

# The objects of laughter in Japanese comedy shows

Yoshimi MIYAKE

## お笑いショーの笑いの対象となるもの

三宅 良美

今日の日本のメディアにはお笑いショーがどこにおいても見られる。ニュース番組にもお笑いの要素が入る。この論稿は、なぜ笑いを誘うコメディアンが横行しているのかを、主要なお笑いキャラクターの性質と話の特徴をつかむことにより、説明しようとするものである。伝統的なボケとつつこみの関係が今日においてどのように変わったのかについても考える。日本のコメディショーは自虐的で自己を卑下するものが多く、それが観る側の心理に作用することを指摘した。

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, TV shows generally called *O-warai* (deferential prefix *o* + NOUN laughter show) have been flourishing. Every channel except for semi-governmental NHK, has daily *o-warai* shows. Variety shows, quiz shows as well as news shows can be associated with *o-warai* shows. They are comedy shows in a sense that comedians are the MCs, and guests are comedians. Originally non-comedians such as actors and singers are also encouraged to laugh in the shows. This paper tries to answer why those laughter-soliciting comedians became ubiquitous on Japanese TV programs, by examining prominent characters in *o-warais*, their background, and the laughter tradition which influenced the current *o-warai* shows.

The traditional Japanese comedy form, *Manzai*, has been studied from a narrative analysis point of view. This form, which first originated from religious tradition, was performed in the front courtyards of shrines, and started to flourish secularly among the merchant, and artisan caste, located to the west of the current capital of Japan. *Manzai* is performed by two men, whose roles are *boke* 'spaced out' and *tsukkomi* 'cutting in'. *Boke* performers are talkative, eloquent, and many times distinctively aggressive, while the *tsukkomi* backchannels what the *boke* says. The *boke* comedian keeps nagging his *tsukkomi* partner, making the audience laugh. The laughter is induced from the scene in which the *Boke* comedian becomes too aggressive, showing himself as "insensitive".

Although the more recent *O-warai* shows do not have rigidly prescribed dialogues, it is obvious that current *O-warai* shows are influenced by the *Manzai* tradition. However, the current *O-warai*'s have more varieties in terms of the performers and the topics or objects of laughter. The performers have more variety

and more solo performers are seen rather than duos. Women performers have also started to become popular. The current *O-warai* performers are, unlike those of a few decades ago, viewed as idols and celebrities. Based on data collection from TV shows, this paper argues why *O-warai* show performers play the most significant parts of all the TV shows. Also, the paper will show what induces laughter, and argue that the current Japanese *O-warai* shows are dependant on the self-condescending, self-confessing discourse, which may be tightly related with psychological aspects.

### 2. Structure of laughter—is it culturally specific?

The theme of laughing can be approached from a cultural point of view as have been issues of politeness, rudeness, silence, apology, etc.

In Japanese convention, laughing was not considered a reasonable behavior in general, especially for the samurai caste, as it is said that *Bushi wa sannen ni ichido kata hoho de warau*. "Samurai laughs once in three years with cheek."

Samurai men were expected not only notto laugh, but also not to cry, meaning that disciplined and educated men are not supposed to show their emotions. Naturally, it was more common to find literature and artistic performances of laughter among the lower caste, the merchants. This included stories by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, and Shikitei Sanba, as well as *Shunga*, erotic printings circulated popularly in towns. Several themes of *shunga* focused on funniness, i.e. 1. funniness of peeping, 2. funniness of trespassing caste, age, and sex differences, 3. funniness of boundary-breaking, such as woman sexually excited by the touch of octopuses, ghosts, or or priests. *Rakugo*, a form of funny storytelling, also flourished during the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Edo period. The memorized *rakugo* stories are

called classical *rakugo*, and constitute the genre whose plots *rakugo* professional families must memorize and be able to tell in front of audiences.

Crying was better evaluated. *Ureshinaki*, meaning crying because of happiness, was well evaluated and perceived. In contrast, laughing at inappropriate times was considered strictly taboo. From a class point of view, laughing was appropriate for the merchant class, and other lower people who cannot control their emotions.

