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Death of the "Legendary Okama" Tōgō Ken: Challenging Commonsense Lifestyles in Postwar Japan 「伝説的オカマ」東郷健の死––戦後日本における常識的生活様式への挑戦

Mark McLelland

Death of the "Legendary *Okama*" Tōgō Ken: Challenging Commonsense Lifestyles in Postwar Japan

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"What's wrong with being a fag? What's shameful about being a fag? Why is it wrong for a man to love a man? Why is it wrong for a woman to love a woman? What is shameful is living a lie. What is shameful is not loving others." Tōgō Ken campaign slogan.

Tōgō Ken, bar owner, occasional singer and actor, pornographer, gay magazine editor, political candidate, social activist and all round "legendary *okama*" died from cancer on April 1, 2012, at the age of 79. Since the early 1970s Tōgō had campaigned tirelessly in support of a range of sexual minority issues that were much broader than the gay rights agenda with which he is most often identified. The political support group that he founded, the Zatsumin no kai (Miscellaneous people's association), as its name suggests, sought to bring together a range of people whose sexual and lifestyle choices placed them outside the Japanese mainstream or, as Tōgō was later to frame it, contravened "common sense" (*jōshiki*) conventions structuring intimate relationships.[1] These individuals included sexual minorities such as transgenders, lesbians and gay men, but also extended to sex workers. Tōgō also welcomed those who engaged in stigmatised heterosexual practices such as sadomasochism and he even spoke of the ostracism faced by divorcees, mistresses and children born out of wedlock.

Tōgō's identification with individuals whose "failure" to conform to social mores brought on stigma from friends, colleagues, family and neighbours, was clear in the unabashed manner in which he identified himself as "The *okama* Tōgō Ken" in his political campaigning.[2] He proudly announced the fact that he was "Tōgō Ken the faggot" from the back of his campaign truck, sometimes clutching a bunch of roses and at other times a boyfriend's hand. Tōgō was far removed from today's gay assimilationists, proudly proclaiming his polyamorous nature and rejecting marriage, child-rearing and all the trappings of conventional family life.

Tōgō's controversial campaign tactics weren't limited to street corners. Rather, due to a regulation requiring NHK, Japan's national broadcaster, to allow a fixed time for party political broadcasts on behalf of all registered parties, from the 1970s Tōgō appeared on television sets in living rooms across the country. Dressed in his signature kimono, wearing light makeup and speaking in camp Osaka-inflected language, Tōgō discussed a range of issues that were barely touched on elsewhere in the media and were certainly not considered staples of political debate. A number of these extraordinary rants are available on YouTube and the contents still prove shocking, even today.

Tōgō's platform included not only criticism of sex and gender discrimination but wholesale onslaughts on Japan's patriarchal family structure and even the Emperor system itself. And this was in the early 1970s, a time when gay liberation was just beginning to take off in New York and San Francisco, and some twenty years before newly emergent queer theorists sought to forge the kinds of allegiances between disenfranchised groups that Tōgō was attempting. Perhaps the closest western comparison would be Quentin Crisp appearing on the BBC railing against the monarchy and calling for dykes and poofters to bring down the heteropatriarchy.

To date there has been no mention of Tōgō's passing in the English-language press and although the major dailies in Japan dutifully recorded a few paragraphs, mainly highlighting his identity as a political candidate and campaigner against censorship, there has not yet appeared a major article offering a considered account of his legacy, and it is quite possible that such an account may never be written. In the following brief account I would like to take the opportunity to celebrate Tōgō's life and contributions and also suggest some reasons why Japan's most senior and relentless campaigner for sexual minority rights whose career spanned over four decades, has largely been overlooked by both Japanese and western commentators.

