

KINBAKU: THE LIMINAL AND THE LIMINOID IN RITUAL PERFORMANCE

Heather Pennington

Abstract

Kinbaku, also known as Japanese rope bondage, has grown in popularity in recent years yet remains marginalized due to its associations with BDSM. Therefore, outside of its own community, it is a scarcely studied form of performance. Perhaps due to this lack of scholarship, and in spite of its popularity, kinbaku's legacy remains vague. Most practitioners agree kinbaku arose from Japanese ritual practices, yet this leaves much to explore. After an introduction to kinbaku, this article will examine historical and contemporary Japanese ritual traditions in order to contextualize the practice. Next, analyzing the art of kinbaku via the concepts of the liminal and the liminoid, the argument will be made that kinbaku practices embody ritual performance. By locating the practices via a set of Japanese cultural traditions, this study ultimately argues against a binary, pathologizing reading of kinbaku, and contributes to validating future academic research centered around kink practices.

Keywords: Kinbaku, kink, liminal, liminoid, ritual performance

A model hangs, suspended in mid-air by sturdy but delicate ropes. A rigger stands to one side, proudly presenting the scene. An avid audience admires the rigger's rope work and knots as well as the shape and position of the model's body. This is *tsuri kinbaku*, or suspended rope bondage, one in a group of Japanese rope bondage practices known as *kinbaku*.¹ The rise of the internet coincided with a growing interest in this practice, and today technique books and blogs teach would-be practitioners 'the ropes' while venues from clubs to art galleries² showcase kinbaku performance and photography (Midori, 2001: p. 3). Though often occurring within the context of BDSM activities (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism and/or masochism), kinbaku is not inherently concerned with masochism or sadism, the desires to experience or cause pain for sexual pleasure. Thus rather than the formulation SM or S & M, the term *kink* will be used as the umbrella term to describe the set of activities amongst which kinbaku can be located.³ The titles *model* and

¹ Within the kink community, both *shibari* and *kinbaku* describe Japanese rope bondage. The distinction is that while *shibari* means 'to tie', *kinbaku* means 'to bind' according to more traditional Japanese forms, thus carrying stronger aesthetic appeal (Master K, 2008: p. 6). As tradition heavily informs this investigation, the word *kinbaku* will be used.

² Such as the "Art of Contemporary Shibari" (2012) at *Mother Dog Studios* in Austin, Texas, or various shows at the *Concorde Art Gallery* in Paris (2013, 2014, 2016).

³ Thanks here owed to kink scholar Tristan Taormino for an encompassing definition of kink as "an intimate experience, an exchange of power between people that can be physical, erotic, sexual, psychological, spiritual,

rigger will denote those who are tied and those who tie within a *scene*. ‘Scene’ is a general designation meaning any set of kink activities carried out between two or more people. A scene can be public (taking place at a club or party) or private (typically carried out within the home, a hotel room, or other similar venue without an audience). Participation in scenes, and in the broader community of people who practice kink, is governed by rules and collective values. These are best outlined by two acronyms: SSC and RACK. SSC stands for Safe, Sane, and Consensual, while RACK means Risk Aware Consensual Kink.⁴ Both acronyms emphasize consent, which has become a core value within kink play in the postmodern era. When considering contemporary kinbaku, which at its most basic is one person taking power from another by immobilizing them,⁵ it is important to remember that these actions are consensual.

The practice of kinbaku can be characterized both as performance and ritual. It has elements of standard theatre, such as an audience, repeatable sequences of behavior executed in particular ways to achieve particular results, technique, dramatic showiness, and denouement. Though these are not necessary for a designation as ‘performance’,⁶ kinbaku’s theatrical elements help it feel performative. Furthermore, kinbaku has been classed as ritual. As an activity which occurs within the kink community, kinbaku falls under what author and sex educator Barbara Carrellas refers to as “BDSM rituals” (2012: p. 140); as a form of sexualized binding, kinbaku relates to ritual elements of Japanese culture to be detailed shortly. Finally, anthropologist Edward Schieffelen posits “ritual performance” as a classification, conjoining the two categories (1998: p. 205).