This cultural aspect of laughter is related to the gender issue as well. As women were apparently exempt from samurai ethics or behavior codes, they were allowed to laugh more often than men, but were not supposed to laugh with their mouths open. They were expected to cover their mouth while laughing. As a result, men and women's laughter have been transcribed differently in literature such as novels and in cartoon onomatopoeia. Men's laughter was transcribed as *Hahahahaha* in katakana, bold, while women's laughter has been written with back vowels such as *hohoho*, *ufufu*.

Table 1. Vowel and consonant transliterations of laughter

Front	Back
<i>hihihi</i> —evil laughter, <i>ushishi</i> —evil laughter	<i>ufufu</i> —women's laughter
<i>hehehe</i> —embarrassed	
<i>hahhahaha</i> --large laughter	
<i>hahaha</i> ;---laughter	<i>hohoho</i> —pretentious women's laughter

Table 2. Noun compounds associated with laughter

<i>tere warai</i>	'laughter because of embarrassment' bitter laughter
<i>fukumi warai</i>	'laughter with connotation' alluring laughter
<i>naki warai</i>	'laughter and crying, ups and downs' cry laughter
<i>warai naki</i>	'laughter on the surface but crying inside, laughing mask on a crying face'
<i>niga warai</i>	'laughter while feeling bitter'

According to psychologists Doi 1990 and Nomura 1994, the primary function of Japanese laughter is to restore a mental insecurity, a feeling of unbalance of emotion. A quite popular laughter is *terewarai*, a noun consisting of a verb *tereru* 'behave embarrassed' and a noun *warai* 'laughter'. Thus 'laughing/giggling because one feels embarrassed' has been considered acceptable. When a person cannot answer a question, happens to stumble, or makes a small mistake, s/he giggles, and laughs. This behavior can be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to reassure or mollify those in the person's vicinity who may feel bad, worried, or sorry for him/her, by giggling, smiling, or laughing as though to signify: "I am ok. You do not have to worry about me".

### 3. Who are the comedians?

Known as THE BIG THREE, three comedians are known for making comedy the most prominent entertainment industry. These are Takeshi, Sanma, and Tamori. Although the first two came from traditional comedy shows in theatre, i.e. *rakugo* (solo comedy) and *manzai*, they changed the comedy performance drastically, moving their space from small theaters in towns to TV studios.

Driven by the success of the Big Three, a large promotion company called Yoshimoto Kogyo, Co. Ltd. flourished. Yoshimoto Kogyo, established in the 1930s in Osaka, has played a significant role in the

popularization of *o-warai* performances, which originated in vaudeville performers, theatre comedians, and stand-up comedians such as *manzai* and *rakugo* professionals. Those comedies were performed in local theatres. Even after the introduction of TV in the 1950s, *o-warai* shows were more in theatres and many TV programs were focused on singing. When comedy gradually moved to TV studios, the comedy shows began to include several topics, including interviews, cooking, singing performances, etc. As the audience drastically increased, those who wanted to become comedians also increased in number, leading to schools for comedians. All shows in which the performers solicited laughter began to be called *o-warai*, i.e. deferential prefix *o* and the noun for laughter.

It should be noted, however, that those promotion companies have a long history. Having been established in the 1930s, the issue of seniority is significant to them, and they maintain the Japanese traditional hierarchy of arts. It meant that if a person A becomes a disciple of a certain master one day before person B, then B must pay respect to A in terms of verbal as well as nonverbal behavior.

At the beginning of Japan's bubble economy, the *manzai* business started to flourish, a *manzai* boom that ended around the middle of the 1980s, anticipating the beginning of *o-warai* entertainment.

The term *o-warai* is a comprehensive term that

includes simply funny variety shows, *manzai*, *rakugo*, *mandan*, and skills of funny celebrities. The current Japanese TV schedules, especially those of evening and late nights on private broadcasting companies, are filled with those *o-warai* programs. In some, comedians simply travel and show small funny accidents or encounters with the local people. In others, comedians visit restaurants, eat, and evaluate the food. Funniness is produced because the local people provide surprising meals, customs, or even local dialects, to which the visiting comedians react in an exaggerated way. Comedians visiting restaurants can also yield laughter by over-reacting to the meals, the owners, bizarre menus, unexpected prices and quantities, etc. Sometimes they make funny comments, or evaluate the restaurant so poorly that the audience laughs.

