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Iki : Aesthetics of Impossible Pleasure

“Iki” no kōzō or translated as The Structure of “Iki” is a noteworthy work of Japanese literature written by Kuki Shuzo, a prominent Japanese scholar in western philosophy. The book analyses a Japanese aesthetic ideal called “iki”. Although iki is usually translated as chic, its definition and sensibility is way more complicated and ethnically interconnected to be boiled down to one simple adjective. Kuki Shuzo (Here on Kuki) discusses the sensibility of iki, trying to convey his gaijin readers a tenuous understanding of what otherwise would be an obscure concept to the outsiders. Although Kuki is a Taisho period scholar, iki is a mode of being that is strictly particular to the urban lifestyle of “middle to lower class Edo townspeople” (Yamamoto 1). In a nostalgic longing to what he feared to be lost with the westernization that Japan experienced after the end of its national

seclusion policy at the end of the Tokugawa Period (Bellah 22), Kuki tries to make this work a reference book for reminding a forgotten traditional Japanese aesthetic value to both his nation and western civilizations. Although “Iki” no kōzō might be structured to analyze an ethnical concept of a particular time and place, it is gripping to see how Kuki exemplifies and discusses qualities of Iki that is observable in my modern daily life - although in different forms and conditions. Understanding an iki mode of being and possessing an iki sensibility is something that would be as valuable today as it was in the pleasure quarters of 19th century Edo.

What made me choose “Iki” no kōzō as the subject of analysis for the final paper was seeing few of Suzuki Harunobu’s woodblock prints. What is interesting about Suzuki’s work is not only the pictorial characteristic of his paintings but his general aesthetic style: Ukiyo-e. Translated as floating world or floating world paintings, the general sensibility of decadence that Ukiyo-e adopts, shares the same origins with the iki sensibility. Ukiyo-e artist makes the expression of hedonistic activates not a taboo but a primary subject to their artworks. They are known to picture erotically explicit scenes of pleasure, representing the dominant lifestyle of brothels in the Tokugawa Period. In order to make the relationship between Ukiyo-e and iki clear, it is important to discuss the historical context that Ukiyo-e was adopted as a popular art form. Since it happens to be the same context that iki being and deportment flourished. Since everything discussing what iki

is or what *iki* is not adds up to the reinforcement of some main building blocks of Japanese culture, a short historical biography makes the analysis of the structure of Kuki's book meaningful. In Tokugawa Era (1615 – 1868), Tokugawa Government ruled with the newly centered capital Edo (Bell 18) and with strict military control and foreign isolationist policies. As Edo started to form new rules of urban lifestyle, the changing social-economic values altered the “class-bound cultural distinctions” (Nam-Lin 136) putting commoners like merchants or *rōnin* into positions of cultural determinants. It is natural for a sub-population with no means of representation to channel out their inner spirituality to be bogged in a mire of desperation. Combined with the understanding of ever-present notions of transience and evanescence, what 19th century townsmen gets from this desperation is a constant mode of sadness. Choosing hedonism and decadence becomes the perfect antidote for this desperation that is actually a sort of Motoori Norinaga's *mono no aware*. Decadence in the context of Tokugawa era is associated with the “delight that comes from the certain manifestations of decay” (Weir 122) and this decay gets to find its outlet in the pleasure quarters where stimulant of amorous tendencies proves to be the best distraction from the jitters of constant change. These marginalized locations don't just become the subjects of Ukiyo-e paintings but they turn into petridishes for new modes of self-expression. “*Iki*” no *kōzō* introduces *iki* as a new mode of being that can only be understood through various examples. It can be traced in

the erotic relationship between a courtesan and her visitor or it can be found in the physical details of a woman's countenance. Iki can be basically defined as a "word of taste" (Bell 30), yet it has a heavy erotic aspect that helps Kuki to show the nature of eroticism in the Japanese identity. Although I first thought understanding iki would only mean understanding a certain artistic movement like some version of Ukiyo-e. Iki branches out to relate deeper with multiple aspects of Japanese essence. Discussing Kuki's iki in the context of Japanese culture is to me like killing many birds with one stone, connecting Bushido, Zen Buddhism, with the value of evanescence and form.