Though its roots stretch back much farther, Japanese erotic rope bondage as it is known today began to become popular in the 1920s, when a series of photographs of tied women, taken by artist Itoh Seiyu, entered circulation (Midori, 2001: p. 16). It seems kinbaku’s popularity declined preceding and during World War II (ibid.). After the war had ended in 1945, the Allies abolished censorship. When Japanese kink magazine *Kitan Club* published the illustration “Ten Naked Tied Women” that year, kinbaku began to experience a resurgence (Merzbow, 1996). Around this time, bondage performance clubs appeared in Tokyo, furthering an appreciation for the art (Midori, 2001: p. 16). Though the internet has allowed kinbaku techniques and images to proliferate widely beyond Japan,⁷ certain traditions are still prevalent. For example at present, a majority of riggers are male and models are female.⁸ This may be due to kinbaku’s evolution from a style of military restraint primarily practiced

or, most often, some combination” and “an all-encompassing term to describe the people, practices, and communities that move beyond traditional ideas about sex to explore the edges of eroticism.” (2012).

⁴ SSC was coined in 1983 (Stein, 2002) and RACK in 1999 (Switch, unknown date).

⁵ The APA has declared the singular “they/them/their” appropriate, and in agreement with BDSM educator Mollena Williams, this author will “deliberately use the plural pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their* to refer to singular persons of any gender,” as “the traditional forms reflect a gender binary to which I do not subscribe.” (Williams, 2012: p. 263).

⁶ Richard Schechner’s argument that a practice need not be classed as orthodox theatre to be studied as performance was foundational to his creation of the field of performance studies (2002: p. 1). However, though his work arguably facilitated the present discussion, his point of departure classes artistic performance as distinct from cultural performance (which includes ritual). A Turnerian reading allows for a richer interpretation of kinbaku within a performance framework that includes both art and ritual and thus will be the focus here.

⁷ The present work is concerned with kinbaku that originated in Japan and utilizes methods handed down from Japanese master teachers and yet, in spreading out over the globe, evolves and changes to reflect best practices, cultural attitudes, and performers’ preferences. Cities of the author’s research include Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei.

⁸ The present work does not focus on the problematic gender politics of these practices.

by men, known as *hojojutsu*. Hojojutsu's origins are as murky as those of kinbaku,⁹ yet investigating the evolution of Japanese ritual helps contextualize both.

JAPAN, RITUAL, AND ROPE

Shintoism, a native religious practice dating back to at least 300 BC, contains some of the earliest recognized forms of Japanese ritual in washing, offering, and burial customs (Ishida, 1974: p. 91). Though rice farming had been introduced more than a millennium earlier, rice rituals became central to Japanese farming society in the mid to late *Heian* period (794-1185 AD), around 1000 AD (ibid.: p. 14). Together, these agrarian and religious ritual practices formed the basis for those ritual elements which persist in Japan today. In fact, a search for recent publications on ritual aspects of Japanese culture reveals ritual persists in nearly every area of life: food preparation and presentation, aging, fertility, business, gift giving, speech, dance, dwelling, sex, and death.¹⁰

