IN THE SISTERHOOD OF SEDUCTION

by MELVIN KONNER

GEISHA
by Liza Crihfield Dalby
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From the sojourn of Franz Boas among the Eskimo, through Margaret Mead's much-maligned visit to Samoa, to Clifford Geertz's "thick description" of Balinese cockfights, the methodological watchword of cultural anthropology has been *participant observation*; to this day, the ethnologist seeks insight by living with, eating with, even identifying himself with, the subjects under study. To be sure, scientific objectivity has been a steady beacon. Boas, a physicist and geographer by education, had set out to study the properties of light. Even as this inquiry led him from the "hard" to the "soft" sciences—to the study of visual perception and, in turn, to the question of how perception shapes cognition and culture—he retained a faith in empiricism. Nonetheless, it was his belief, and that of his contemporaries and heirs, that an objective understanding of any human culture required an empathy with the humans in question. When the anthropologist considers the words of the Roman dramatist Terence—"Nothing human is alien to me"—it is not from the armchair of the philosopher but from the grass-thatched hamlet in the jungle.

Still, the luminaries of cultural anthropology, for all their dedication to participant observation, have rarely, if ever, tried to *become* the subjects they were studying. They have tasted the exotic foods, mastered the strange languages, and clapped and sung and danced in the arcane and marvelous rituals, but they have stopped short of changing their identities. Admitted misfits, in many cases, in their own cultures, they have nonetheless made no attempt to slough off the old skin and grow into some entirely new one.

Liza Dalby—or, as she came to be called, Ichigiku—did. She presented herself in the mid-1970s as a *maiko*, or geisha-in-training, at a respected Kyoto geisha house, and was accepted as such by her seniors. Dalby took on, and yet did not, all aspects of that role for a period of one year. The contradiction, of course, lies in the length of stay. She was fluent in Japanese from the beginning, and she trained diligently in all the graces of geisha culture—dress, coiffure, bearing, conversation, dance—and, more important, formed bonds with her teachers at a level of emotion and commitment far deeper than the merely professional. But she (and, to her credit, they) knew that she was there to conduct a study, and that she would complete her true vocational training not in their "flower and willow world" in Kyoto but at Stanford University, in California. More problematic, as the first Westerner ever to attempt to become a geisha, she gained a certain notoriety, and "was interviewed almost as often as [she] conducted interviews."

By moving so completely in and out of her two worlds, Dalby accentuated the natural tension between observation and participation. On the one hand, she is schooled in the ways of empirical analysis and, in fact, used questionnaires to quantify every aspect of the geisha's life from family background to future plans. On the other hand, the author of *Geisha* seems to have limited faith in the purist's scientific ideals: she dislikes the term "participant observation" because "it implies a degree of emotional distance that only creates a false sense of objectivity." In her case, objectivity was possible, if at all, only in retrospect. While in Japan, she says, "I was totally absorbed in learning to be a geisha."

The culture of the geisha arose out of legal prostitution by a most indirect route during the seventeenth century. The first geisha, oddly enough, were men—jesters and musicians who entertained in brothels. (The term itself is rendered as "artist," although "artiste" would seem to be closer to the mark.) The first known record of a female geisha is from 1751, and women gained steadily in popularity thereafter, replacing men by the turn of the nineteenth century. This new breed of geisha occupied a well-defined niche. Although the prostitutes (*yujo*) served men sexually, they were otherwise rather dull; geisha, by contrast, were easy in social intercourse: clever, friendly, and entertaining—in a word, fun. They were officially forbidden to compete for customers with prostitutes, and from that day to this the legal and cultural distinction between geisha and harlots has been clear.

Kitagawa Utamaro, Geisha Girls Dressed for a Niwaka, *c. 1791*

In practical terms, geisha, although they no longer work among prostitutes, are perfectly free to develop (and sooner or later do) sexual relationships with customers of their choosing. Maiko were traditionally initiated in a complex process that included a ritual deflowering at the hands of a client. A mature geisha may have a number of lovers and eventually become the "kept woman" of one, who is then expected to provide gifts of perfume and jewelry as tokens of a qualified commitment. In a few cases, marriage ensues. Thus, the aura of sexuality carefully cultivated at the formal geisha banquets is due not only to deftly rendered suggestive pleasantries but to realistic, if sometimes distant, possibilities. Some geisha, and some geisha houses, have rather loose reputations, but there is no market transaction, no overt quid pro quo; a knowledgeable man who merely wanted sex would not waste much time in geisha houses. What customers of geisha are looking for—and have been for two centuries—is sophisticated and entertaining companionship outside the confines of their frequently dull marriages.

