



Tokyo

by Mark McLelland

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Edo (as Tokyo was previously known) was the seat of political power under the Tokugawa shoguns from 1603 to 1868 when it was renamed Tokyo (Eastern Capital). Edo/Tokyo has long been an enormous metropolis--by the middle of the eighteenth century it housed a population of over 1.2 million, and today over 12 million people call it home.

As Japan's military capital, Edo was inhabited by large numbers of samurai and their retainers among whom *nanshoku* or "male eroticism" was openly practiced. Another site for the expression of male-male sexuality was the Kabuki theater. Since women were banned from performing on the stage, all roles were played by male actors, and the *onnagata* or female-role players were courted for sexual favors by both men and women. Apprentice *onnagata*, known as *kage*, also plied their trade as transgendered prostitutes in tea shops located in the theater districts.

However, after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, newly imported sexological ideas pathologizing "perverse desires" meant that same-sex eroticism could not be openly practiced, although continuing scandals surrounding the Kabuki theater and students at Tokyo's military academies suggest that homosexual desire continued to be expressed in these environments well into the 1920s.

Japan's descent into militarism in the 1930s was accompanied by an ideology emphasizing heterosexual reproduction as a patriotic duty. As a result, homosexual practice retreated further underground.

Yet, as also happened in Western nations, the mass mobilization of troops occasioned by World War II made it possible for men from all over Japan with homosexual inclinations to mix together.

Soon after the war, Tokyo saw the rebirth of a lively homosexual subculture, originally springing up in cruising spots such as Ueno and Hibiya parks, where *dansho*, or cross-dressed male prostitutes, plied their trade. During the early 1950s a growing number of coffee shops and bars frequented by gay men sprang up in the old red light and theater districts. Yukio Mishima describes this emerging gay scene in his novel *Forbidden Colors [Kinjiki]*, first published in 1952.

Since the criminal code contained no mention of male-male sex, these meeting places were largely ignored by the police, and their number increased unhindered throughout the 1950s. Comparatively lax censorship laws also made it possible for a genre of "perverse magazines" to discuss a range of sexual behaviors, including male homosexuality, and these magazines often carried reports on the capital's gay bars and cruise spots, making them easier to locate.

The bars were small, hole-in-the-wall joints staffed by a *mama* (usually a cross-dresser) and a team of "gay boys" (*gei boi*) who were often, to varying degrees, transgendered. Although the customers in the bars might also develop relationships with each other, much of the sexual interaction went on between the gay boys and the customers.



A street scene in Tokyo's Shinjuku district, a center of gay nightlife. Copyright © 2005 David Monniaux. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

In 1957 prostitution was made illegal in Japan, and many of Tokyo's brothels were forced to close down. As the brothels moved out of the red-light areas, gay men moved in, taking advantage of the cheap real estate and establishing their own bars and meeting places. From this time Shinjuku Ni-Chome emerged as Tokyo's main center for male homosexual socializing. By the early 1960s there were estimated to be over 100 gay bars in Shinjuku and other former red-light districts in Shimbashi, Ueno and Asakusa, employing a staff of over 400 gay boys.

The early 1960s also saw the development of a few bars for same-sex desiring women. Like the gay bars, the women's bars were also patterned on a transgender model, and were staffed by cross-dressed women known as "brother girls" and *danso* (male dressers) who served as bartenders and "hosts" for a mainly female clientele.

Also popular throughout the 1960s were cabaret acts in which male-to-female transsexuals performed as singers, dancers, and strippers. Known as "blue boys," these entertainers had been strongly influenced by the French transgender cabaret Le Carrousel de Paris, which toured Japan in 1963.

Today, Tokyo is home to a vast entertainment world known as the *mizu shobai* or "water trade," which supports hundreds of venues for individuals with diverse sexual and gender identities and interests, including an estimated 200 gay bars in Shinjuku Ni-Chome alone. These include bars and clubs that cater to gender-normative gay men as well as transgendered gay men and gay and straight cross-dressers, and transsexual cabarets and clubs that cater to a clientele of straight "tourists." Bars for lesbians and transgender women are, however, still comparatively rare.

A popular development since the mid-1980s has been the holding of separate club nights for gay men and lesbians at major Tokyo discos, although Tokyo has yet to develop permanent large-scale mixed venues like those that exist in many Western cities. The mid-1980s also saw the development of increased gay and lesbian activism in Japan, although because of regional differences, the relationship between groups centered in Tokyo and Japan's second city, Osaka, were not always harmonious.

Since 1994, Tokyo has also been the venue for annual gay and lesbian parades that attract large crowds of participants and onlookers. However, Tokyo is not the only city in Japan with a longstanding gay scene: Osaka, Japan's ancient commercial capital, has a strong tradition of gay culture; and recently Sapporo has emerged as a lively center of lesbian and gay culture and activism.

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