

# Gender Masquerade: Reflections on *Irezumi*

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## **Art on the Body**

Tattoos are either works of art on a human body or a means of transforming the human body into art. It is impossible to state either condition categorically, as the issues surrounding tattoos are manifold, allowing the bearer to occupy both the status of subject and object. Practices of bodily inscription have been becoming popular among the younger generations all over the world. In Britain, particularly, the practice is perceived as fashionable and 'cool,' with pop-stars and sporting personalities proudly showing off their tattoos and body-piercing on TV. According to Margo DeMello, tattooing 'as a new cultural, artistic, and social form' emerged in the United States during the 1980s, forming the new 'tattoo community' which consists primarily of members of the middle classes.<sup>1)</sup> This community extols the new significance of their mode of tattoo, which, they maintain, is utterly different from (and better than) the former tattoo practices prevalent among the North American working classes. Susan Benson describes the way in which today's tattoo-bearers see their practices as 'statements of the self' or 'individuation,'<sup>2)</sup> a perception which is probably applicable also to the young tattoo-bearers in Britain. Given that tattoos and body-piercing still possess shock-value, even though the practices have become popularised, young tattoo-bearers insist that they differentiate themselves from 'normal' people by putting themselves 'outside society' and thus creating a new egalitarian community. Even more importantly, Benson observes 'that these practises *in themselves* transgress or negate something central about the kind of person demanded by "society" in late capitalism.'<sup>3)</sup> Moreover, given that tattooing has previously been strongly connected with masculinity and sexual aggressiveness, in cases where the bearer is a woman, the effect is intended to be gender-defying.

However, this insistence contains several contradictions. The first of these, as DeMello points out, is that the new tattoo community does not free each individual tattoo-bearer from social oppression, but rather creates a new oppression and hierarchy with the use of words such as 'professional' or 'fine art,' which contribute to the maintenance of a superior status by vulgarising and subtly excluding other kinds of tattoos, such as those associated with working-class cultures. The tattoo popularised today has been, DeMello suggests, 'sanitized or stripped of its working-class roots, in order to ensure that the tattoo is now fit for middle-class consumption.'<sup>4)</sup> A similar shift seems to be happening in Europe, reflecting the popularity of American tattooing and body-piercing, suggesting that no culture can effectively resist those American economic influences which alter the perceptions and create consumer desires.

DeMello's use of the word 'consumption' is therefore significant here, as this implies the way in which the tattoo is handled in today's society. With terms such as 'professional' and 'fine art,' the new tattoo community 'mask[s] class differences within the supposedly egalitarian tattoo community.'<sup>5)</sup> One effect is simply to substitute a new system of class, significantly, now more or less middle-class, rather than working-class.

A second contradiction is that, contrary to the alleged freedom from the capitalist norm, this new tattooing practice itself owes much to capitalist ideology. With regard to class, the new tattoo community exploits the older working-class community in order to acquire certain desirable qualities. In the process of 'sanitisation,' the tattoo has not only acquired the more 'refined' and 'artistic' qualities, but also 'has been assigned a new set of meanings,'<sup>6)</sup> both derived mainly from non-Western cultures, particularly 'exotic' Asia. The Japanese tattooing practice, *Irezumi*, may be one of the most influential here. Benson explains that 'for many, to inscribe upon the skin the marks of the primitive other is "anti-repressive," a way of releasing the savage within or of returning to a corporeal authenticity occluded by the disciplines of contemporary conformity.'<sup>7)</sup> What concerns me the most here is the way in which non-Western cultures have assimilated and appropriated the idea of the Other in an idealised mode which is largely removed from actuality. Benson says 'the identification with the primitive and the exotic is thus no longer abjected, but is reconfigured as identification with the authentic, the uncommodified, the pure, in opposition to the corruptions of mainstream society.'<sup>8)</sup> This is the attitude, a residue of Orientalism, which either by abjection or by idealisation, transforms other cultures for service to Western culture. As with previous Orientalist practices, these too are closely bound up with commercialism. The recent boom in Feng Shui is merely one of many examples where Western capitalism manipulates the vulgar concept of the Orient. Tattoo practices seem to live on in the same kinds of manipulation. A tattoo is something you can buy and wear: the modern tattoo and body-piercing are equivalent to the designer garment. The designer dress or ornament is assumed by its wearer to be an authentic expression of the self: the economic manoeuvring of late capitalism manipulates the desire of the consumer by assigning a particular set of images to brand-names through mass advertisement strategies.

DeMello herself perceives this conflict among the tattoo-bearers, when she describes the various phases of redefinition through which the American tattoo has passed, from 'the mark of the primitive to a symbol of the explorer, a sign of patriotism and a mark of rebellion' and finally to 'where it stands for many today, as a sign of status.'<sup>9)</sup> It is a status achieved by material acquisition, the very mark of capitalism.

This leads to the third point of contradiction: the commodification of the tattoo seems to occur alongside the commodification of the body in consumer society. Contrary to the bearers' insistence on individuation and retrieval of the authenticity of the body, its transformations, though assumed to be in the intended image of individual desire, are actually subject to all of the pressures of social and cultural constructionism. Benson reckons that dieting and working-out, body-building, plastic surgery, gender reassignment, anorexia and bulimia, all seem to share 'a kind of corporeal absolutism: that it is through the body and in the body that personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained.'<sup>10)</sup> The bearer of the tattoo is now using not only the outfit, but also

his/her own body, to assume the quality which is supposed to make them look better. The claim of authenticity might be the other side of the coin of the contemporary objectification of the body in conformity to the social norm.