From dress and hairstyle to musical performance and on to drunken flirtation, geisha have mastered a code replete with meaning for the men who buy their company. For example, their traditional kimono is *more* demure—less revealing—than the kimono other Japanese women wear on certain formal occasions, but by varying the width and stiffness of the sash, geisha can clearly convey to the sophisticated client almost any degree of prudish or wanton intent. As they play the *samisen*, a three-stringed, fretless, lutelike instrument that has long been a tool of the trade (geisha say, "If you have three strings, you can eat"), they may sing subtly suggestive or plainly sexual songs. In some cases, they do both:

If it's a shallow river
Lift your skirts up to your knees
But as the water deepens
Untie your sashes please.

My body flesh and hair is
Received from Mom and Dad,
But the one thing I don't show them
I'll show to you my lad.

Here is the essence of geisha culture: they are capable of the unabashed eroticism in the second stanza, but also of the beautiful indirection in the first. (The first stanza is in fact the refrain of the song, the symbolic note to which it keeps returning.) Just as no mere wife could exhibit the open suggestiveness of the verse, no mere harlot could presume to the high style of the refrain. For this unique and sophisticated eroticism, one must go to geisha.

There is more here than mere performance. Although geisha occasionally appear on stage, most of their entertaining is done at private parties and, as a result, is interactive. The geisha must assess a guest's willingness to join, however ineptly, in song, and make him feel artful. In conversation she must draw him out on subjects he would speak about with virtually no one else: memories of his own sexual and romantic education; exotic sexual techniques; the looseness of certain geisha less discriminating than those among whom he is dining. As a guest becomes increasingly drunk, the geisha must both encourage and control the behavior exhibited by Japanese males under the influence: giggling, slapstick, rather than witty humor, lewdness—a general picture of naughtiness and culturally sanctioned regression.

Geisha play a role that is not unfamiliar in other societies dominated by men: they are the women—actresses, singers, dancers, barmaids, cocktail waitresses, masseuses, call girls—who, although not suitable as the mother of one's children, provide more interesting company than one's wife. The culture of geisha institutionalizes this social role with a dignified tradition. The women who choose it, as Dalby shows, are almost always of an artistic bent and of higher-than-average intelligence, and they possess the discipline to learn and follow quite complex customs.

Above all, perhaps, and ironically, geisha are women who want autonomy from men. Without paying nearly as high a social price as a prostitute, a geisha liberates herself from the prospect of a life under the thumb of one man. She enters a sisterhood—indeed, a family, which is ruled, at least in the immediate sense, by women; those who run the geisha house are called "mothers," and the assignment of an "older sister" is made ceremoniously and with great and enduring seriousness. The geisha will associate with interesting, wealthy men, gain access to several channels of aesthetic expression, forge deep friendships with women, and have, more or less as she wants it, an outlet for her own sexuality. What others may gain from marriage—social status, financial security, a dependable network of relatives, a sense of belonging—she will in large part acquire by membership in the culture of geisha. Dalby tells the story of a woman whose two daughters grew up to be, respectively, a university professor and a geisha; the mother, who had wanted each of them to be, like herself, a good Japanese homemaker, was about equally disappointed in both. Yet both careers were quite logical choices for a Japanese woman of any talent or ambition. In the words of Kazue, a sixty-one-year-old geisha thinking back on her life, "My choice would be either to be born a man or be born a geisha." It is possible that in a society where women had equal rights, the appeal of geisha life would be nil.

Before the First World War, women were brought into the world of the geisha in or around their twelfth year, an age when there could be no question of choice. They were thereafter unlikely to be viewed as suitable wives, and their own, almost inevitably illegitimate, children would be destined for the same role or other roles with limited social mobility.

Politically, geisha were associated with both patriotism and modernism, a seeming contradiction. Other women viewed them as being in the vanguard of Western-inspired fashion; they led a trend, for example, in carrying manufactured parasols, and another in accepting jazz music. Yet they were also known for their loyalty to the emperor, and they consorted with men of power who supported him; by the 1930s, they were a visible part of the reactionary elite. Most men of prominence then frequented geisha, and a book filled with the reflections of customers, *The Geisha Reader*, was published in 1935. In it businessmen, politicians, intellectuals, and other men of stature gave advice to working geisha. "Anyone who thinks the occupation of geisha is a lowly one is mistaken," wrote a restaurateur. "Look at the word itself—a woman who lives by art. Think of this, you geisha, and take pride in yourselves. Don't fall in love with fickle characters." Another contributor, a poet, wrote, "There is much I have resented about Japan's feudal age, but in this case, I feel, the geisha of the past were more admirable than what we have now—they were not so quick to offer their bodies. Those geisha were creators of new forms of beauty, and they could match their customers in education, taste, and wit. Truly, they were 'comrades of the opposite sex.'" The very existence of such a collection left no doubt as to who must determine what geisha would be, and why: men, of course, but not just *any* men. The institution of geisha owes almost as much, historically, to the unequal distribution of wealth and power among males as it does to their enduring oppression of women.