"Iki" no kōzō is not a work that should be read, disregarding its author's biography. Kuki is the son of a high rank ministry officer, Kuki Ryūichi, who worked on the matters related with the traditional Japanese art. His mother is discussed with a controversial love affair and her background in pleasure quarters (Pincus 24). His familiar background might give few ideas about why he is known infamously with his predilection to his pleasure outings and carousings (Pincus 26). Kuki doesn't write about demimonde as a passive observer because he writes actually as a member of the demimonde. Being born and raised in the "cultural cosmopolitanism" (Pincus 26) of the Taisho period, he did not experience pre-modernized Japan. Yet reading his biography from various sources, it is possible to get a generalized opinion about how his conception of western changes after a decade he spends in Europe where he had many opportunities to contact prominent western

philosophers like Sartre, Husserl or Heidegger. Even though he is always known to be a great admirer of western philosophical thought and western philosophers, he has a firm stance about the Japan's excellence over any other nation. In another writing he comments on the Japan he returns to: "Every aspect of our life is tainted by the west, a condition commonly believed to be as modern" (Kuki Shuzo zenshu) and with a throbbing push of nostalgia, he publishes "Iki no kōzō", a work that is praised as well as criticized out of reasons like being a pushy and somewhat improvisational attempt to "seek the forgotten being of the modern world in the aesthetic way of life of the nineteenth century" (Karatani 623). In my struggle to understand iki in isolation with the philosophical aspect that I lack the full grasp of, cultural and literary examples set the scope of my discussion.

Kuki structures his book into six chapters and in his introduction; he discusses the impossibility of actually translating the full meaning of iki. Next chapter, "The intentional structure of iki", discusses iki as a mode of being, discussing what iki means when used in contexts such as "an iki woman", "an iki matter"? Iki is said to exist in the relationship between heterogeneous sexes. It is felt through the interaction and it is more like a quality that engenders intense "sexual tension" among sexes. Yet to make an erotic interaction, a woman iki, having sexual tension is not enough. Iki is discussed to be indigenous to the local conditions of Edo in the 19th century. As a person who experienced "modern" brothels in Japan as well as in many different

European capitals, Kuki's yearning is not only for lost values of general Japan's history but it is also probably for the yearning for a lost aura of the geisha that is absent in the modern life. In this discussion, what I might discard as a commoditized sexual experience today was once seen as a bewitching, valuable experience that had put the geisha into a position of great respect. What Kuki describes in "Iki" no kōzō is an aesthetic of pleasure that can be possessed only by following a set of formal rules and with the presence of a certain degree of impossibility that prevents one from enjoying that pleasure.

Although iki can be abstractly discussed as "a mode of being", "a sensibility", "an aura", it has more concretely perceivable forms of representation. For example iki may also be found in the plucky, urbane stylishness of the courtesan's attire when she dresses without any exaggeration -yet still in modest and revealing way. In the chapter "Extensional structure of iki" Kuki discusses the three critical attributes of iki: bitai (coquetry), akimare (resignation), ikiji (pride or spirit). These three moments of iki (Pincus 120) are qualities that relate directly with the values that are building blocks to the Japanese identity. Bitai translated as *coquetry* or better known as *flirtation* is the material cause for iki, whereas pride and resignation are its formal causes. Being combined with akimare and ikiji, coquetry of the iki behavior sets itself separate from any other forms of flirtation that is widely associated with prostitutes or simply the kind of innocent flirtation that we, as college kids, would know. Ikiji (spirit) found in the iki sensibility comes from

the Confucian moment of honor that is also the source of the Bushido (The Way of Samurai), a classical work of Japanese that studies the way of the samurai. Similarly *akimare* (resignation) comes from the Buddhist moment of renunciation where worldly life and possessions are rendered meaningless in acceptance of the evanescent nature of life. Although it is not expected for a term used referring to the dynamics of Edo townspeople's sexual flings to carry such principal bases. One gets to understand that the fact that *iki* has such strong values to form its quality, makes it a sensibility that can stand the time and be relevant to many generations. Although Kuki only devotes his second chapter to the discussion of *iki* as a deportment flirtatious department, I would like to deeper discuss how multiple attributes sets the condition of the *iki* presences.