Though apparently contradictory, these two tendencies are not mutually exclusive. As in the case of Anorexia, the patient might reduce his/her size in conformity to the social norm, though at the same time, s/he incorporates resistance to such a norm by reducing to an extremity which alienates himself/herself visibly from social norms. As Benson argues, 'what is critical here is, of course, the will of the subject and that the person is "in control" of the process.'<sup>11)</sup> Control of the body by the mind is one of the central Western philosophical concepts, and Benson correctly suggests that the central issue around this contemporary preoccupation with one's body is 'fear of fragmentation, anxiety about boundaries and about the relationship between will and self; the body is the battleground in which such anxieties are played out.'<sup>12)</sup> Though tattoos and body-piercing, like anorexia, can sometimes be fatal, increasing numbers of people are entering into this 'battleground.' The process suggests an ever-intensifying anxiety within postmodern society about the threatened loss of the autonomy of the body and of the assumption of the superiority of the mind to the body. As Benson suggests, 'their fantasies of permanence, control and autonomy that they seek to negotiate,'<sup>13)</sup> are actually expressions of the impossibility of such an absolute condition.

In fact, it could be argued that what I have stated above is ultimately connected to an unsteady transposition/reversion of the status of subject and object informing the practice of tattooing. The new tattoo community assumes a claim to self-definition, to subjectivity, a liberation through the tattoo practice from domination and objectification, but in so doing posits itself as the 'Other': the notion created by the very process of domination. The practise of tattooing thus effectively offers a discursive site where power operates; its differentiation from the social norm works to enhance and facilitate the very oppressive system of the dominant society; its claim to authenticity of the body actually reduces the body to a mere object. The body becomes the site where the social norm is displayed. The claims of uniqueness and rebelliousness seem to be strangely nullified when the body is transformed into an objet d'art. Instead of obtaining the power of control, the bearer paradoxically finds him/herself dependent on the social gaze. To be seen becomes the necessity.

### **Angela Carter and Tattoo**

This anxiety is expressively fictionalised by British novelist, Angela Carter. Carter often uses the motif of the transformation of the body into an object and, also, the inversion of power-relations that is triggered by tattoo or other bodily manipulation. In her novel, *Heroes and Villains* (1969), for instance, Jewel, the male character, is elaborately tattooed, in order to assume the quality of the scary other. The problem for Jewel is that the concept of 'scary other' originates from without rather than within and eventually it takes him over, so that the concept actually subsumes his autonomy.

In this story, the socially dominant power-relation is reflected in the concise opposition between the community of Professors and the Barbarians. It is a hierarchical opposition, representing that of culture/nature, civilisation/savage, order/disorder, and heroes/villains from the Professors' point of view. While the

Professors' community is a patriarchal one, with its symbolic white (and phallic) tower, the Barbarians are regarded as the (feminine) 'Other.' As we find with any dominant social order, the Professors' community is under the constant threat of disruption from the repressed within and without, but their fear is effectively transferred onto the Barbarians who, painted and clad like typical savages thus incorporating the concept of 'Other,' in fact make themselves an easy target of control. They become what Foucault calls 'a discursive construct which power works through.'<sup>14</sup>

It is the danger which falls inevitably upon anyone who posits him/herself as the 'Other' of any society. Jewel, the young leader of the Barbarians, puts this danger into words:

'Sometimes I dream I am an invention of the Professors; they project their fears outside on us so they won't stay in the villages, infecting them and so, you understand, they can try to live peacefully there.'<sup>15</sup>

Though it is the Professors who impose on the Barbarians the status of savage, the Barbarians unwittingly internalise the notion of savageness and put themselves into a mould made by the Professors. In this story, the mould is made by the ex-Professor, Dr Donally, who pledges vengeance upon the community from which he has been expelled. Dr Donally, according to his (ex-Professor's) idea of Otherness, recreates Jewel into the sign of the 'Other.' Tattooing is used here as one of the processes of his transformation, and this is the beginning of the Jewel's fall.

In this novel, Carter is fascinated with the negative transforming power of the tattoo. Dr Donally tattoos Jewel most immaculately in order for him to acquire the mysterious strength against the Professors. However, as Judith Butler succinctly suggests, if one chooses to remain as the 'Other,' it is never possible to subvert the system, but one is condemned forever as the 'Other,' because the 'Other' only reflects the power's wishful image, and therefore belongs to the power system.<sup>16</sup> The interdependency of power and the 'Other' betrays itself. No matter whether Jewel has had a power of his own, his power after he assumes the role of 'Other' designed by Dr Donally, is an artificial one. And this power, like the power of the patriarchal Professors', needs to be guarded heavily by discipline. Jewel becomes 'mechanical,'<sup>17</sup> only an agent of the law.

Here we can see that Jewel is made into an agent of power, but does not possess power himself. His autonomy and authenticity are lost. He is only an artistic manifesto on the skin, an object. 'I think he'd like to flay me and hang me up on the wall, I think he'd really like that. He might even make me up into a ceremonial robe and wear me on a special occasions' says Jewel about Dr Donally.<sup>18</sup> The transformation of the body into an object is so complete that Jewel is now heavily dependent on Dr Donally for his existence. It demonstrates the danger of assuming the notion of 'Otherness' which in itself presupposes the dominant order. At the end of the novel, he fails to rebel against Dr Donally and becomes a powerless slave of his.