#### 4. BIG THREE

The BIG THREE initiated the comprehensive laughter *o-warai* shows. In order to discuss how *o-warai* shows have developed, the characteristics of each of them will be discussed. I will interpret Takeshi's objects of laughter.

At the beginning of their career, the big three had nothing in common. Tamori appeared out of the non-tradition as a funny man from Kyushu, having been discovered by a popular cartoon writer. Sanma of Hyogo Prefecture, near Kobe City, comes from Rakugo, the traditional solo comedy: this is similar to stand-up comedy, although the performers sit on a thin pillow on the floor while talking, with only instrument, e.g. a folded fan. Takeshi started his career from vaudeville, as a curtain raiser or opening performer for a strip theater called Furansu-za in Asakusa, Tokyo. Although all three comedians powerfully influenced the birth and the

development of the TV comedy industry, this paper will focus more on Kitano Takeshi, known as Takeshi, or Beat Takshi.

##### 4.1. Takeshi –Beat Takeshi, Kitano Takeshi (1947-)

Internationally well-known, Takeshi seems to be the most multi-dimensional of the Big Three. In this section I will discuss linguistic as well as meta-linguistic aspects of Takeshi's performances.

*Manzai* performer—Takeshi of Tsuu Biito (“Two Beats”)

Beat Takeshi: *boke*

Beat Kiyoshi: *tsukkomi*

Beat Takeshi has been always known for having a *dokuzetsu* (lit. poisonous tongue). He would never censor himself about what to say or not to say, and at the end of each of the subtopics, he would swear at the objects of his themes, his partner, and his audience.

How Beat Takeshi became popular could be explained in two parts: Beat Takeshi's tools and Linguistically un-PC-ness

##### 4.1.1. Linguistic cynicism/irony-modification of popular sayings

Beat Takeshi constantly changed popular sayings into cynical/ironical sayings, keeping the first phrase the same or slightly different, and revising the last part of the saying, surprising the audience. The last phrases often contained dark humor. The audience had heard the original sayings so often that this unexpected linguistic manipulation produced instant laughter.

Example. 1.

- (1) *Aka shingoo minna de watareba kowaku nai.*  
 Red signal everybody cross COND. scary NEG  
 ‘If we all cross a red light together, we aren't afraid’  
 Original  
*Ao shingoo minna de wataroo te o agete.*  
 Blue light, everybody INSTR. let's cross, hand ACC raise  
 ‘Let's cross, raising hand, when the traffic light is blue.’

In this case, in the first phrase, the original ao ‘blue’ is switched with aka ‘red’

- (2) *Chui ichibyoo kega isshoo,*  
 ‘Attention one-second, injury the whole life’  
*kuruma ni tobikome genki na ko*  
 car to jump in healthy child  
 ‘Hey, kids, jump in front of the car.’

Original

*Chui ichibyoo, kega issho.*

‘Attention one-second, injury the whole life’

‘Watch out. One second of carelessness will injure you for life.’

- (3) *Ki wo tsukeyoo,* busu ga chikan wo matte iru  
 attention ACC attach, ugly SUB molester ACC waiting are  
 “Watch out, ugly women are waiting for their molesters.”

**Original**

*Ki wo tsukeyoo,* amai kotoba to kurai michi  
 Attention ACC pay, sweet words and dark street  
 ‘Watch out for sweet words and dark streets.’

- (4) *Neru mae ni kichinto shimeyoo* oya no kubi  
 Sleep before at well close parent GEN neck  
 ‘Before going to sleep, strangle well your parent’s neck.’

**Original**

*Neru mae ni kichinto shimeyoo* gasu no sen  
 Sleep before at well close gas GEN stopper  
 “Before going to sleep, take care to turn off the gas.”