First attribute and the most prominent one discussed is coquetry (*bitai*) . When we take the courtesan and her behaviors as our primary example for the presence of *iki* demeanor, my modern understanding of the gratis flirting courtesan gets supplanted with the Edo courtesan who plays hard to get. The pleasure is neither easy to access nor it can actually be bought off. Yet I can't help but wonder, if it isn't the easiness that makes a prostitute charming or preferable, what is it? According to Kuki, in the locality of Edo pleasure houses, what makes a courtesan's behavior *iki* and thus bewitchingly desirable is the impossibility of courtesan's love. Kuki discusses this as a relational quality. "Proximity increases the intensity of coquetry... The essence of

coquetry is whilst approaching as far as the distance allows, the difference in distance does not reach extreme limits” (17). Which is to say that while the proximity between a man and a woman infinitely draws closer, they can never be united. In here what makes this seemingly impossible interaction an *iki* matter is the evanescence found in the *iki* sensibility. Such an impossible relationship only becomes possible “because of its infinite change” (Tanaka 332). Tanaka Kyubin argues in his work upon the history of Japanese aesthetics that the pleasure that comes from *iki* is a pleasure that one can take from the changing nature of relationships between the opposite sexes. As long as one follows the rules in the game, the strictly structured form of the *iki* sensibility, one can have many different bodies; yet experience the affection in the equally intense way. That’s why the interaction between a courtesan and her visitor is a valuable one in the 19th century Edo, unlike that of the Western. Although faces change, the dynamic of the interaction never fails to create the “light, refreshed and stylish mood” (Tanaka 333) that can be re-experienced. That’s why Kuki discusses *iki* as a sort of purposeless play, “coquetry for the sake of coquetry” (123), *iki* sensibility accepts change and instead of fighting with it, it utilizes it into an aesthetic of pleasure.

What Kuki defines as the coquetry found in *iki* behavior is concerned with “keeping the possibility of possibility yet never

allowing it to go beyond more than being a possibility. This resembles to making a horse run by putting a stick with a carrot hanging on the tip. In his discussion of coquetry as the purposeless impossibility, Kuki refers to Zeno's famous paradox, Achilles and Tortoise, as an example to the impossible duality of the *bitai*. The first time I've learned about the infinite inability of Achilles to catch up with the Tortoise was for a class I've taken on postmodernism and film, when I also read about French physcoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theories on the subject of impossible desire. According to Lacan the most intense form of desire can be obtained when sexual gratification is left unsatisfied or the object of desire is kept unreachable, impossible. He objectifies this impossible subject as the *objet-petit a* (unreachable objects of desire) and in Kuki's discussion, courtesans of Edo, who constantly try to preserve a ever decreasing yet never getting there kind of a relationship with their visitors, become the perfect instances of *objet-petit a*. Although this relation may be out of context, it is again a small example of how Kuki's analysis is saturated heavily with a western way of thinking. Again after discussing coquetry as the material cause of *iki*, its formal causes must be mentioned as an explanation of how a courtesan can manage to keep the interaction limited to relational. The formal causes of *iki*, resignation and spirit, grounds for this willpower.

Akimare (resignation) as an attribute of *iki* behavior can be traced back to the Buddhist notions of resignation. A courtesan, who has experienced much through her various interactions with many

different men, has resignedly accepted the transience of things and this acceptance - or sadness within- reflects outside through her subdued and alluring behavior. “Resignation comes from the acute awareness of either change or form” (Inouye, 159), and a prostitute’s resignation is not much different from the detached and calm acceptance of Buddhist resignation. Kuki’s quotation from Yuguri “people’s hearts are like the Asuka river- to change is the habitude of profession” is equally fitting to the lament of the courtesan, as it is when used to mourn Buddhist practices in Murasaki Shikibu’s Tale of the Genji. If iki’s origins comes from “the world of suffering” (Inouye, 70), in order to possess the urbane chicness of iki, one must have experienced enough suffering. After seeing the higher order or experiencing pain, courtesan neither gets easily carried away by the sweet words of love nor she cares about the trifling issues of womanhood like appearing attractive to men. Yet this indifference itself is what ironically makes her attractive. It is funny how the traces how Buddhist resignation can be also found in my daily interactions with people. The importance we give to being “chill” in my environment might be evaluated as a distant projection of iki demeanor in 21st century college context. Even today it is known that “chill” attracts men, as iki does. Although it is not actively observed in the Taisho Period when modernization severed once much valued connection with nature, Buddhism Kuki traces in iki shows how the traditional Japanese is still active part of the Edo sensibility,. Iki sensibility puts a serious obligation on woman’s part to practice

abstinence and regulation. This form requirement is associated by the third and last attribute Kuki listed: *ikiji* or the brave composure.