What is demonstrated in this story is the way in which the tattoo is used to put the bearer into a desirable mould of the 'Other,' which only serves the dominant power. Jewel's inherent otherness and disruptive nature is curbed by this tattoo, and he ends up becoming an obedient member of the order. However, Carter leaves open the

possibility of the autonomy of the body, suggested in the pregnant woman, Marianne. Having been forced to marry Jewel by Dr Donally, the now pregnant Marianne resolutely leaves Jewel to find an alternative community. Even if the modern body is so utterly manipulated so as to negate one's sense of autonomy and selfhood, this concrete sense of possession of the body, this corporeality, may be the key to solve this riddle of bodily manipulation.

### **Self-Refiguration**

Though in *Heroes and Villains*, Carter deals only with the negative transforming power of tattoo, there are apparently more positive effects which the tattoo offers its bearers, and which motivate many to take up this practice in the first place. The sense of autonomy derived from the manipulation of one's own body is one possibility, though this claim to autonomy is double-edged. It may mean the complete control of one's body by one's mind, the triumph of the mind superseding the body, hence the transgression of bodily limitation. This can be associated with martyrdom, an extreme form of heroism. I suppose this can only result in the further separation of the body and mind, and ending in the ultimate loss of self in death. Though this might be regarded by some as the ultimate victory, i.e., from a Christian point of view, common sense suggests otherwise, especially in the context of some of the non-Western cultures that invest an undoubtedly huge significance in the Western contemporary tattoo practice. For instance, the indigenous Japanese religion, Shintoism, highly regards harmony between the body and mind, and detests any repression of bodily need, including sexual desire. The ideal is the embrace of the body and not its transgression. When DeMello cites Marc Blanchard saying that 'there is something in tattooing which escapes the flow of commodification,' and also that 'because the body is there always, the image, the writ of tattoo is not as reproducible, and even if the design for the tattooed image can indeed be mass produced, [...] it is the individual body which bears this image, thus making the replication of the tattoo contingent upon its siting on the body of a specific subject,'<sup>19)</sup> what might be implied is a sense of harmony of body and mind, very similar to the Shintoist ideal. This does not necessarily mean the control of the body by the mind, but perhaps a grounding effect, as it were, that a tattoo can offer to the body. Like the pregnant body of Marianne in *Heroes and Villains*, there can be something corporeal about tattoo, the sense of 'me-ness' which transcends the power struggle between body and mind. Benson states this corporeality regarding the pain induced in the tattooed:

Pain, like the tattoo itself, is something that cannot be appropriated; it is yours alone; it stands outside the system of signification and exchange that threatens the autonomy of the self. And, of course, like the flesh itself, pain is conceived of as really 'real'; it speaks its own truth.<sup>20)</sup>

What I am trying to suggest here is the manifold functions which a tattoo can offer its bearer. It can signify the radical control of one's own body, thus showing his/her controlling power. But it can also signify the retreat from such a war of control with the body in the acceptance of one's limit as a mortal human being. And it seems both

elements are seen among the contemporary tattoo bearers.

This alternative reading of tattoos may be able to shed a new light on the understanding of Western tattooing practices. As we have seen, contemporary Western tattooing owes much to the non-Western tradition, including Japanese *Irezumi*. On assuming the tattoo, which is influenced by Japanese tradition, the bearer him/herself also cannot but be influenced by it internally, since tattoo has, as we have seen in Jewel's case, a powerful transformative power, with or without regard to the bearer's intention. This might sound contrary to what many of the Western tattoo-bearers claim as the reason for their practice, which is usually articulated as self-expression or the exhibition of the inner self on the outer skin. An alternative reading, however, might see significance in the opposite practice of taking what is on the skin inside, i.e., as the incorporation of the alternative idea, so that the bearer is freed from the power struggle in the current order.

In fact, Carter's text reveals the textuality of the tattoo. It is a powerful narrative, a text written on the body awaiting decoding and deconstruction. Like any other texts, it is culturally constructed, and may, on the one hand, re-inscribe current power-relations and power-struggles. But, on the other hand, the narrative, as it is, can affect the receptor so fundamentally that it can sometimes alter the perception of the self and the governing power-relations. Alan Sinfield suggests in any given society it 'is very difficult not to be influenced by a story, even about yourself, when everyone else if insisting upon it.'<sup>21</sup> When a Westerner chooses to assume a tattoo, which is invested with non-Western traditional qualities, he/she may inevitably choose to listen to the story which it carries and which becomes the story of him/herself, his/her sense of selfhood. There is a residue of Orientalism which undeniably exists in the contemporary Western practice of tattooing and, although this Orient might be the commercialised, appropriated one, reflecting merely the wishful image of the 'Other' of the West, it also brings in something corporeal, something that cannot be appropriated, with the tattooing practice. No matter whether the Western bearer wants it or not, some ideas surrounding the non-Western tattoo may be transferred not only onto the skin but also into the inner psyche, thus transforming the relation between body and mind. I suggest therefore some reflections on Japanese tattoo, *Irezumi*, might help the understanding of the practice in general.

### *Irezumi*

*Irezumi* is a tattoo in its most florid form, and as is known, is an emblem of Japanese mafia, the *Yakuza*. Since pre-historic times, tattooing has been prevalent in Japan. The names given to the Japanese tattoo has been changed, from '*Bunshin*' or '*Monshin*' and '*Gei*' to '*Irezumi*' '*Horimono*' and '*Shisei*.'<sup>22</sup> The Chinese characters used for the word '*Bunshin*' are 'Bun' for literature or letter, and 'Shin' for body. As they suggest, the original form of a Japanese tattoo has a mythic quality which promises to realise one's dream or to ward off dangers for hunters and fishermen. On the other hand, the term, '*Irezumi*,' was used for the tattoo put on the skin of the criminal as punishment around 8<sup>th</sup> century, and again around 18<sup>th</sup> century, whereas '*Horimono*' and '*Shisei*' were used for the ornamental tattoo, that became popular among working-class male from late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as one of the symbols of masculine bravery. There were groups of firemen in

Edo period, for instance. Those newly organized firemen competed with one another to wear *Horimono* on their skin which showed off and boosted their bravery. This type of tattoo has been carried onto today's Japan, and now called generally '*Irezumi*.'

