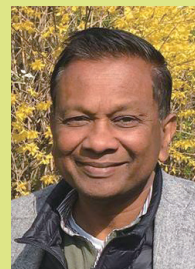


## Hachioji Geisha During the Corona Pandemic

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### The Geisha World & the Pandemic Crisis

The geisha world or *karyukai* has been hit hard by the corona pandemic of 2020. Their income has been reduced to zero. There is a feeling of confusion, followed by tiredness and a sense of loss. Will Japan's centuries-old hospitality culture of *omotenashi* vanish like dewdrops in the sun? Will the appreciation of the beauty of cherry blossoms and aesthetic skills that hark back to the Heian Era be lost to posterity? Unlike their ancestors, geisha join the profession not due to poverty but because of their love for the calling. Will poverty once again hound them and force them to abandon their profession? The five *geiko kagai*, or entertainment areas, of Kyoto will be protected by its vast patron network and the government. But what will happen to other *hanamachi* in Tokyo like Hachioji and Asakusa? Those who love fine arts, both in Japan and abroad, will hope that traditions can be preserved in these difficult times.

### The Geisha Tradition

Japan's unique geisha traditions date back many centuries. Sixteenth-century Japan created pleasure quarters for men to engage with courtesans, or *yujo*. Among these courtesans, the most accomplished actress was called the *tayū* who performed unconventional dances called *kabuku* by the riverside stages in Kyoto. Many nubile dancing girls travelled around big cities with their groups, performing their craft. As late as the 20th century the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Yasunari Kawabata celebrated the beauty of

adolescent dancers in his novel *Izu no Odoriko* (1924). But Kawabata's middle-class prejudice forced his Tokyo University protagonist to give up his feeling for the dancer and return home. The *tayū* theater of the past evolved into the kabuki theater of our times. Within 200 years the geisha traditions became a

reservoir of performing arts, dance, song, music, poetry and calligraphy (Photo 1).

### Geisha Megumi in Hachioji

Geisha Megumi who runs lodging houses or *okiya* for about 21 young girls or *geiko* in Nakacho in Tokyo's Hachioji district is heir to these great traditions. She says she is "determined to secure the *karyukai* and make it move ahead". Megumi was born in 1962 and when she was 22 she came into contact with Taiko, who was the chairwoman of the Hachioji *Geigi Kumiaiye*, or Hachioji Geisha Association representing 19 geisha houses. Taiko was a charismatic person and Megumi was full of admiration for her abilities. Taiko convinced Megumi to join the profession and in 1983 Megumi joined the Hachioji *karyukai*. Though her father was against her joining a profession which lacked social respect, Megumi was convinced that it was a profession she could dedicate her life to. The moment she joined she assiduously set herself to work on the rebuilding of the Hachioji *karyukai* which had become quite inactive. For two decades she worked relentlessly to train herself and many young girls who had joined the profession with starry-eyed optimism. She worked for many hours on playing the Japanese harp or *koto* till her fingers bled. When her father saw her working so diligently his attitude towards her profession changed (Photos 2 & 3).

After two decades Megumi opened her own *okiya* called Yukinoe in Hachioji. A personal *okiya* for a geisha means she has arrived in the world of *karyukai*. An *okiya* is a lodging house for geisha and *geiko*

Photo 1: Mukesh Williams



Geisha dance

Photo 2: Mukesh Williams



Yukinoe entrance

Photo 3: Mukesh Williams



Megumi with her mother

Photo 4: Mukesh Williams



Megumi with her tea ceremony teacher, Kimie Iwasawa

which is usually owned by the woman paying for their training. Though Megumi's financial loans for the purchase and construction of the *okiya* remain to be paid back fully, she feels confident that she now has a place where she can work as an instructor of geisha trainees (*hangyoku*) and a hostess-

owner (*okami*) for the rest of her life. It took a lot of ingenuity and planning for Megumi to become independent.