Discussion of Tōgō's life and work in western languages is scant. Swiss scholar Alain Delfosse's monograph in German,[3] based on his dissertation fieldwork, is the most extensive source but none of this material has been published in English (although Wim Lunsing interviewed Delfosse and mentions his work in his own monograph on Japanese gay life).[4] There exists one short interview with Tōgō in the US gay periodical *The Advocate* dating from 1983.[5] Lunsing, who was a regular at Tōgō's bar while doing fieldwork in Japan in the mid 90s and early 2000s, discusses his significance in several book chapters and articles[6] and I provided an overview of Tōgō's activism and theoretical contributions based on key articles authored by Tōgō in my history of queer Japan[7]. I also had a key interview with Tōgō that appeared in the left-leaning current affairs magazine *Shūkan kinyōbi* in 2001 translated and included in my co-edited collection of first-person narratives from sexual minorities, *Queer Voices from Japan*.[8]

More surprising, perhaps, is the lack of academic work on Tōgō in Japanese. I have not been able to locate any academic articles explicitly about Tōgō's life and ideas despite the fact that he himself contributed some early opinion pieces to high-brow magazines on, among other things, connections between women's liberation and gay theory.[9] There has also been a considerable amount written about Tōgō in the popular press so it is not the case that later writers and activists are not aware of Tōgō, but rather that he has not been positioned as an important player in the developing narrative of gay history in contemporary Japan.

Tōgō is not, however, the only figure to have been overlooked in accounts of Japanese gay history, as transgender academic Mitsuhashi Junko has pointed out. There is an entire prehistory of "gay studies" in Japan prior even to the emergence of Tōgō in the early 1970s that has yet to be researched or discussed at length in Japanese.[10] There are many reasons for this neglect, not least lack of institutional support for queer studies at Japanese universities. There is a cross-disciplinary queer studies association in Japan, but it only dates from 2007 and so far

has published only four volumes of an in-house journal.[11] Prior to the founding of this association support for queer studies research was sporadic at best and tended to be based at specific institutions under the guidance and protection of a single senior academic.[12] These initiatives often did not survive the graduation of a key cohort of graduate students or the retirement of the sponsoring staff member and graduates in this field have had difficulty finding tenured positions. Forced to make a living through short-term contract jobs at different institutions, these scholars have faced difficulty in developing their research and in turning their thesis findings into books.

Cover of 1972 album dedicated to gay-themed songs, *Baramon* (Gate of roses). (Source)

There has also been friction between members of sexual minority communities and academics which has limited to an extent the capacity to access, record and preserve historical information about these communities.[13] Although there have been a wide range of community-based organisations in Japan going back to at least 1952, to my knowledge there has been no organised attempt to establish an archive of queer-related texts, including community-generated ephemera, or to collect and preserve oral narratives.[14]

This means that we have no access to the lives and experiences of queer Japanese individuals from the prewar period other than what can be pieced together from surviving documents. With the passing of Tōgō Ken earlier this year, another key figure has gone leaving only a scattering of written documents and a few sound bites from which to reconstruct his story. Below I give an outline of Tōgō's life and activism and suggest some reasons why his legacy has not been embraced by contemporary activists and theorists.

In the mid 1960s Tōgō Ken (b. 1932), a scion of a high-profile Japanese family, caused a scandal by resigning from his prestigious job at the Daiichi Bank, deserting his wife and children, and openly proclaiming his homosexuality. Even today it would be remarkable for such an individual to come out in this manner but Tōgō's actions are even more surprising when we consider the extent to which he went out of his way to align himself with the stigmatized effeminate *okama* identity by opening a "*gei* bar".[15]

Despite the fact that Tōgō admitted to being influenced by lectures on Marxism he heard during his university days as a commerce student at Kwansei Gakuin University in the early 50s, his rejection of the "family system" and adoption of a *gei* lifestyle was not at first the result of a heightened political awareness. When Japan, like many other nations, was swept by student protests in the late 1960s, Tōgō was already in his late thirties and making a comfortable living as the master of a *gei* bar in Osaka. It was only through meeting and falling in love with a young student radical that Tōgō began to make the connection between the marginalization of homosexuals and other minority groups in Japanese society. It was at this time that he began to critique the Japanese concept of *jōshiki* or "common sense" which underpinned most people's taken-for-granted ideas about how people should live their lives.[16]

Tōgō became part of the late 60s radical underground scene that mixed sex and politics, and he was peripherally involved with the Tenjo Sajiki Company "formed by poet, film maker, boxing fan and all-around agent provocateur Terayama Shuji".[17] Tōgō even featured as singer on one of the tracks on a compilation of gay-themed songs *Baramon* (Gate of roses) produced by the company in 1972. No doubt influenced by Terayama's provocative use of sexual imagery and language in his theater productions, Tōgō brought politics into the world of the "*gei bōi*"[18] and the figure of the *gei bōi* into politics.