As the traditional American working-class tattoo reflects the high valuation of physical strength and masculinity, *Irezumi* is also mainly for men. There have been female bearers, but they belong to certain masculine groups. Although the practice has been banned many times, it has survived until today, mostly in the underworld. Perhaps, because it was forbidden by the government, the tattoo practice has acquired special significance on top of any inherent meaning as an occupational badge. Now it may mean that the bearer is not only brave and masculine, but also rebellious and lawless. It is, therefore, understandable that this practice is still alive among the mafia members, *Yakuza*, though its practice has long disappeared among other law-abiding working-class males.

*Irezumi* in the contemporary mafia world is the mark of masculinity. *Yakuza*, when entering the caste as a senior member, usually has his body tattooed. As the *Horimono* in Edo period, today's *Irezumi* has been more elaborate and extensive than Western tattooing practices. It is not the random statement of most of its Western counterparts, but a full-body inscription of carefully designed art. The pain inflicted is enormous, and the tattooed has to endure it for a long time, as the process is extended over a long period. The process is effectively a rite of passage, marking one's entry into a (male) society. Here, one obvious function of the tattoo is to show one's ability to endure pain, as a token of masculinity. On completion of the rite of passage, he is now announced as a celebrated, legitimate member of the caste. His lifelong commitment, an absolute requirement, is effectively proved by this practice. Also, the practice requires the masterly hand of an artist, and the art is strictly maintained in a very patriarchal master-disciple relationship.

In spite of its association with masculinity, the striking aesthetic feature of *Irezumi* is its feminine qualities. The designs for *Irezumi* vary, and some are typically masculine emblems such as scary dragons or tigers. However, the most popular and more traditional designs (also popular in Edo period) consist of colourful flowers and beautiful objects such as butterflies, snowflakes, or a child and a carp. It seems to me significantly contradictory that the tattoo which should function to boast of the bearer's masculinity, actually exhibits the very representation of femininity which society normally associates with women. Why is this tattoo so colourful, flowery, and, almost, feminine? Surely *Irezumi* has its own story to tell, which might not fail to affect the Western bearer from within.

*Irezumi* among *Yakuza* is a masculine mask put on the human body, but its feminine design makes it a bizarre mask. Angela Carter, staying in Japan from 1969 to 1972, remarks in *Nothing Sacred* (1982) on this peculiarity of *Irezumi*: '*Irezumi* is tattooing in toto. It transforms its victim into a genre masterpiece.'<sup>23)</sup> She perceives the contradiction that while the tattoo provides the bearer with a passport to be a member of the clan, it also somehow turns him into an object. Carter finds repression functioning as well: 'He is visually superb; he exudes the weird glamour of masochism; and he carries upon his flesh an immutable indication of caste. Bizarre beauties blossom in the programmed interstices of repression.'<sup>24)</sup>

It is a bizarre mask. Though its beauty is undeniable, its association with immense and gruesome pain and underworld violence scares off those who see it. Once again, one sees how the tattoo successfully differentiates the bearer from 'normal' people, and stresses his masculine power. The feminine design, on the other hand, seems to provide compensation for the femininity which he is required to give up on entering the *Yakuza* community. I would locate the crucial gender-crossing function that *Irezumi* might offer to its bearer. And it seems that it is the strong necessity for repression which might make the tattoo so feminine.

So, why do they need to repress their femininity so strongly that they need some compensation? The *Yakuza* community is patriarchal in the extreme, and the necessity of the members to repress their femininity and to put on masculine mask of *Irezumi* might be great. However, it may merely be an intensified version of 'normal' contemporary Japanese society. As the creed of original Shinto religion shows, Japanese society, before being influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, had a very relaxed attitude towards sexuality, and women were often the head of community. Gender-division as it is today was nowhere to be seen. Might it be because of its original status of the society, that superimposed patriarchy has to police its gender division so strictly? And might it be that *Yakuza* society (extreme version of today's Japanese society) has to ward off femininity so ritually through *Irezumi*-initiation?

### **Gender-Division in Japan**

Angela Carter sees through the thick mist of so-called 'cultural difference' to the very core of the power struggle, which is carried out in Japanese society and which the insider may be too involved to be able to see. What she perceives is the very intense version of gender-division. Japanese society seems to force each individual to assume 'masculinity' or 'femininity' according to his/her biological sex. As feminism has shown, gender is a social mechanism rather than an anatomical given. Gender-division, therefore, almost inevitably entails repression of one's sexuality more or less. In Japan's case, the requirement for this repression is so intense that sometimes it requires a compensation, or unleashing in one sublimated form or another; hence the feminine *Irezumi* on the *Yakuza*'s skin.