Megumi embodies the finest qualities as a human being, instructor and hostess-owner. She is the quintessence of *omotenashi*. She plays the shamisen and composes her own songs. Her young students not only respect her as a teacher but love her as an *okami*. Apart from many other aspects of hospitality, Megumi teaches them the boundaries to be maintained with customers and society. The traditional business community of yesteryear knew how to maintain the boundaries between interaction and intimacy. Modern society has lost this delicate nuance. It is more difficult to maintain the gap between passion and politeness. Over the centuries the concept of *omotenashi* has acquired new meaning (Photo 4).

## Contemporary Geisha World

Geisha Megumi points out that the “pleasure of the night” symbolized by the old geisha world have given way to the “politeness and cleanliness” of our contemporary world. The tradition of the *kagai* combines five different kinds of architectures: the physical architecture of rooms and *kaburenjo* (lesson studio for geisha), the kinesthetic architecture of the tea ceremony, the symbolic architecture of *kado* (flower arrangement), the psychological architecture of social behavior, and the aesthetic architecture of dance and song. Of these, the psychological and aesthetic architectures play a significant role in survival and dissemination (Photo 5).

Megumi believes that a strong psychological architecture creates a strong human network to support the aesthetic goals of the geisha tradition. The geisha world depends on social appreciation and support. In the past girls were sold into the profession by their families to pay off debts. The geisha entertained men at a party, banquet or ceremony. The phantoms of the old world continue to haunt the image of

Photo 5: Mukesh Williams



Tea ceremony Tokonoma

geisha even today. The old world has gone and together with it its financial urgencies.

Megumi has reimagined the image of geisha as clean and professional. She gives greater emphasis to self-development, self-learning and globalization. The students who study manage to speak English. She is taking English lessons to understand the larger international world. She uses the geisha stage or *kaburenjo* with her students to connect with the local citizens, school children, hospital patients and international students of Hachioji. She invites them on stage to join them in song and dance and shares history lessons of their trade. Megumi uses creative avenues like hotels, railway stations and concert halls to attract people. The neighborhood of Nakacho in Hachioji brings together all these different architectures. She believes that the old tradition of the geisha world needs to survive in the modern world through “creative ways”.

The postwar realignment of trade in Hachioji had a negative effect on geisha business. With the decline of the silk industry in the 1960s and the oil shock of the 1970s people did not want to spend money on geisha. Competition with service and IT industries further reduced the power of geisha. Though the *okiya* and *ryotei*, or traditional Japanese restaurants, survived young girls did not see any future in becoming a geisha. From 215 geisha in 1916, Hachioji has around 21 today.

The ideal world of hospitality and politeness rubs against the real world of earning a regular income. The income of geisha is irregular. It depends on the events they do on a daily basis. They get paid when they are called to do a job. But expenses such as hiring kimono, buying make-up and eating must be incurred on a daily basis. Their social insurance is almost negligible. They have some security through the pension system, or *hangyoku*, but its terms and conditions differ from *okiya* to *okiya*. It is not so much for money but the love of the profession that they become geisha.

## What Has the Pandemic Brought to the Geisha World?

The pandemic was both a moment of reckoning and innovation for Geisha Megumi. When Covid-19 hit Japan in March 2020 the geisha world collapsed. Postponement of events organized by the *okiya* began to happen in May. Megumi became tired of writing letters of apology for the cancellation of events. Her immediate goal to provide entertainment to society became “shaky”. As a leader she became worried about “how to encourage” those who were with her. But she had never faced a situation in her life when she did not have a plan, and as business came to a standstill, she got busy “organizing things” in her house. By organizing things, she felt she was organizing her life. She realized that in the hustle and bustle of daily life she sometimes forgot the basics of her craft. The state of emergency in Tokyo taught Megumi how “to return to the basics of learning” like practicing the shamisen, Japanese song and dance.

