (in Japan, age matters – people compare birthdays in order to know who should bow a little lower to the other).

Although *shudo* among the Samurai owed much to the *nanshoku* of the Buddhist monks of the Heian era, it reached its peak during the Tokugawa shogunate which began in 1603¹² but from that time on, the practice gradually declined as the country became increasingly unified and the need for a warrior class diminished.

Homosexuality among the Middle-Classes

The long period of peace during the Tokugawa shogunate saw the rise of a middle class along with the growth of trade. For a time, they even traded with Europe, the Japanese wanting firearms and shipbuilding skills, the Europeans after silks and ceramics.¹³ Japan originally opened its doors, first to the Portuguese in 1542 and later, to the Dutch, but it

¹² which incidentally, was the year Elizabeth I died and James VI of Scotland succeeded her as James I.

¹³ A good read on the subject is Giles Milton: "*Samurai William, The Adventurer Who Unlocked Japan*", Hodder & Stoughton, London 2002.

slammed them shut again and confined the Dutch to the one small trading entrepot at Nagasaki, principally because they disliked the activities of Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries and their intolerant attitudes to Shinto and Buddhism.

During this period, the traditions of both *shudo* and *nanshoku* infiltrated the high society which became known as the “*Floating World*”, the life in the pleasure quarters of the cities, but especially Edo from about the 17th until the end of the 19th centuries. This was the world depicted in many of the famous Japanese wood-block prints, the **ukiyo-e**. While we think of this as the time of *geisha* and the *tea-ceremony*, it is also the time when the *kobuki* and *no* theatres were at their peak of popularity. In these theatres, as in Shakespeare's time, young male actors played female roles, their made-up faces coming to be considered the ideal of female beauty! Kabuki actors known as *kagama*, became the media stars of their day, able to charge fortunes for their sexual favours from the wealthy patrons who pursued them.

This form of male prostitution gave rise to countless literary and artistic works with many of the greatest artists of the time documenting both the *kagama* and their activities. Although some of the better-known artists used false names to protect their reputation, few could avoid producing *ukiyo-e* (“pictures of the floating world”) or, where their pictures were more erotic, what were known as *shunga* (“pictures of spring”). Great artists whose names are household words among Western collectors, such as Hokusai and Hiroshige, produced works of this kind.



Spring Pastimes — A tryst between an older man and a youth — by Miyagawa Isshō, ca. 1750. This is a *Shunga* hand-scroll (sumi, color and gofun on silk) a dalliance between an older man and a young kabuki actor (known as *onnagata* or *kagama*) who often doubled as rent-boys and were much sought after by the “stage door johnnies” of their day.

The Tokugawa shogunate also saw the emergence of a male cult known as *onnagirai*. These were the “women haters”, men who were exclusively homosexual in their behaviour. This stands out against the bisexuality which had always been traditional in Japanese culture. Of course there had long been an attitude that women were “unclean” and that sex with women “polluted” a man’s spirit, the pollution having to be lifted by appropriate religious rituals. To some degree, this was the basis for both *nanshoku* among the monks and *shudo* among the samurai, but it had not before become an institutionalized form of exclusive homosexuality.

The end of *shudo* and the floating world

In 1868 the decrepit Tokugawa shogunate was ended by the **Meiji Restoration** and Japan was prised open for business with the West by American gun-ships. This of course is the time of *Madama Butterfly*! Increasingly conscious of the outside world’s view of them, the Japanese began to hide and eventually abolish the old sexual traditions which had become embarrassing in the world of international relations. In comparison, the Meiji period was rather wowsery and “Victorian” in our terms, so much so that WS Gilbert in “*The Mikado*” sent it up by making beheading the punishment for flirting!

Homosexuality in modern Japan

There are no laws against homosexual behaviour in modern Japan but the old open acceptance has gone, banished from public gaze especially by the American occupation following the Second World War. However, of course homosexual behaviour still goes on even if it is now something to be kept private and considered by the society at large to be rather shameful. But, as Mark McLelland¹⁴ from Murdoch University reports:

..... representations of (primarily male) homosexual love and even sex permeate Japanese popular culture to an extent that would be unimaginable in the US or Europe and that 'homosexuality' in Japan is therefore very differently conceptualised.

However, I must point out that the visibility of 'homosexuality' in Japanese media such as comic books, women's magazines, TV dramas and talk-shows, movies and popular fiction has not created the space for individuals expressing lesbian or gay 'identities' to

¹⁴ **Mark McLelland:** *Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue3/mcllelland2.html>

come out in actual life. Yet, as recent research has shown¹⁵, the notion of 'coming out' is seen as undesirable by many Japanese gay men and lesbians as it necessarily involves adopting a confrontational stance against mainstream lifestyles and values, which many still wish to endorse.

It is difficult to assess exactly what is meant by “homosexuality” in Japan because the media seem to conflate same-sex desire with cross-dressing and trans-genderism and at times to portray it as a kind of “hobby” or a form of “play”. This rather confused and trivializing attitude can be best seen in two major institutions of Japanese contemporary life: in the comic books called *manga* and their animated form, called *anime*.

Anime and Manga

Many *manga* and *anime* contain male homosexual stories and bedroom scenes. Since the 1970s, a genre of *manga* and *anime* has developed especially for women fascinated by the “boy-love” theme, a genre increasingly written and drawn by women themselves. These feature very stylized, feminised youths, known as *bishoonen* which many commentators argue are not really men but:

...fantastic, androgynous creatures created by Japanese women as an expression of dissatisfaction with current gender stereotypes and the 'narrow life paths' which restrict women in the real world.¹⁶

However, there is evidence that these notions are more than just day-dreams for many women who, since the early '90s, have come to believe it is better to live with and even to marry a gay man. As McLelland reports, these women believe gay men have qualities straight men lack, including a willingness *to negotiate roles within the marriage and to help with housework.*

Relationships between straight women and gay men are also the focus of what are called "gay boom" movies in which a common theme is 'camouflage marriage'. These marriages are undertaken to avoid the intense social pressures on both partners to marry and are welcomed by women because they believe gay men offer them *... ..the kind of love, appreciation and respect denied to them by straight men.*

¹⁵ McLelland refers to his own *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*, Richmond: Curzon Press – then in press; and to Wim Lunsing, *Beyond Common Sense*, 1999a.

¹⁶ McLelland, *ibid.*



“Boy-love” yaoi (Manga for women)

Japanese feminist writer, Ueno Chizuko¹⁷ states that

'neither men nor women are sleeping with the opposite sex, they are sleeping with a system' which always works to the disadvantage of women. So women turn to images of sex between men which are, as one woman [said]¹⁸, the only picture we have of men loving someone else as an equal. It is the kind of love we want to have.'

¹⁷ Ueno Chizuko, *Sukaato no shita no gekiba [The theater under the skirt]*, Tokyo: Kawade Bunko, 1992, p. 140., quoted in McLelland, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan and Bush Years*, London: Cassell, 1994, p. 245.