

Packaged Japaneseess: Weddings, Business and Brides. By Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni. ConsumAsiaN Book Series. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1997. 195 pages. Hardback £40.00.

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This book rests on the assumption that Japanese people have an overwhelming urge to state, restate, and interpret their cultural identity on any occasion. As the title suggests, the contemporary wedding is presented as an event in which the cultural meaning of being Japanese is metaphorically “packaged” in a series of symbolic ceremonies. Half of the argument is beyond reproach: Japanese weddings are indeed set packages of symbolism that cry out to be interpreted. In the case of the bride, who is the central figure in any wedding, the practice of wrapping and re-wrapping her in a sequence of sumptuous dresses throughout the ceremony makes the wrapping/packaging metaphor, borrowed here from Eyal Ben-Ari and Joy Hendry, especially appropriate.

But what exactly is being “packaged”? What is being symbolically presented in the events that Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni observed during her fieldwork at a bridal parlor in Kobe? At one level, a wedding is, of course, a rite of passage, symbolizing the transition from single to married status. Hence the candle and cake-cutting ceremonies, both of which entail the bride and groom jointly manipulating a single tool (candle lighter/knife). There are some obvious sexual nuances here, too. It is also a ceremony of alliance, bringing together two families whose members may never have met before and invoking friendly relations between them as they take turns to make speeches and gradually get drunk together. Respect for the older generation by the younger is also symbolized, in the “flower ceremony,” a highly charged moment in which the bride and groom present bouquets of flowers to their parents.

Goldstein-Gidoni drifts up against all these elements in the course of the book, but most of her effort is expended in the search for a higher level of symbolic meaning—and this is where trouble arises. In the last sentence of the book, for instance, we are told that people who buy weddings at bridal parlors are offered “a carefully packaged representation of their Japaneseess and sense of cultural identity, which they willingly purchase in their continuous attempt to imagine their world” (p. 159).

The question of *why* precisely people should want to have their Japaneseess represented to them on their wedding day is not discussed. Does it reflect some deep-seated insecurity, in which one needs constant reminding of one’s national identity? Or conversely, does it stem from a bullish nationalistic confidence that spills over into the wedding arena? At the very least it is an odd idea that requires justification.

I would argue that, in fact, being Japanese matters little to most brides, grooms, and guests. They do not need to be reminded of the fact any more than they need to be reminded that they are land-dwelling mammals. And if “Japaneseess” really is the key to the event, why should the bride swap her kimono for a European-style wedding gown halfway through the event?

The author makes a valiant attempt to present that white wedding gown as another aspect of Japaneseess—she calls it “Westernese” (Western-Japanese), in contrast with the “traditionese” (traditional-Japanese) symbolized by the kimono. But although one willingly accepts the point that both “Western” and “traditional” ele-

ments of the wedding are artificial constructs, it does not follow that in the contemporary situation they are equally “Japanese.” On the contrary, the bridal gown is worn precisely because it is *not* Japanese: it is a demonstration of cultural versatility.

The real theme is that of having it all. How about a splendid Japanese-style wedding? How about a splendid Western-style wedding? Better still, how about both? This, I believe, is the rationale that enables wedding parlors to sell two sets of symbolism to their customers.

Most of the time, Goldstein-Gidoni seems well aware of this. She makes several references to Thorstein Veblen’s classic work on conspicuous consumption, including his telling description of a woman as a servant who “puts in evidence her masters’ ability to pay” (p. 134). Surely that says it all. What is being “packaged” in these weddings is not Japaneseness, but wealth and status. The various kinds of kimono worn by the bride at the ceremonies are not really traditional Japanese clothing in the one-nation sense, but imitations of aristocratic court clothing. The *hakama* worn by the groom derives from the garb worn by low-ranking nobles of the Meiji era (p. 138). The Shinto ceremony favored by many couples is traced to the crown prince’s wedding of 1900, before which nobody seems to have used it (p. 136). The bride’s gown may be only vaguely “European” in terms of cultural reference, but it is unmistakably expensive. Even the allegedly “Western-style” party dresses hired and worn by the female guests “ape the gowns of the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie” (p. 42).

In short, Yanagita Kunio’s old theme of samurai customs being taken over by commoners and turned into shared “traditions” fits the international part of the wedding just as well as it fits the Japanese. There is a common thread of bourgeois fantasy running through all the trappings of the modern Japanese wedding, and if Goldstein-Gidoni had only put this theme at the center of the book, rather than toying with it at irregular intervals, we would have had a plausible, if not especially original, interpretation.

But, alas, because this is a book about Japan, and because the author shares the obsession of generations of writers on Japan with the mirage of “Japanese identity,” that mirage has to be put at the theoretical center of the book, and if it means arguing that nineteenth-century European ball gowns and plaster four-decker wedding cakes are all part and parcel of “Japaneseness,” then so be it. Goldstein-Gidoni quotes, but fails to absorb, the altogether more plausible position put by Marilyn Ivy: “The seemingly indiscriminate cultural mixing and matching that some have taken as a hallmark of contemporary Japan becomes, in the global postmodern situation, the simple prerogative of an affluent nation” (p. 155). It is that simple affluence which is supposed to be conveyed by Japanese weddings, not some kind of national cultural identity.

Herein lies the irony of the Japanese wedding, for in practice, “having it all” means having nothing at all. As the author points out (p. 26), the bride’s frequent changes of clothing and ceremonial entrances and exits mean that she is in fact absent for most of the reception. She does not hear the speeches made in her honor, she has no time to eat the elaborate celebratory foods laid before her. Moreover, some of the clothing she has to wear is so heavy and constricting as to cause her physical suffering (p. 20). For her it is a day to endure (pp. 25–26), perhaps to demonstrate her ability and willingness to endure the married life to come.

Again, each wedding must be finished in two hours flat, so that the parlor can generate maximum profit from the peak earning period of spring and autumn weekends. Even as the parents of the bride and groom are accepting bouquets and applause in a tearful climax of sentiment, the excessively polite master of ceremonies is waiting for the right moment to lead them away so that the party fretting in the anteroom can be admitted and the next welter of emotion can get underway. The slow and stately rhythm of the rituals enacted at the wedding contrast poignantly with the brisk, conveyor-belt efficiency of the parlor's backstage management. Goldstein-Gidoni is at her best when observing that backstage world and revealing the hidden structure of the wedding industry. The "total service" supplied by the wedding parlor proves to be the outcome of a complex hierarchy of specialized subcontractors, some of whom are actually in intense competition with each other, a fact the customer never notices. One longs for more of this kind of institutional analysis and less about "Japaneseness."

Japaneseness is of course a part of any Japanese person's identity. But most of the time it is taken as given, as being in common with everyone else. In everyday life, things such as kinship, friendship, age, class, status, income, workplace, education, place of origin, and regional affiliation are of far more pressing concern. Japanese only become self-conscious about their national identity when they meet foreigners, and I believe that this understandable tendency has led many foreign anthropologists and sociologists to vastly exaggerate the importance of nationhood in the composition of Japanese identity. While Goldstein-Gidoni has a postmodern awareness of the complexity and artifice involved in the construction of the category "Japanese," she still persists in overstating its significance in people's identity. The result might be described as postmodernist Nihonjinron.