She remains hopeful. She has taken recourse in digital technology

to reach out to her audience. She is focused on doing the *odori* in the fall next year. She has gone online using Facebook, YouTube and digital videos. She created a video of her work which was selected in the Encouragement to Art Performance. Megumi has realized that the pandemic has made her “reconfirm bonding with others”. She believes that “Online business holds promise but just doing an online *nomikai* (drinking party) is not enough. We must follow the fundamentals of geisha aesthetics and tradition.”

Megumi has not lost her long-term goal of introducing people to the beautiful world of *karyukai*. She wants people to participate in the world of *omotenashi*. Though the geisha houses have received some money from the government allocated for private entrepreneurs, business is not as usual. Their restaurant opened in June, but it is not possible to hold large parties. Megumi says she is somehow managing the business and trying to pay mortgages. Though these are real aspects of life, she believes the “dignity and pride” of the geisha world should not be “compromised”.

### Dignity & Pride of the Geisha World

The geisha’s aesthetic skills represent a unique Japanese tradition. The dances and music performed by geisha are a symbol of their dignity and pride. We can rarely see today these traditional Japanese dances performed with the shamisen except on the stage of a Kabuki play or geisha performance. Kabuki actors are also worrying about the impact of the pandemic on their art. Their dances to the music of the shamisen reflect the Japanese feeling for transient beauty. The young and beautiful women dancing in magnificent kimono, even though played by male actors, represent the Japanese belief that authentic beauty is short-lived. This aesthetic is also seen in their affection for cherry blossoms in full bloom for only a week or so and falling off shortly. However unusual it may be to observe these traditional performances in a modernized Japan, it is important to protect this aspect of Japanese cultural identity, just as in any other nation cherishing its traditions and long history.

The dignity and pride of geisha in their distinctive aesthetics would, if lost, be a huge detriment to Japan’s traditional identity. What has been attracting people from all over the world visiting Japan or permanent workers here is mainly Japanese traditional culture visually expressed rather than its modern society, industries, and convenient lifestyle. Besides Japanese classical dance and music, old prints and paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries called *ukiyo-e* often depicting geisha and Kabuki actors, or classical films of the 1940s and 1950s are also in this category of Japanese culture. Even today, the extraordinary popularity of animation tells us that Japanese pride and dignity exist in those visual arts.

Perhaps this is the last chance for Geisha Megumi to preserve the geisha identity. Her efforts to maintain their performances during the pandemic are important for all those who love traditional Japanese culture. Through her efforts to show their dances and musical

performance online, she needs to convince her audience of the importance of Japanese cultural identity.

Megumi wants to create a viable future for geisha by training young enthusiasts. Educating young apprentices to be full-fledged geisha is more important than ever in order to transmit this cultural inheritance to future generations, since in the pandemic it is difficult to have long face-to-face practice and lessons for them. She is, however, optimistic about it. Today, the young apprentices do not know even how to sit straight on a tatami mat which is the most basic art of a geisha. But she enjoys her conversations with them, and finds hope among those who do not know anything but want to move forward with their lives.

Even though Megumi often meets her old customers online, she misses face-to-face encounters with them. In Hachioji, there are groups of business people who have supported the geisha community for decades. Online meetings are certainly convenient, but the art of geisha and their hospitality can only be fully appreciated by face-to-face encounters. She looks forward to seeing those old customers again in person and restoring warm human relations and friendships after the pandemic is over.

Megumi also misses the opportunity to give performances for non-Japanese customers. As Hachioji is located close to a US military base, there have been some old American customers as well as customers from other nations. She has presented some performances on YouTube and this has prompted some artists to collaborate with her in joint musical performances. She hopes to organize an event of dance and music in May this year in collaboration with some other traditional arts and dance communities. This will be called “Hachioji Odori” and will not be online but real. She sincerely hopes this can be done.

We are all aware that theater, music, art, and literature possess the power to enrich our lives. It is possible to say that those who practice these fine arts are essential for our survival and worthy of our praise. The geisha belongs to such a world. The performers of such cultural activities devote their lives to preserving their craft with dignity and they must be rewarded for their efforts. In these difficult times we must help the geisha tradition to survive with whatever means of encouragement we have at our disposal.

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