Carter recognises the strict gender roles according to which Japanese men and women seem to act almost mechanically, and she finds the strain produced by this impossible disparity. She writes also in *Nothing Sacred*, 'In Japan I learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalised.'<sup>25</sup>) One of her essays describes an exaggerated and simplified male-female relation unfolding in a Japanese bar, an illustration of the social norm, an 'ideal' male-female relation from a patriarchal order's point of view:

It would be easy to construct a blueprint for an ideal hostess. Indeed, if the Japanese economy ever needs a boost, Sony might contemplate putting them into mass production. The blueprint would provide for: a large pair of breasts, with which to comfort and delight the clients; one dexterous, well-manicured hand for pouring their drinks, lighting their cigarettes and popping forkfuls of food into their mouths; a concealed tape-recording of cheerful laughter, to sustain the illusion that the girls themselves are having a good time; and a single, enormous,

very sensitive ear for the clients to talk at.

Japan must surely be the only country in the world where a man will gladly pay out large sums of good money to get a woman to listen to him. Possibly slaves do not make good listeners. However, the hostess — the computerised playmate — may conceivably be an illustration of the fact that Japan is just the same as everywhere else, only more so; perhaps she is indeed the universal male notion of the perfect woman.<sup>26)</sup>

In this passage, Carter succinctly compares the status of hostess with that of an automaton, reminding us of E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman.'<sup>27)</sup> As in Hoffmann's story, the displacement of male desire and fear occurs in an obvious way in this hostess–client relation. Surely male clients pay a lot of money in order to secure their power of control and assert their masculinity. Their need for such an ego boost may be so huge that they make it a kind of role-playing game, where the clients cannot be disappointed, since monetary exchange makes it safe and reliable. This hostess–client relation is perfect for power to work through, since 'both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy.'<sup>28)</sup> This process of displacement may be found everywhere in the world, as Carter writes, but it is more obvious in Japan, a society so intensely trying to secure the containing division of gender. It might be important to note here that this fantasy is not primarily an expression of sexual desire. It is a fantasy of male-society, of their masculine dominating power. Hence, men do not go to such a bar only to gratify sexual desires. They go to cultivate comradeship with other men, and are therefore rarely accompanied by a woman.

Such bars, in fact, offer the same kind of compensation as *Irezumi*. While boosting the client's masculinity, the role-playing game with the hostess allows men to behave extremely childishly, as if he can strip off this masculine mask in the bar, because it is only a role-playing game which is safeguarded by the monetary exchange, and cannot affect his status as a masculine subject. It is a scenario in which a mature man may talk like a baby and be fed by a hostess, which, as pathetic as it may look, exhibits precisely those symptoms which originate from that impossible repression suffered by each individual in Japan.

### **The Protective Feminine Mask**

The compensatory function of *Irezumi*, a protective mask, is to offer a secret enjoyment of that femininity which the bearer is supposed to have given up, whilst externally advertising his masculinity and legitimacy as a member of the caste. If one considers the Japanese concept of the naked body, the importance of this protection might become clearer. In Japan the naked body seems to carry different connotations from that in the West where the nude has always been the central figure in art and a naked woman the focal point of the male gaze. In Japan, on the other hand, nakedness means an exposure of your inner weakness to the rest of society, and the naked body is semiotically equivalent to 'unprotectedness,' 'destitution,' or 'fragility.' Carter, quoting the detestation of the naked body expressed as early as in the eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, says, 'traditionally, the Japanese have always felt a lack of interest,

verging on repugnance, at the naked human body.’<sup>29)</sup> Going naked puts a man into a dangerous situation, where his weakness is revealed. If he goes naked, it has to be done among people with whom he can feel safe. On the other hand, by going naked together, men can build an intimate brotherhood, as a revealing Japanese phrase ‘Hadaka-no-Tsukiai’ shows, which literally means ‘socialising in nakedness,’ and can be translated into ‘intimate comradeship.’ (Note that this phrase is only applicable to male-to-male relationships.)

John Berger points to differences in the treatment of naked women between the European and non-European traditions. He says that, in the European tradition, even when the central figure of a painting is a naked woman, the real protagonist is not her, but ‘the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man’<sup>30)</sup> and that ‘[the] picture is made to appeal to his sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality.’<sup>31)</sup> On the other hand, in non-European traditions, ‘nakedness is never supine in this way’<sup>32)</sup> and even when the theme is sexual, it usually features two people with ‘the woman as active as the man.’<sup>33)</sup> However, I would argue that Japanese culture should not be included in what he calls the non-European tradition since, in traditional Japan, sexual provocation by nudity was extremely rare. As Carter mentions, ‘even the erotic actors in the pictorial sex-instruction manuals of the Edo era rarely doff their kimono.’<sup>34)</sup>

That sense of the vulnerability of the naked body traditionally found in Japan is perhaps one of the reasons for the surviving custom of *Irezumi*, which is so elaborately performed to cover the *Yakuza*’s entire body. Carter perceives this role of *Irezumi* as a protector:

Now, a man who has been comprehensively tattooed [...] can hardly be said to be naked, or he may never remove this most intimate and gaily coloured of garments. Stark he may be, but always decent, and therefore never ashamed. He will never look helplessly, defencelessly, indelicately, nude. This factor may or may not be important in the psychological base of *Irezumi* — which provides the potentially perhaps menacing human form with an absolute disguise.<sup>35)</sup>

Japanese *Irezumi*, and possibly Western ones too, may protect the bearer with a proof of comradeship with other members of the community, successfully reducing their vulnerability. Its elaboration reveals the intensity of the need for such protection.

### Unlikely Heritage

The strict requirement of gender division, which symptomatically reveals itself in the form of *Irezumi*, is not inherent in Japanese society, as I mentioned before. On the contrary, Japan is unusual in that it has had a female-dominant past, close to matriarchy and has seen several empresses. A Japanese Shintoist myth holds a Goddess of the sun, *Amaterasu*, as the head of all gods. One theory suggests that the patriarchal system imported from China, along with Buddhism and Confucianism, gradually replaced the original matriarchy around the period from the second to the seventh century.