Iki is a “moral ideal” of the Edo culture, which “compromises the spirit of Edoite”. Kuki emphasizes the value of chivalry in the Edo landscape and this chivalry is also discussed as an inherent part of the *iki* sensibility. What Kuki discusses as *ikiji* or the spirit comes from the Confucian ideals that are a source of inspiration for Nitobe’s *Bushido*, the way of the samurai. Although I’ve read *Bushido* keeping an image of an adamant warrior in mind, thinking back with Kuki’s description of geisha with a man’s will, I see much resemblance in the code both a prostitute with *iki* and a honest samurai live by. A morally ethical prostitute is not an oxymoron in Kuki’s Edo as it might be in my modern western context. In order to have *iki*, courtesan should follow a “a common standard of behavior” (*Bushido* 37) like samurai who should abide the rules of his code. Like the courtesan and the samurai, Nitobe and Kuki share a common characteristic: They both try to position their values in juxtaposition with western differences. *Ikuji* the fearless pride or the spirit “is a legacy of the bushido ethos” (Pincus 227) inherited to the women of Edo pleasure quarters. “*Iki*” no *kôzô* is like a *Bushido* version of a code enumerating the rules of how to be attractive to the opposite gender. For instance *Bushido*’s self-control requires the samurai not to “mar the pleasure or serenity of another by expression of [their] sorrow or pain (Nitobe 99)” is also a demeanor of the courtesan. It is this control that gives her seemingly “playful

bravado” or the cool disposition. A woman with iki has to keep her mono no aware bottled up still this doesn’t mean that she should not act as cheerful or showy as to repel a man. “Iki is not only coquetry but also the consciousness which had the strength to show the resistance to different sex” (23). Discussing what iki is and what iki is not in this context, I find Saikuku’s character in “The Women Who Spent Her Life in Love” as an appropriate example of a woman who lacks iki. He tells the story of an old woman living in hermitage, although she once had a position of high respect as she was a courtesan of pleasure quarters, her inability to say no to her pleasures causes her dismay. She lacks iki not only because she is dressed in a gaudy kimono with a pattern of double chrysanthemum but also because she lacks control and moderation. Her habit in overindulging herself in the worldly pleasures is what precipitates her lonely death. In this context although I comprehend how iki embodies the Confucian benevolence and exemplifies another important tenet of Japanese culture within its mode, I can’t help but rebel at the injustice present in the clash of hedonism and iki. If the hedonist tendencies of Edo townspeople advocate following pleasure to its full extent to make the most of this fleeting world, it is ironic that a courtesan, who is much respected in her context, is shunned when she follows her sexual instincts. Kuki overtly puts it “When you let yourself go, you make a reputation” (34). Overindulgence eliminates any form of the iki-ness that one might possess. This again brings the discussion of iki back to preservation of

relational possibility. Saikaku's character can't seem to preserve possibility as only possibility and she crosses the line. Form present in iki is emphasized in this case: If you don't follow certain set of cultural obligations, you can't possess iki.

At this point there is still much to be discussed about the multiple aspects of iki but I will have to keep it shorter and less detailed than the discussion of iki's intentional structure. The third chapter "The extensional structure of iki", Kuki discusses few taste terms and their relation with iki in order to position iki as a taste. He offers these terms in opposite pairings. He discusses *Johin* (refined) and *Gehin* (unrefined) in their relation to iki (chic). Yet what complicates things is that iki's status as an "excellence of taste" (Mayeda 151) makes it impossible for it to be positioned in a black and white distinction. It is observed in the junctions, grey zones of other similar tastes. For instance in his discussion of the taste pair, refined and unrefined, iki can't be only refined or only unrefined. The coquetry present in iki, which is also a characteristic possessed by unrefined, prevents iki from being purely defined as *Johin* (refined), since its flirtatious attribute can at times be unrefined since Geisha's thick red lipstick might possess coquetry yet it is definitely not possessive of iki. What makes Kuki's discussion of adjacent terms of taste interesting is how he weighs iki-ness with the presence or absence of a certain qualities. What he discusses in detail resembles to a recipe of a mixologist, or making of a love elixir. If we add a pinch of coquetry to what is refined, we get what

is iki. Iki generally stands in between.