The tea ceremony, flower arranging, and *shiatsu* massage¹¹ are visible practices in modern Japanese culture containing significant elements of ritual – and connecting with kinbaku. Master K, kinbaku practitioner and author of the foremost account of the practice's development in English, notes the Japanese ability to “ritualize and beautify daily objects and activities, from the tea ceremony to flower arranging” (2008: p. 14). In fact, the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) is known as the “ritual drinking of tea” (Sato, 2008: p. 23). Teahouses are often decorated with floral art, and flower arranging (*ikebana*) is part of the Japanese appreciation for the seasonal, fleeting beauty of nature. Ikebana links with ritual via its presence in the ritual tea ceremony, and its associations with Buddhism. Buddhist ceremonial flower offerings (*kuge*) took on significance during the Heian period (Kawase & Miyake, 1999: p. 98), when plants came to have ritual functions, banishing evil or representing coming of age (Shirane, 2012: pp. 102, 103). Interestingly, “ikebana – like *waka* (classical poetry) [...] and *chanoyu* – is best defined as a performance art; once the occasion is over, the flower arrangement has fulfilled its primary function” (ibid.: p. 103). This is also true of ritualized binding in a kinbaku performance – the bondage is done specifically for and in its performed context, and has fulfilled its primary function when the performance ends. Another contemporary Japanese ritual form is *shiatsu*, a medicinal bodywork practice (Beresford-Cooke, 2011: p. 5). Though founded circa 1925, the practice draws upon ritual techniques from ancient Chinese medicine, combining pressure, massage, and stretches which may promote relaxation and stress release (ibid.: pp. 8, 11). Shiatsu and kinbaku can be corporeally similar, almost as if a tied model is experiencing an intense massage:

The pressure of ropes on skin and body, when bound, produces an effect similar to that of a vigorous embrace, thus promoting a strong release of endorphins, and

⁹ A general lack of scholarship on kinbaku performance practices, and a specific lack of published materials in English, prohibits extensive textual research. Consequently, alternative sources have been used as data points: published resources on other kink practices, kinbaku technique books, and various aspects of Japanese culture; the author's ongoing field research, commenced in 2012.

¹⁰ While some of these accounts are written by outsiders (*gaijin*) who promulgate an orientalist reading of Japanese culture as ritualistic, this is not the case for every article. This author hopes to avoid such a reading of kinbaku practices.

¹¹ More connections between kinbaku and contemporary Japanese ritual practices can be drawn, via the dramatic nature of poetry recitation, ceremonial aging rites, and the performativity of power relations in formal dance. See Shirane (2012); Traphagan (2006); Averbuch (1996).

producing a great sense of relaxation [and] tension release. (Kinbaku Luxuria, 2012).

In addition to shiatsu, the tea ceremony, and flower arranging, present-day Japanese culture also evinces a strong link with ritual tradition via its connection with rope and tying objects. This connection finds its antecedents in Japanese antiquity (Midori, 2001: p. 13). Because historically the island was resource-scarce, wood and metal crafts were rare but plant fibers were plentiful and rope crafts became central. The *Jōmon* ('straw rope pattern') period, roughly 10,000 – 300 BC, was named after the distinctive rope-patterned pottery of its people (ibid.). From the *Jōmon* period to the present, rope and knots have been used in religious ceremonies for Buddhism and Shintoism; in wrapping and decorating packages (*furoshiki*); in attire such as the *kimono*, tied closed with a strip of cloth (*obi*); and in battle armor, tied to the body. With the advent of hojojutsu, the martial and law enforcement technique of detaining a captured opponent with rope which likely dates to the *Sengoku* period (beginning in 1467), rope and ties became symbols of power (ibid.: p. 14; Master K, 2008: p. 12). Though present scholarship in this area remains vague, the argument has been made that once rope and ties became symbols of prisonership, similar to handcuffs and stocks used in other forms of bondage, this translated into sexual play (Bacarr, 2004: p. 185). Indeed, Itoh Seiyo brought kinbaku into initial popularity after learning hojojutsu from an aged practitioner and then using it to bind his models (Master K, 2008: p. 65). Stepping into the sexualized, temporary roles of captive and captor may help bring kinbaku performers into a ritual space called the liminal.