Originally, the Shintoist idea of sexuality was very different from Buddhism and Confucianism. The former had high regards for feminine sexuality, that it was not to

be repressed, but admired, cherished, and enjoyed. It was a source of all blessing. Sexuality was celebrated. On the other hand, in Buddhism, woman is a debased, lower creature than man. Man may be able to become Buddha, and thus be freed from the cycle of incarnation, whereas woman has to be first reborn as a man in order to be free. And sex with a woman is forbidden to a Buddhist monk, as it is debasing. To complement this, Confucianism advocates the respect and decency of the younger for the elder, and significantly of woman for man. As society transformed into a patriarchal structure, the two Chinese religions were manipulated by the dominant order of the time as useful ideologies to protect its power in an increasingly competitive world. Japan entered the war period following the import of the patriarchal system until the Tokugawa era which started in the seventeenth century.

Gary P. Leupp, in his work on Japanese homosexuality, argues that 'the Buddhist faith is traditionally anti-female, and though the misogyny was in some ways mitigated in Japan, particularly in the early centuries after the introduction of the religion, by the medieval period Japanese Buddhism insisted upon women's inherently evil and defiling nature.'<sup>36)</sup> He associates the emergence of homosexual activity among Buddhist monks in Japan not only with this debasing theory of women, but also with the lack of women in their monastery life. However insistently the Buddhist and Confucian idea preached against any form of sexual activity, its complete renunciation was so difficult that the monks invented alternative, male–male sexual activity. Possibly, the strong tendency for sexual freedom originally celebrated, needed to find an outlet within the more repressive structure. In fact, Leupp points out that Japanese Buddhism developed a peculiarly tolerant attitude towards male–male sex, unlike Chinese Buddhism. According to Leupp, such homosexual activities prevailed among *Samurais* after the end of the eleventh century in Japan, the time when Japan entered the war period and the feudal system prevailed, and then among commoners in the Tokugawa period. *Samurai* society was a male-dominant one that required a discipline and rigid hierarchy for which Buddhism and Confucianism seem to have provided an ideal moral ground. Once again the lack of women in the feudal castles of the *Samurai* might have contributed to homosexual activities. It seems that this prevailing male–male sex was regarded either as a substitute or as a better alternative to heterosexual relations, though heterosexual intercourse was also carried out when available. The interesting point Leupp makes is that it cannot be merely described as situational. It might have been so in the beginning, but, after a while, along with the urbanisation and the beginning of capitalism, such homosexual activities prevalent among monks and *Samurais* (who were at the top of class system) began to be regarded as something which commoners might also pursue as a form of highbred, luxurious pastime: hence the emergence of licensed prostitution, both male and female.<sup>37)</sup> Licensed as it was, the patriarchal government needed to keep sexuality in check.

What is intriguing is the way in which Buddhism and Confucianism failed to repress sexuality altogether for, as Leupp mentions, neither misogyny nor homophobia prevailed. The celebration of sexuality inherent in traditional Japanese culture may have re-emerged in this popularity of homosexual activities, and as a consequence of the combination of unique historic events.

However, as well as the successful repression of women through this process,

femininity in men was also equally repressed. In fact, homosexual activities during these periods seem to have been regulated by a rule, that men are never to be completely feminised. While the acolytes who were also the bed partners for elder monks were dressed and made up like girls, they were encouraged to cultivate masculine arts.<sup>38)</sup> And they were carried out under the strict role-playing rule. The elder always assumed the role of the active partner, the younger the passive, and thus the choice of role was circumscribed by factors external to the issue of the femininity of the performer. Excluded from this rule were male prostitutes, but they were protected by the monetary exchange as seen in the hostess–client relationship. Gender division has by then come into being.

### Gender-Crossing

Foucault suggests that repression works through repetitive battles between the repressor and the repressed, and points that resistance of the repressed may inevitably occur. Gender-crossing theatrical performances in Tokugawa period may be such an occasion. As Leupp explains, *Kabuki* theatres and prostitution were closely related in those days, showing that both worked to accommodate some kind of sexual liberation. Prostitution and these kinds of gender-crossing theatres prospered in the Tokugawa period, explains Leupp, though both were effectively controlled by the end of it. Prostitution and the female version of *Kabuki* were banned by the government which feared that rampant sexual liberty might lead to social disruption. This seems to reflect the stronger control upon women’s sexuality than the male version of *Kabuki*, which sustains until today, transformed into a highly sublimated and formalised system. The theatres of *Noh* and *Kabuki* today are expensive entertainments, the actors being highly regarded celebrities, overloaded with expensive costumes and masks. Though the connection with prostitution was erased, the stylised *Kabuki*, nonetheless, may offer the some sort of sublimated form of gender-crossing to men, as *Irezumi* does.

While feminine behaviour was generally repressed in the ordinary men, *Kabuki* actors were allowed to act publicly as female. The audience of *Kabuki* could thereby share the forbidden enjoyment, while maintaining their safety. Freud acknowledges this process of sublimation as necessary to civilisation and specifically points to perversion as a prime focus for suppression/sublimation: perversion as the instance of desire gone wild, uncontrolled, irrational, or unreasonable. Perversion, according to his formulation, is incompatible with the demands of civilisation and with the heterosexual norm for the maintenance of society.<sup>39)</sup> Even though, and as if to contradict Freud, homosexual activities were tolerated, and even celebrated in Leupp’s opinion, until the end of the Tokugawa period, they were put under strict repression after the modernisation of Japan. This time, it seems that Western ideology and religion, together with its homophobia, permeated Japanese society. Today’s Japanese society is one of the most homophobic and one in which gay people rarely come out. They are marginalised and confined to certain sections of the city, where they live as professional gay dancers or entertainers. This segregation functions as a form of sanitisation by the monetary exchange so as not to disturb society as a whole.