Cover of Tōgō's single *Suki nan'ya* (It's because I like you) released from the album *Baramon*. (Source)

Tōgō's radicalism was evident in the manner in which he unapologetically identified with the feminized mode of homosexual performance that had long been prominent in Japanese tradition. Since the Tokugawa period there had been a strong association between the female-role players (*onnagata*) of the kabuki theater and male prostitution. In the early postwar period the older "mama-san" of the developing *gei* bar scene often styled themselves as *onnagata* although the young *gei bōi* they employed preferred a more androgynous look. Tōgō was very much part of this burgeoning scene and self-consciously appropriated the term *okama*, a slang term for the buttocks and a reference to anal sex which was used to objectify and denigrate effeminate homosexual men, and deployed it as a speaking position -- "*Okama* Tōgō Ken" was to become his catchphrase.[19] Tōgō's reclamation of *okama* and his investing of the term with a more confrontational, political nuance came some 20 years before activists in the west were to perform a similar act of recuperation on the English term "queer."

Tōgō's self-presentation and developing social critique anticipated similar moves by western queer theory in a number of ways. Rather than viewing mainstream society as repressing a small number of sexual minorities, and calling for their liberation, Tōgō argued that society restricted the free sex and gender expression of all its members. He spoke of his desire to cross-dress, not so much as an expression of his homosexuality but rather as a desire to change his body and thereby break free from the rigid gender norms that constrained all men. Cross-dressing for men could be a political act -- a means of directly confronting society's "common sense" notions of how a man should comport himself. Arguing that the application of makeup and the wearing of women's clothes necessarily brought about a new way of experiencing the "male" body, Tōgō suggested that this was, in fact, an experience that would benefit a majority of men. As a result, Tōgō was opposed to sex-change operations by those working within the entertainment world since he considered the tension created between the "male" anatomy and the "female" appearance to be a particularly productive site for personal transformation and social confrontation.

Image: poster for Tōgō Ken memorial celebration, at the event space CAY. (Source)

Tōgō was revolutionary in articulating the political nature of sex. The Japanese term for “politics” is *seiji* 政治, written with a combination of two different characters meaning government. Tōgō pointed out the way in which sexuality was also invested in politics and politics in sexuality by replacing the first character of *seiji* 性治with the homophonous character *sei*性designating sex. As he frequently argued, the Japanese family system which requires one man and one woman to come together in a joint project to produce and manage children is considered “normal” (*seijō*) simply because this is the form of family most easy to govern within the context of capitalist society.

Sophisticated language play was to be a mark of Tōgō's campaigning as he frequently made slight alterations to words in order to shift their meaning and produce arresting new definitions. For instance, he would change *sabetsu差別*, the term for “discrimination” made up of the characters “difference” and “separate,” to “*geibetsu*” ゲイ別designating the tendency for “normal” people to regard homosexuals as “other.” Tōgō's language is important, too, in another respect, since his refusal to communicate in “standard” Japanese (understood as the Tokyo dialect) also signifies his outsider status. Born in Hyogo Prefecture neighboring Osaka, Japan's second city and longtime commercial and cultural rival of Tokyo, Tōgō uses the dialect of the Kansai region in both his spoken and written communication. His use of the Osaka way of speaking, which is considered more down-to-earth and forthright than that of Tokyo, also aligns Tōgō with the Kansai tradition of individualism which has long adopted an oppositional stance toward the political culture imposed by Tokyo.