KINBAKU AND RITUAL LIMINALITY

In 1967, Victor Turner published *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*. This essay describes the rituals of the Ndembu people of Zambia by drawing upon Arnold van Gennep's 1909 definition of the liminal, a space created during ritual rites of passage. Turner defines rituals as sets of "prescribed formal behavior for [certain] occasions", through which participants enter the liminal, a state of being "neither here nor there" but rather "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed" by societal structures (2008: pp. 19, 95). Because ritual participants experience the liminal as a state of great intensity, the experience must necessarily be short-lived.

Applying Turner's concept of the liminal "betwixt and between" to kinbaku enables framing the practice as ritual. Certainly, kink activities such as kinbaku performance fit within Turner's conception of liminal sites as loci of great intensity, having been termed "crucible[s] for creativity, vulnerability, perseverance, control, catharsis, and connection" (Taormino, 2012: p. xv). Kink educators and practitioners widely agree, as Taormino states in *The Ultimate Guide to Kink*, that kink can provide opportunities for "self-reflection, challenge, and personal growth", just as rites of passage do (2012: p. xv; Turner, 1989: p. 102). Kink is sometimes considered by its practitioners to be sacred (Master K, 2008: p. 11), similar to van Gennep's formulation, with the "potential to heal" and "generate spiritual renewal" as do the liminal rituals Turner discusses in *The Ritual Process*. Additionally, Turner's idea of donning the liberating mask of the liminal within ritual (1975: p. 243) resembles prolific kink-based writer Lee Harrington's description of those in a scene donning the liberating mask of kink,

stepping out of themselves for a little while into roles they do not normally play (2007: 265).¹²

Further allying the liminal with specific conditions that arise during kinbaku is the transient relationship of those sharing in the experience. Ritual participants can be divided into two groups: the masters, or teachers, and those experiencing the rite of passage upon their bodies, or the neophytes. Similarly, performers in kinbaku may begin as autonomous, equal individuals, but will quickly adopt the roles of rigger and model. In these roles, as “between instructors and neophytes[,] there is often complete authority and complete submission” (Turner, 1989: p. 99). This is necessary for the ritual to succeed. Yet, though “complete obedience” (ibid.: p. 100) characterizes the neophyte, Turner also writes of ritual’s ability to invert societal hierarchies in an almost carnivalesque¹³ manner: “in liminality, the underlying comes uppermost” (2008: p. 102). In kinbaku, because the model dictates the limits of the scene, many argue they hold more power.¹⁴

Though this may be accurate, in kinbaku performance the model’s vulnerability is often stressed through various activities such as the removal of clothing before or during a scene, tightening ropes in strategic places, tickling, or applying hot wax, a blindfold, or a gag. These stressors help reinforce the control the rigger appears to have, often bringing the model to a place called *subspace* – the mental state of a submissive who has surrendered will, control, and power to another. During the liminal period, vulnerable neophytes too receive symbolic stress (ibid.: p. 108), and demonstrate “passivity” and “malleability, which is increased by submission to ordeal” (Turner, 1989: p. 101). These “ordeals and tests” may amount to “torture”, but are sustained out of obedience to authority during the liminal state (ibid.: p. 100). Submissive subspace may help models relax in order to cope with the physical stress and sensual intensity of their situations: those in subspace report a feeling of surrendering into the activity in which they are participating, frequently describing meditative feelings of calm (Midori, 2012: p. 117). Reached specifically through the particular set of ritualized actions performed in kinbaku (or other kink), it appears that subspace is liminal space.

DISCONTINUITIES AND THE LIMINOID

Importantly, there are several elements within Turner’s concept of the liminal that do not correspond with kinbaku. First and foremost, kinbaku does not use the liminal as a means to an end. Unlike rites of passage, creating and employing liminality is not kinbaku’s function, but rather a quality of its practice. Models might wish to enter subspace, riggers might like to see this happen, but the route to it is often unpredictable and thus it is rarely the ultimate goal of kinky play. Next, though it may be a spiritual experience, kinbaku is not a religious practice, whereas for Turner, ritual and liminality are associated with religious behavior (1989: p. 95). Nor is kinbaku a way of refashioning the identities of members of society, a way for practitioners to be “ground down” so they may assume a new social role after rites of passage (Turner, 2008: p. 95). Furthermore, in their ‘ground down’ condition, individuals in the liminal state are invisible because society does not expect to see people passing from one life phase to another (ibid.). In performing kinbaku, subjects make themselves visible (even if they feel a dissolution of self during performance). Perhaps subjects remain invisible to a

¹² Williams also uses the terminology of liberation freely (2012).