When society tries to repress homosexuality, the real threat seems to lie in the fact that ‘it openly interprets the law according to which society operates and in so doing

threatens it,' as Luce Irigaray suggests.<sup>40</sup> Her argument that 'all economic organisation is homosexual'<sup>41</sup> sounds especially credible in the case of Japan. Because of its past, it may need to repress homosexuality all the more forcibly. Power tries desperately to avoid the confrontation with what it has repressed, since it fears the revelation of its constructedness. The debasement of woman, and the homophobia introduced from the West, may have thus shaped contemporary Japanese society as a strictly gender-divided and hierarchical one. Gender-crossing activities, possibly hazardous to the dominant order, are therefore controlled, because the transgression of an artificially imposed division suggests the precariousness of the power relations. What is ultimately revealed in the gender-crossing activity is the performative nature of gender, the absence of any ontological status which patriarchy would claim. Judith Butler, in her analysis of the cultural practices of drag and cross-dressing mentions, 'in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency.'<sup>42</sup>

Jonathan Dollimore quotes Laura Levine as writing that 'there is a fear that men dressing as women will lead to an erosion of masculinity itself.'<sup>43</sup> This also explains some theatrical displays of transvestism as a form of sublimation or attempt at containment of this unstable sexuality, the unleashing of its wild desire to transgress the rigidly defined borderline of gender in a controlled way.

It is indeed interesting to find such stylised gender-crossing as *Kabuki* and *Noh* in Japanese culture, where the gender division is carried out. The stricter the repression, the stronger the need for a release. One reason why the ideas of effeminacy, of becoming woman, is so threatening for a man since the Buddhist and Confucian debasement of woman, might be the existence of a femininity in himself which he knows cannot be fully repressed. What society refuses to admit is woman's 'sameness,' not her 'otherness.' There may be a fundamental fear of proximity to the subversive. One of the functions of male gender-crossing theatres is probably, and carnivalistically, to incorporate and thus re-establish the concept of 'femininity' which is culturally constructed, in order to maintain that order. Dollimore explains this attempt to make a woman or homosexual into an absolute other:

the woman was once (and may still be) feared in a way in which the homosexual now is — feared, that is, not so much, or only, because of a radical otherness, as because of an inferior resemblance presupposing a certain proximity.<sup>44</sup>

In Japan, *Kabuki* female-role actors are said to behave in a more 'womanly' fashion than real women. This is not surprising, since he enacts the ideal woman preferred by society. In any masculinist culture, it seems that 'femininity' is marginalised, displaced, or sublimated through cultural performances such as art, literature, or theatre, in which it is branded as an 'absolute other,' or 'object of desire.'

### ***Irezumi* as Cross-Dressing**

There is still more gender-division in contemporary Japanese society than one would find in any Western society, although, the postmodern dissolution of social norms has had some influence and the hold of such gender separatism upon each individual

seems to be loosening. Still, modern Japanese society has been organised much as a feudalistic society, where men are supposed to be superior to women and your loyalty to the lord (the company) is the priority. Though cross-dressing might be allowed for women, behavioural transgression is less acceptable. Women feel the pressure from society to be feminine, the required model behaviour is to wear high-heeled shoes, have well-manicured hands, wear make-up and talk in a high-pitched voice. The majority of jobs taken by women are secondary, secretarial ones, and it is expected that a woman quits her job when she marries. It might be worth noting that Japanese women living outside their own country often act differently from the way they do in Japan. They enjoy the opportunity to take up a less 'feminine' attitude, as if, outside their country, they can free themselves from the pressure of such social requirement.

Until recently, femininity in man has also been heavily repressed. As in *Samurai* society, the dread of effeminacy persists and results in, for example, the flourishing of the hostess bars. This might go some way to explaining the relative importance and respectability attached to *Kabuki* and *Noh*, compared to female theatrical efforts. The greater popularity of *Kabuki* and *Noh* compared with female theatre shows that there is a more urgent need for the former among the Japanese men. Similarly, in such a society, *Irezumi* may function as yet another form of cross-dressing. The feudalistic structure of contemporary Japanese society, a structure not inherently Japanese, might be less clearly visible on the whole, but *Yakuza* society contrives to exhibit this tendency intensely. If *Yakuza* culture is a symptomatic subculture, *Irezumi* materialises the need for compensation for the loss of inherent quality: the need for the retrieval of femininity, which is so severely repressed. Though the femininity of *Irezumi* tends to be overshadowed by the masculinity associated with the gruesome practice of tattooing, the certain existence of femininity in the male bearer reveals itself on the skin. The Shintoist harmony and balance of masculinity and femininity is somehow displayed there. It might be a sublimation of gender-crossing desire like *Kabuki*, but, unlike *Kabuki*, it seems to work not for the successful containment, but for the revelation, of such a desire. The disturbance caused by it seems more intense, maybe because of its corporeality, its permanence, and its concreteness. It demands to be looked at, and it would not fail to affect the looker.