As the Second World War approached, geisha switched from being leaders in fashion to being curators of tradition. Facing criticism for excessive modernism, and dependent on an increasingly conservative clientele, many reverted to the more reserved ways of their past. They became, almost deliberately, anachronistic. Since 1947, the age of the typical geisha has risen from the mid-twenties to the late thirties. Their numbers have dwindled to seventeen thousand nationally (after reaching eighty thousand in the 1920s), and the recruitment of new maiko, Dalby found, is now in a critical stage of difficulty. It seems likely that a small population of geisha will persist almost indefinitely, if only for nostalgic value. But one suspects that, in the long view of history, they will be seen as a vestige of the last phase of feudal and imperial life in Japan—two centuries of futile holding action against the rising tide of modernization.

This is all conveyed in a work that is at once a scientific treatise, a diary, and a scrapbook. Dalby's conventionally quantitative survey shows that the life of the geisha still yields considerable measures of happiness and self-esteem. And there is a handful of graphs—like the rest of the book, exceptionally attractive and well designed—depicting the shifting demographics of the geisha. But at least equally impressive and germane are the photographs and drawings of geisha dress and custom, the quotations from haiku and Japanese song, and Dalby's own sparkling prose, obviously influenced by that very poetry.

> *Tsuyu* [the rainy season] began with a crash of thunder and a sudden downpour. I woke up at 5:45 the morning of June 9 with rain dripping through my roof. . . .
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> Later in the morning after the skies had cleared, I noticed a single blue hydrangea in the cool, steamy garden of the Mitsuba. Flowerets had opened only at the edges of a head of tightly closed buds. By afternoon, torrents of rain were falling again. People said the rainy season that year had a rough, masculine temperament. A feminine tsuyu, I supposed, would have been one where soft rain drizzled without break, day after gray day.

This, of course, could have been written by someone practicing conventional anthropology. But in the following passage something more is in evidence, something that goes beyond sympathetic description:

> On one of those balmy late-April nights in 1978, a tendril of smoke drifted from the west bank of the Kamo River. Nobody noticed it issuing lazily from one of the closely spaced wooden buildings in the area where the geisha of Pontocho live and work. By four in the morning, a raging blaze had destroyed several houses. Distraught geisha clutched their cotton sleeping kimonos against the river breeze and splashed their roofs with buckets of river water in an effort to halt the spread of Japan's most feared natural catastrophe, fire. At daybreak, a dozen houses lay in smoldering ruins and one young geisha was dead.

What makes this passage so frightening is our knowing that its author could easily have been one of those distraught geisha clutching their kimonos. And when we learn that the dead woman had been Dalby's older sister in the fictive kinship order, the passage becomes a model of poignant understatement; it is all the more powerful for that, because we believe that the sisterly feeling was real.

That feeling may underlie Dalby's long *apologia pro geisha*. To the usual Western stereotype of servile entertainment for men, not far above prostitution—an image as enraging to feminists as it is titillating to male chauvinists—Dalby opposes the sympathetic descriptive eye of an ethnologist guided by cultural relativism. According to this, the fundamental tenet of anthropology, human cultures are neither good nor bad but various and valid; the anthropologist's mission is not to pass judgment on a culture but to see what binds it together and why it persists. Cultural relativism has gone hand in hand with participant observation since Boas's day, and in this book we see why: observed from within, cultural systems make sense; from Dalby's point of view, the rewards of being a geisha outweigh its costs, given the alternatives. Her book thus conveys the feeling of human coherence that comes almost uniquely from a good ethnography: that sense of a foreign world of experience first stuck and wriggling on a pin, but then brought forward steadily by a sensitive intelligence until it is within the embrace of sympathy. Complete objectivity (if indeed such a thing is possible) is a small price to pay for such a document.

Ichigiku's name, and those of her sisters, are descended from the word *ichiko*, or "shamaness." In ancient Japan, the ichiko was a woman who entered a trance by dancing, for the purpose of making magic. This derivation is altogether fitting, for if geisha are hypnotic to men, they also appear, in some ways, to hypnotize themselves—to dull their perception of the peripheral and ambiguous nature of their lives. The American Liza Dalby must have numbed some of her own political sensibilities to come up with such an appealing, even loving account of an institution set among heavy shadows. Yet the reader need not fall under the same spell. One of the most convincing arguments for Dalby's methodology is that we find in the text the means to distance ourselves from her perspective: we see the context of male chauvinism, the historical relationship to political reaction, the limited social options for geisha and their children, and, above everything, the occupational obligation to be endlessly tolerant of the most obnoxious male behavior. Although I detect in her book not a trace of righteous anger, Dalby's extraordinary empathy for her subjects makes us angry for them even as we admire them. ●

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