¹³ See Mikhail Bakhtin’s 1984 *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁴ Though the topic of who holds greater power in a scene is the subject of much debate in the kink community.

larger society, as their practice is still taboo, yet within their own community they are very much visible.¹⁵

These discontinuities between Turner's liminal and the liminal of performative kinbaku may be reconciled in the *liminoid*, an idea on which Turner focused later in his career, which "resembles without being identical with 'liminal'" (1974: p. 64). Where the liminal underlines the importance of custom, tradition, and normative behavior, breaking rules only within a regulated context and later restoring order to reinforce social standards, the liminoid provides the opportunity to subvert such norms. Thus, performance can be read as a liminoid genre if used to liberate its practitioners from the axioms of industrialized societies so they may explore subversive alternatives, such as kink (Turner, 1975: p. 14). Additionally, Turner defines liminoid as a transitional state only arising within complex, post-industrial revolution societies, which divide between work and leisure (which includes play) (ibid.: pp. 63-64). With "the absence of obligation", leisure activities have "a pleasurable quality", central to the notion of play and found within the liminoid but absent from the ritual liminal (ibid.: pp. 16, 65).

As societies began to divide work from play, there was "a shift from the meaning of sex as procreative 'work,' (a persistent meaning in tribal and feudal societies) to the division of sexual activity into 'play' or 'foreplay,' and the 'serious' business or 'work' of begetting progeny" (Turner, 1974: p. 66). 'Work' can create liminal states, but only play can create the liminoid. Setting aside the troublingly heteronormative implications of the nature of 'work' within this discourse, Turner's designation of sexual play as a liminoid activity is useful. Though kink performers could be said to engage in their sexual play for financial gain, which might re-classify it as work, many perform for free, or do not earn their living from performance, re-demarcating their kink activities as play. Audiences do often pay to see these performances, yet this further connects to the liminoid, which "often is a commodity, which one selects and pays for" (ibid.: p. 86). By these criteria, kink such as kinbaku, a playful sexualized activity, can be classed as liminoid.

There are several other reasons to delineate kinbaku performances as liminoid. First, liminoid phenomena are "practiced by and for particular groups" – in this case, predominantly the kink community and consumers of pornography (ibid.). Next, "liminoid phenomena develop apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins" and "tend to be more idiosyncratic or quirky" (Turner, 1974: p. 85). This is true of the development of kinbaku performance, still often considered taboo. Also, like kinbaku, liminoid forms "are plural, fragmentary, and experimental in character" (ibid.). As a practice, kinbaku evolves as riggers and models imagine new things to do with ropes. Additionally, the liminoid is often "generated by specific named individuals and in particular groups – 'schools,' circles, and coteries" such as in/famous kinbaku teachers and their students,¹⁶ or kink communities in specific cities which have their own common and preferred methods of tying (ibid.). Furthermore, just as, for Turner, "each type of ritual" in Ndembu society has "its own combination of medicines" and its own type of "ritual apparatus" (Turner, 1989: p. 14), so kinbaku has its own specialized practices, its own rope patterns, knot work, suspension techniques, and extensive equipment. In order to create both a site for the use of the equipment which the liminoid often requires, and a private location which can effectively

¹⁵ The author's own research (2016), indicates issues of visibility are an area for further study, as mainstreaming of this otherwise illicit practice increasingly puts kinky subcultures on display.