### **Cultural Reciprocity**

I have tried to demonstrate the fluctuating states of subject/object of tattoo-bearers and the contradictory functions of tattoos, suggested by the case of Japanese *Irezumi*. The new generation of tattoo seems to be invested with a new power derived from the various stories told by each ancestor of the practice. Behind the *Irezumi*, for instance, there may be stories of its matriarchal past, lurking desire for sexual liberty, and the Shintoist faith in harmony for body and mind. It cannot be said whether the new tattoo community which has emerged creates an alternative society where the current oppressive system is defied completely, or rather, whether the community still functions according to the system it claims to subvert.

It may well be that the very fluctuation of the tattoo function between the subversive and the agent of oppression occurs along the lines of a Foucaultian discursive operation of dominant power. And yet, this does not necessarily have to mean that the

subordinate group is infiltrated by the power system in its attempts to sustain itself, a process which would effectively turn over the attempt at subversion.

As we have seen, the tattoo has a corporeal quality which resists easy appropriation, and it has a strong power to turn the bearer into something different: a power that might be derived from a non-Western tradition. As modern Westerners take on the tattoo, which has its own story to tell, they also take the story in to themselves and are transformed by it, perhaps in very subtle, but definite, ways.

Significantly, the more people who enter the practice, some casually and some committedly, the more visible and recognisable the community becomes, enabling the dissident power to permeate the dominant system. As I mentioned earlier, the increasing participation of women in this tattoo practice is significantly transforming the meaning of tattoo itself as a masculine manifesto. When women start to bear Japanese *Irezumi*, which is supposed to provide feminine protection for the masculine self, then a fundamental transformation of the meaning of *Irezumi* may become possible. Also, the casual bearers of the tattoo, who see tattoo as a fashion item, may themselves mark the shift of the mentality behind the practice. With the dissolution of the association of a particular class, sex, or occupation with tattooing practices, gender and class division might become less regulatory, if not altogether defied. As Sinfield argues, 'dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself.'<sup>45</sup> Even if the subculture now uses the same terminology which the dominant discourse uses for oppression, the different perspective offered in the subculture may invest a new connotation to the terms.

Very recently, a new generation of feminine boys have started to appear in Japanese cities. Whether this phenomenon will consolidate to create a substantial subculture is uncertain at the moment, although it seems to be a symptom of the way in which gender-division is loosening among the younger generations. One factor informing this change has been the effects of Western mass media on Japanese culture, including 'celebrity' figures such as David Beckham wearing a skirt, and 'Sporty Spice' showing her tattoo. Cultural influence is now reciprocal in the contemporary world, where one culture triggers a phenomenon in another culture, which in return influences the original culture. Traditionally *Irezumi* has been associated with underworld men in Japan, and it is still not acceptable for a woman to have her skin tattooed. Western society seems to exert a less regulatory gender-division, so that Western people's need for repression of gender is weaker, and they are more confident in their capacity for playful gender-crossing. When the Western appropriation of tattoo is re-introduced to Japan, however, the process may open up a whole new perspective on tattooing, one which might invest *Irezumi* with new sets of meaning. When Japanese women start to bear tattoos in a casual way, as Westerners do now, one may assume a drastic transformation in Japanese society.

#### Notes

- 1) DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, 2.

- 2) Benson, Susan, "Inscription of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America," in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000, 244–5.
- 3) *Ibid.*, 242.
- 4) DeMello, *Ibid.*, 4.
- 5) *Ibid.*, 6.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 4.
- 7) Benson, *Ibid.*, 242.
- 8) *Ibid.*, 242.
- 9) DeMello, *Ibid.*, 3.
- 10) Benson, *Ibid.*, 236.
- 11) *Ibid.*, 249.
- 12) *Ibid.*, 252.
- 13) *Ibid.*, 253.
- 14) Foucault, Michele, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. London: Penguin Books, 1979, 101.
- 15) Carter, Angela, *Heroes and Villains*. London: Penguin Books, 1969, 82.
- 16) Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 79. Butler argues that it is self-defeating to rely on the very stability and reproduction of the paternal law, if the law is sought to be displaced.
- 17) Carter, *Ibid.*, 113.
- 18) Carter, *Ibid.*, 86.
- 19) DeMello, *Ibid.*, 34–5.
- 20) Benson, *Ibid.*, 251.
- 21) Sinfield, Alan, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 31.
- 22) Koyama, Akira (ed.), *Nihon Dento Shisei (Japanese Traditional Tattoo)*. Tokyo: Koa Magazine, 2004, 120–1.
- 23) Carter, Angela, *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*. London: Virago, 1982, 33.
- 24) Carter, *Ibid.*, 33.
- 25) Carter, *Ibid.*, 28.
- 26) Carter, *Ibid.*, 46–7.
- 27) See Hoffmann, E. T. A., "The Sandman" in *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, trans. and ed. Ritchie Robertson. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1992, 85–118. (First published in German 1815.)
- 28) Butler, *Ibid.*, 9.
- 29) Carter, *Ibid.*, 35.
- 30) Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, 54.
- 31) Berger, *Ibid.*, 55.
- 32) Berger, *Ibid.*, 55.
- 33) Berger, *Ibid.*, 53.
- 34) Carter, *Ibid.*, 35.
- 35) Carter, *Ibid.*, 35–6. Ellipses mine.
- 36) Leupp, Gary P, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995, 38.
- 37) Leupp, *Ibid.*, 65.
- 38) Leupp, *Ibid.*, 46.
- 39) See, for example, Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1994, 33–4. (Originally published as *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930.)
- 40) Irigaray, Luce, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985, 171.
- 41) Irigaray, *Ibid.*, 193.
- 42) Butler, *Ibid.*, 137.
- 43) Dollimore, Jonathan, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991, 250.
- 44) Dollimore, *Ibid.*, 253.
- 45) Sinfield, *Ibid.*, 41.