The most significant characteristic of his discussion of taste terms is the hexahedron he utilizes in order to make the relation between four taste pairs (showy(hade)-silent(jimi), sweet(amami)-shibumi(astringent), chic(iki)-conventional(yobo) and refined(johin)-unrefined(gehin)) clearer. As what his western studies inspired him to do, using graphic representation provides him with the structure he needs to ease the understanding of iki sensibility. Leslie Pincus on her article on Kuki ,*In Labyrinth of Western Desire*, evaluates this geometrical figure as “Kuki’s project to capture an elusive sense of style in the rigid structural precision of a schemata as an attempt to lend durability to a fading cultural phenomena.” (Pincus 145). Although the logic behind his use of this figure is justified, at times instead of helping, the hexahedron made it harder for me to follow Kuki’s description as I tried to position concepts on the hexahedron and understand his distinctions. Kuki puts these terms in many categories like tastes with active or inactive nature; or self-dependent or other-dependent; in public domain or private domain. One interesting example Kuki gives in concern with these adjacent tastes is iki’s relation with the taste pair sweet-astringent. Kuki positions iki, on his hexahedron, right in the middle of line joining the vertex of astringent and sweet. Explanation of this positioning takes us back to the traces of Buddhist resignation found in iki. Kuki says “that “when sweet dreams are broken, iki rich with critical knowledge awakens” (62). Iki is neither

pure sweet nor entirely astringent. It occupies a place between the transition from sweet to astringent. The duty of the Edo courtesan is to keep the balance of sweet-astringent deportment so that she should prevent *iki* into turning into astringent.

After discussing *iki* as a phenomenon of consciousness found in the deportment of the geisha, I understand how *iki* can be observed through demeanor. Yet Kuki's *iki* can also be objectively expressed. In two different chapters he categorizes as the artistic and natural expressions of *iki*, Kuki discusses how *iki* can reflect on the form. Under the discussion of the natural forms of *iki*, human countenance and gesture become main points of reference. For instance the sense of moderation and restraint that comes from the Confucian ideals of samurai's code can be applied to even the use of make up. A make up to embody *iki*, it must be lightly worn and free of exaggeration. Similarly *iki* attire reflects the balance of coquetry, refined and *iki*: it should be revealing enough the hint at a presence of possibility yet not too revealing like Kuki criticizes of western way to make the woman be showy and gaudy. Reveling a small portion of the nape of one's neck or going barefoot are moderated attempts in being showy without bordering on the being unrefined, simply standing on the single spot that *iki* can be found.

In reference to the artistic expression of *iki* vertical lines are discussed to be pattern that are true representative of *iki*. Vertical lines are discussed to be the perfect visual representation of the relational

possibility. Parallel vertical lines are close, yet although they might go on forever, they can never converge. What engenders iki coquetry is its rationality so in this case according to Kuki “Parallel Lines which run forever without meeting are the purest visual objectification of the relational” (87). Yet while Kuki fervidly believes that straight lines scream of iki , he has a firm stance on the other forms of stripes, especially curved ones which is seen not to be suitable with the clear cut chicness of iki. Curve visually kills the cool disinterest because it looks warm. “All warm things, all love, have either a round or oval shape and will depict a spiral pattern and other curves. Only the cool and disinterested have handles and the straight lines. If a troop of soldiers were assembling in a loop without stationing a file, they would probably dance and not fight” (68). This quotation exemplifies the interesting way how form can actually affect a sensibility. Even in the discussion of which colors are more iki, three attributes, discussed as to make up the intentional structure of iki, are referenced. Iki prefers cool colors like grey, azure, tea brown because “the soul which has tasted to the full the stimulant of warm colors inhales tranquility as the complementary after image of cool ones” (99). It is all about a certain purposelessness that helps to create iki. When one is resigned from the worldly dealings, her/his artistic preferences or behavior automatically reflect a mood of somberness, a mellow suggestiveness that Kuki sees as the moments, instances of iki.

After the discussion of what iki can represent as an aesthetic

sensibility particular to Japanese culture, it can be said that “Iki” no kōzō proves to be a perfect medium for merging various values of the Japanese way of living. Although Kuki limited the aura of iki within Edo period, I believe iki carries universal qualities that enable it to stay relevant through many generations. Iki accepts and utilizes evanescence, thus there is a dynamic quality in this sensibility that makes is applicable even in my time. What is quite popular in today’s popular culture, what I see in the blogs I check every day: the rising trend of minimalism can be traced back to the iki sensibility of Japanese in 19th century. “The structure of Iki” is Kuki’s lamentation and an effort to make a connection between past or present in order to preserve and certain historical moment and define a “cultural formation”. Iki can be regarded as a concept of change, form, a nostalgic regard, an erotic affair and many other different things, yet more than everything it manages to give a form and structure to a concept as ethereal and fleeting as aesthetics or fashion, “Iki” no kōzō manages to give me a 21st century university student a brief and superficial understanding of the workings of a completely different milieu, and help me practice the unique aesthetic of iki in my daily life.

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