Particularly remarkable is Tōgō's playful use of the figure of the Emperor in arguing for greater flexibility in Japanese conceptions of sexual and gender practice. Tōgō was often to point out how, in the period prior to Japan's defeat at the hands of the Allies in the Second World War, the Emperor was unthinkingly regarded as divine. Indeed any questioning of the Emperor's divine ancestry was considered treasonable and could lead to arrest and imprisonment. However, immediately after the war, under instruction from Allied command, the Emperor made a proclamation that he was not, in fact, divine but a human being like every other citizen of Japan. Since the Japanese people were able to accept the Emperor's sudden change of status from god to human being with apparent equanimity, Tōgō argued that they really should be able to come to terms with the different forms of love that exist between human beings or indeed, the relatively minor shift in a person's identity occasioned by a change of sex, from man to woman.

Reference to the Emperor's change in status was, in this context, an extremely radical intervention. In the prewar period, the Emperor had been the supreme patriarch, a symbol both of heterosexual masculinity and of the subordination of women and children in a “family system” which made each male household head the sovereign of his own domain. After Japan's defeat, the Emperor was enshrined in Japan's postwar constitution as a “symbol” of the Japanese people, and was and is treated by the popular press with a remarkable degree of deference that would be quite unthinkable in the case of European royalty. Invoking the figure of the Emperor in a discussion of perverse sexuality is, then, in the Japanese context, extraordinarily provocative and was frequently to bring Tōgō into conflict with Japan's right-wing activists. Indeed, in 1984 he was knocked off his bicycle and bashed by a right-wing thug, an attack he wore as a badge of honor and would frequently remind people of later in his life.

To underline his ironic relationship to the Emperor system, Tōgō named his female cat Chin which is not, contrary to expectation, a sly reference to the penis (*chinchin*) but the Japanese version of the “royal we,” that is, a pronoun reserved exclusively for use by the figure of the Emperor.[20] Indeed, one of Tōgō's election slogans played on the homophony of these terms: “If the symbol of Japan is the Emperor's royal we (*chin*), then I prefer the symbol of a man -- his penis (*chinchin*).”

Between 1971 and 1995 Tōgō ran more than ten times in national elections as an openly homosexual candidate. Tōgō addressed his manifesto to a broad range of *sogai sareta monotachi*, that is “people who are alienated” both by and from the Japanese family system. In so doing, Tōgō adopted a position close to contemporary queer politics which, unlike identity-centered lesbian and gay activism, does not rely upon normative notions of sameness in order to galvanize group identity. Instead, Tōgō stressed the importance of developing a shared agenda among people who, despite their many differences, were nonetheless adversely affected by the same power structures.

Yet, despite Tōgō's pioneering efforts and the controversial nature of his views, which meant that he was often in the news, his influence on Japan's developing homosexual subculture was minimal for various reasons. Whatever his Marxist sympathies, Tōgō's elite background is evident in his conviction that social and sexual change is not to come from the downtrodden masses, who are too preoccupied earning a living, but from the intelligentsia among whom he certainly numbered himself.

Tōgō, despite the community-oriented nature of many of his activities (for instance he organized one of the first call services for the discussion of problems concerning homosexuality), has often been perceived as egotistic. He named his first magazine *Za Ken* (The Ken), a reference to his own given name, and bars he has owned or managed have also at times been named Tōgō Ken. The magazine was in the late 1970s renamed *Za gei* (The gay) -- one of the first political uses of this term -- and, in keeping with Tōgō's radicalism, published photos, stories and articles which were much more graphic than those in other gay magazines and which required it to be sold via subscription, or, when in stores, with a sealed inner section. Tōgō was called in for questioning by the police on multiple occasions on the charge of disseminating “obscene” material. However he refused to apologize, expressing bemusement at the idea that images of naked human bodies in acts of love could ever be obscene. Even the Emperor has a penis, Tōgō would argue, and he uses it. *Za gei,* which was the main channel for Tōgō's views, was a very queer mixture of pornography, erotic fiction, reportage and political commentary, quite unlike any of Japan's other homosexual media.

