Ethnicity and Gender in the Wartime Japanese Revue Theatre

JENNIFER ROBERTSON

The ‘playing’ of ethnography is a genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise, for if we are to satisfy ourselves of the reliability of our script and our performance of it, we will need advice from various nonanthropological sources . . . Ideally we need to consult, better still, bring in as part of the cast, members of the culture being enacted (Turner 1982: 90).

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL WEAPON

This epigraphic quote from the late ‘performance anthropologist’ Victor Turner could have been written by his Japanese counterpart active in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, Japanese theatre directors and critics dramatized ethnography for the dual purposes of wartime recreation and the cultural assimilation of Japanese colonial subjects. They sought to create a ‘cultural weapon’ by fusing theatre and ethnography. It was an ambitious – and in retrospect, chilling – plan for which they sought advice from various anthropological sources, including from the very peoples who themselves were targeted for assimilation. One theatre critic, Endō Shingo, writing in 1943 about Japanese theatrical productions about and for export to the ‘southern regions’ (nanpō), urged playwrights and directors to closely collaborate with anthropologists in order to create plausible representations of, and for, Asian and Pacific peoples (Endō 1943: 1). I shall explore the affective, aesthetic and cultural dimensions of Japanese colonialism that have previously been neglected relative to the more bureaucratic, military and political dimensions of that expansionist project. Specifically, drawing on several of my earlier publications, I shall examine the relationship, primarily during the 1930s and 1940s, between colonial anthropology and the revue theatre in Japan, focusing in particular on the representation on
stage of the various peoples and cultures subjected to Japanese domi-
nation. The theatre discussed here is the all-female Takarazuka Revue,
founded in 1913 (see Robertson 2001 [1998]). The Revue’s opportunistic
founder (a leading entrepreneur and politician), playwrights and direc-
tors collaborated with the military state to create a popular drama with
the didactic potential to shape public impressions about the peoples and
cultures under Japanese rule.

Beginning with the colonization of Okinawa in 1874, followed by
that of Taiwan in 1895, Korea in 1910, Micronesia in 1919, Manuchuria
in 1931, North China by 1937 and much of South-east Asia by 1942,
the state consolidated through brutal military force a vast Asian-Pacific
domain, the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (daitōa
kyōei ken), a rubric coined in August 1940.¹ The core literature on
Japanese empire-building details four of the means through which the
Japanization of Asia was pursued: the education of children, the exalta-
tion of state Shintō, the organization of youth, and observation tours
to Japan (Peattie 1988: 104). To these I would add an overarching fifth
means, entertainment, which, like the preceding four, was also deployed
within Japan as a means of incorporating the public into the imperial-
list project and ethos. An abundance of archival evidence suggests that
theatre was regarded by the state and its agents as a particularly effi ca-
cious form of entertainment towards this end both within and outside
of Japan.²

Takarazuka playwrights were especially keen on incorporating eth-
nographic details into wartime revues for the purpose of providing the
public with ‘culturally authentic’, spectacular ‘infotainment’ (informa-
tion plus entertainment). Although the relationship between the
Takarazuka Revue, a private corporation, and the imperial state was one
of mutual opportunism as opposed to seamless consensus, the ‘cross-
ethnicking’ performed by the cross-dressed actors was homologous to
the official rhetoric of assimilation which equated Japanese expansion
with a mission to ‘civilize’ through Japanization the peoples of Asia
and the South Seas (see Robertson 2001 [1998], ch. 3; cf. de Grazia
1981). The ‘civilizing mission’ of the ethnographically informed revues
was two-fold. On the one hand, colonial subjects were represented on
stage as objects and products of the dominant Japanese imagination of
exotic yet inferior alterity. On the other hand, these representations
were sometimes recirculated in performances staged abroad, as ‘cul-
turally correct’ models to be emulated by the very peoples objectifi
don the Takarazuka stage. In this way, the theatre enacted a discourse
of comparative otherness with the catalytic effect of enabling a broad
spectrum of the Japanese viewing public to think that they were familiar
with, knowledgeable about, and superior to manifold other cultures and
ethnic groups.

European cultures and societies were also represented on the wartime
Takarazuka stage. In the fall of 1941, for example, the Revue produced
the play, New Flag (Atarashiki hata), which glamorized the unification of