¹⁶ For example, 'Master' rope teachers Osada Steve and Yukimura Harkui have five authorized dojos to teach their styles globally, in Copenhagen, Melbourne, Tokyo, Vancouver, and Vienna.

monetize entrance or membership to such a space to see or practice the liminoid, “there are permanent ‘liminoid’ settings and spaces” such as “bars, pubs, some cafes, social clubs, etc.” where kinbaku is practiced (Turner, 1974: p. 86). These are plausible reasons to class kinbaku performance as liminoid, though it should be noted that this reading owes much to Turner’s earlier concept of the liminal. Turner is careful to mention that both liminal and liminoid are ritual experiences. This continues to support a reading of kinbaku activities as ritual performance.

CONCLUSION

There is a practice which those in the kink community use to conclude a scene, called *aftercare*. To engage in aftercare means to exchange a hug, eat chocolate, cuddle, or do whatever activity helps players feel comfortable while bringing the emotional intensity of a scene to an end. Midori (2012) designates kink as “being in an altered state”, while aftercare is “what each participant needs to transition from [kink] play to everyday life.” (p. 92). Williams agrees: “playing can take you to new and exciting places. But afterward? You have to find a way back” (2012: p. 261-62). After the liminal state, there is a phase of re-entry. Like the liminal, the liminoid too must end, and one must find one’s way back. For kinbaku, aftercare is the way to return to normal life.

Unfortunately, the distance many perceive between ‘normal life’ and kink, including forms of consensual bondage such as kinbaku, has meant kinky activities are still widely considered sexual perversions, whether tolerated as a subculture in Japan or pathologized in much of the English speaking world.¹⁷ Despite growing popularity and mainstream recognition, this delimitation has, until very recently, put these subjects beyond scholarship. At present, academic work on kinbaku is virtually nonexistent. While there is scholarship on SM/BDSM, it often involves binary discourses which seek to either condemn or condone kink as a practice. A non-binary investigation into kinbaku and kink as forms of performance should find a place within the ever-expanding fields of performance and cultural studies. In moving beyond kinbaku’s associations with pathologized, deviant sexuality, in tracing its ancient roots to rice rituals or military ceremony, in finding its modern context in ikebana or the Kitan Club, it becomes clear that kinbaku’s connections with ritual traditions inform a complex practice. Indeed, investigating the liminal/liminoid space of kinbaku should clarify that viewing this art form as simply about perverts tying people up for sex fails to recognize its depth.

¹⁷ See the DSM-V, the 5th Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – used widely as a diagnostic tool – which classes sadism and masochism, as well as other kinky activities such as exhibitionism and general “non-normative sexual behavior” as “pariphilias” – grouping them with pedophilia and acts involving sexual violence against nonconsenting victims.

GLOSSARY

Chanoyu 茶の湯
tea ceremony

Furoshiki 風呂敷
art of wrapping or decorating packages

Gaijin 外人
Outsider, foreigner

Heian (heian jidai) 平安時代
period of Japanese history spanning
794-1185 AD

Hojjutsu 捕縄術
style of military restraint utilizing ropes to
restrain a captive

Ikebana 生け花
art of flower arranging

Jōmon (jōmon jidai) 縄文時代
'Straw rope pattern' period of Japanese history
spanning roughly 10,000 – 300 BC

Kimono 着物, きもの
rope tied at the waist with a sash

Kinbaku 緊縛
literally meaning 'to bind'; a word for rope
bondage in accordance to traditional Japanese forms

Kuge 公家
Buddhist ceremonial flower offerings

Obi 帯, おび
sash used to tie a *kimono* or martial arts uniform

Sengoku (sengoku jidai) 戦国時代
period of Japanese history spanning 1467-1603 AD

Shiatsu 指圧, しゃつ
massage or bodywork form

Shibari 縛り
literally meaning 'to tie'; a word for

Tsuri kinbaku 吊り緊縛
suspended (吊り) rope bondage (緊縛)

Waka 和歌
classical poetry

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