Furthermore, as the 1970s progressed, Tōgō's effeminate *okama* persona increasingly fell out of sync with the wider homosexual community. As the understanding of “gay identity” became more masculine, partly due to increasing contact with overseas gay liberation organizations,

those homosexual men with an interest in gay activism were put off by Tōgō's embracing of effeminate stereotypes. At a meeting in 2002 held to discuss discriminatory language in the media, AIDS activist Hasegawa Hiroshi, for instance, spoke about his initial reaction to seeing Tōgō campaigning on television in the early 1970s, "The time I saw Tōgō-san appear on television I remember thinking that although I liked men, I didn't want to become like that and I didn't want to be grouped together [with him]".[21] Another participant in the meeting also spoke about how his first sighting of Tōgō resulted in "trauma" since he felt his own attraction to men had nothing to do with "looking like a woman and mincing about".[22] Bar owner and early gay activist Ōtsuka Takashi, too, mentioned to me the alienating effect that seeing Tōgō on television had upon him as a young man who was just beginning to come to terms with his sexual feelings for other men.[23] Tōgō's fearless reclamation of the category *okama* was not necessarily inspirational for masculine-identified young men who were keen to establish identities separate from the transgender paradigms of the bar and entertainment world. It is not surprising then that some of the most appreciative accounts of Tōgō's influence have been written by male-to-female transgenders such as Miyazaki Rumiko.[24]

Tōgō's rather patrician attitude also meant that others were reluctant to join with him in group-oriented projects. Yet, despite never having won widespread support, Tōgō's activism was unflagging. In 1987 he became embroiled in a dispute with Japanese customs when his baggage was searched upon returning from a trip to San Francisco. Tōgō had brought back with him various gay magazines and videos, whose explicitness contravened Japanese obscenity laws. Although Tōgō was resigned to having this material confiscated, he was additionally fined for attempting to bring the material in to Japan with the possible purpose of redistribution, a charge Tōgō denied, claiming that the pornography was for purely personal use. Incensed by this charge, Tōgō took the matter to court, losing the original trial since the court ruled that as the editor of a gay magazine there was a high chance that he might have attempted to disseminate the imported material. The Tokyo High Court, however, overturned this ruling on appeal, accepting that the magazines and videos were in Tōgō's private possession. However, Customs further appealed the case to the Supreme Court which once again reversed the decision, finding in favor of Customs and ordering Tōgō to pay both the fine and the trial costs, which by this point were considerable.

In the years before his death, Tōgō continued to make the occasional public appearance and until 2011 hold court nightly in his tiny bar in Shinjuku's Kabukichō. When he passed away in April 2012, Tōgō's children declined to open the funeral to the public so we may never know how many might have come to mourn his passing – although it would no doubt have been a colourful event. A celebration of Tōgō's life organised by friends and supporters is however currently planned to take place on 1 July.[25] It will be interesting to see whether, now that Tōgō has passed on, the embarrassment felt by many gay men at his very public adoption of an *okama* identity can be put aside. Perhaps it is time that Tōgō's contribution to Japanese gay history can be reconsidered and his role as one of the most tenacious critics of Japan's postwar social order acknowledged.

Mark McLelland is Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wollongong and author of *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005; and *Love, Sex and Democracy in Japan during the American Occupation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

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Notes

[1] Hence the title of Tōgō's autobiography, *Jōshiki o koete: okama no michi 70 nen* (Overcoming commonsense: 70 years on the *okama* path), Tokyo: Potto shuppan, 2002.

However, Wim Lunsing, who also referenced the term *jōshiki* (commonsense) in the title of his monograph *Beyond Commonsense: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Japan*, London: Kegan Paul, 2001, says that Tōgō actually picked up this title from him when Wim was a customer at Tōgō's bar in the mid 90s (personal communication). Tōgō had previously been using the term *hijōshiki* (not or non-commonsense) when Wim suggested that "overcoming common sense" sounded more positive.

[2] The Japanese derivation of this term is discussed later in this article. It is slightly less aggressive than "faggot," perhaps the closest English analogue would be something like "poofter" since it is essentially a *gendered* term connoting male effeminacy.

[3] Alain Delfosse, *Eine "Gay Liberation" in Japan? Soziale Emanzipation und politisches Programm bei Tōgō Ken und Minami Teishirō im urbanen Japan, 1950-1985*.

[4] Lunsing, *Beyond Common Sense*.

[5] "Gay Life in Japan. Interview with an Activist Togo Ken", January 6, 1983, Issue 359, p. 39.

[6] See for example, Wim Lunsing "The Politics of *Okama* and *Onabe*: Uses and Abuses of Terminology Regarding Homosexuality and Transgender," in Mark McLelland and Romit Dasgupta, eds, *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*, London: Routledge, 81-95.

[7] Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

[8] Original interview by Oikawa Kenji, translated by Katsuhiko Suganuma as "Tōgō Ken, the Legendary *Okama*: Burning with Sexual Desire and Revolt," in Mark McLelland, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker, eds, *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*, Lanham: Lexington Press, 2007: 263-70. An online version is available here (accessed June 8, 2012).

[9] See for example an essay he co-authored with feminist writer Mizoguchi Akiko, "Homo to ribu ga mita sei to shakai (Sex and society seen from the perspectives of homosexuality and women's lib)" *Shisō no kagaku*, vol. 6, no. 121, August 1980, pp. 58-64 and also "Homo no sei to sabetsu o kataru (Talking about discrimination against homosexual sex)," *Gendai no me*, 22(10) 1981.10, pp. 86-89.

[10] Mitsuhashi notes the importance of two early postwar writers Kabiya Kazuhiko and Ōgiya Afu who, as well as writing essays on the topic of male homosexuality for the so-called "perverse press" in the 1950s, also ran advice columns and organised club meetings for those interested in "research" into male-male love. See Mitsuhashi's blog entry on Japanese transgender history (accessed May 8, 2012). Fushimi Noriaki, too, notes the importance of these and other early 1950s figures in his historical overview of male homosexuality in *Gei to iu keiken* (the experience called gay), Tokyo: Potto shuppan, 2002, and I discuss their legacy in my *Queer Japan from the Pacific War*.

[11] See here.

[12] As was the case with a group of postgraduate scholars at Chūō University who, under the guidance of sociologist Yajima Masami, did some extremely important ethnographic work recording the life histories of gay men, lesbians and transgenders, published as *Sengo Nihon josō, dōseiai kenkyū* (Postwar Japan cross-dressing and homosexuality research), Tokyo: Chūō Daigaku Shuppanbu, 2006. However these endeavours have not continued after the graduation of key members of the group in the mid 2000s.

[13] I have written about the complicated politics of sexual minority community relations in a paper entitled "The role of the *'tōjisha'* in current debates about sexual minority rights in Japan", available here.

[14] A variety of individuals, including myself, have large personal collections but accessing them is problematic and securing them when they meet with illness or even death even more so.

[15] I prefer to transliterate and leave in italics the Japanese version of the English term "gay" to indicate that from its introduction into Japan in the late 40s through to the 1980s the term had a different nuance and reference to its use in English. See my *Queer Japan from the Pacific War* for a discussion of this and other terms relating to male homosexuality in Japan.

[16] See Tōgō, *Jōshiki o koete*.

[17] For a discussion of Terayama's queer flirtations see here. (accessed June 10, 2012).

[18] *Gei bōi* here designates a transgendered identity located in the club/bar world and is not equivalent to the English term gay boy.

[19] Tōgō Ken, "Okama no Tōgō Ken no kacchifureezu de watashi ga hontō ni iitakatta koto soshite 'minzoku no heya' ni tsuite (What I really wanted to say with the catch phrase *okama* Tōgō Ken and also about the 'people's room')", *Za Gei*, July, 1986: 38-49.

[20] As discussed in "Tōgō Ken the legendary okama."

[21] Fushimi Noriaki, ed., *Okama wa sabetsu ka? Shūkan kinyōbi no sabetsu hyōgen jiken* (Does *okama* have discriminatory connotations? The discriminatory expression case in *Shūkan kinyōbi*), Tokyo: Potto shuppan: 2002: 53.

[22] *Okama wa sabetsu ka?* 70.

[23] Personal communication.

[24] See her blog entry describing a 2002 meeting with Tōgō (accessed May 8, 2012).

[25] See the notification here. (accessed June 10, 2012).

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