These parodies of classical sayings are violent, severely satirizing the mass mentality of Japanese. (1) mocks them as group oriented. If alone, and the traffic light is red, an individual will not cross the road even when there is no car passing, but if not alone, but standing with many other people, they will not be scared of crossing the red light with other people: connoting that they will do anything, even bad thing, as long as others do it.

(4) is black humor, too, connoting recent incidents of children killing their parents while they were sleeping. This is a severe cynical comment on contemporary social problems. This black humor may be difficult to accept, but it also shows Takeshi’s idiosyncrasy of avoiding any political correctness.

#### 4.1.2. Violation of linguistic code

Beat Takeshi violates the linguistic codes considered taboo to publicly say. The following list is the terms he has sworn in his performances. Indeed they are terms prohibited for broadcasting.

*jijii* “old man”  
*babaa* “old woman”  
*busu* ‘ugly woman’  
*kappe* “from *inakappe*” ‘country bumpkin’  
*unko* “poop”  
*yakuza* “mafia”  
*gaki* “kid”

#### 4.1.3. Boke in manzai

Takeshi has shown severe criticism toward popular social/cultural phenomena, coupled with swear words towards his objects of laughter, his *tsukkomi* partner, and the audience. The following is an example of Takeshi and Kiyoshi’s *manzai* work as *Tsuu Biito*. Note that out of 44 sentences, Kiyoshi acted as *tsukkomi*, i.e. interjected/shot back only 12 sentences, about 27 percent of the whole plot. Kiyoshi’s *tsukkomi* sentences are underlined and Takeshi’s swears are in bold.

Example 1. *Boke* role of *manzai* duo in *Tsuu Biito*, from *Tsuu Biito* (lit. Two Beats)

(Approx. 2 minutes 30 seconds)

Dialogue 1 About popular TV commercials and soap operas. (1981, The *Manzai* Grand Prix)

Roles: *Boke*: Beat Takeshi *Tsukkomi*: Beat Kiyoshihi

Topic 1 about TV commercials

- (1) Komaasharu demo ne, kudaranai, Raama toka  
 ‘TV commercials are stupid, like that of Raama (margarine).’
- (2) Rama yatte masu yo ne.  
 ‘Rama broadcasts its commercial, yeah.’
- (3) Ikaga desu ka,  
 ‘In the commercial, the host asks a group of people who’ve tried the margarine “How does it taste?”’
- (4) Assari shite umai desu ne (laughter)  
 “They say, ‘Natural taste, and it is delicious.’”
- (5) **Naani itten da, bakayaro. (huge laughter)**  
**‘What are you saying? Fuck it!!’**
- (6) Ato motto kudara-nai. Yamaguchi Momoe to Miura Tomokazu, chokoreeto ne.  
 ‘Even more stupid is the commercial for the chocolate endorsed by Yamaguchi Momoe (idol star) and Miura Tomokazu (popular actor).’
- (7) Aa, komaasharu yatte-ru, chokoreeto, ne.  
 ‘Ah, yes, that chocolate on the TV commercial.’
- (8) Shitashii hito e no chokoreeto datte.  
 “They say, ‘Chocolate for people you care for.’”
- (9) Omotenashi ni **chokoreeto ageru baka ga doko ni irunda. Konoyaro. (Laughter)**  
 ‘Who gives a chocolate bar to people you care for. Fuck it.’
- (10) Paatii no omotenashi datte.  
 ‘They say, “For welcoming to your party”’
- (11) Ryoori ga ippai anno ni mannaka ni chokoreeto ga atte.  
 ‘You have lots of dishes on the table. And in the center there are-chocolates!’
- (12) Sonna mono **dare ga te dasunda!!**

- ‘Who wants that chocolate?’ (Laughter)
- (13) Oyogeru anne nante,  
‘There is also an ad on Swimmable Anne (sanitary pads which can be used while swimming).’
- (14) Oyogeru?  
‘Swimmable?’
- (15) Anna mono arukara uchi no neesan tobikonde obore-chatta. (Laughter)  
‘Because of that stuff, my sister drowned, jumping into the water.’
- (16) Doko ga oyogeru anne da, **bakayaroo.** (Laughter)  
‘Swimmable Anne? Fuck it!!.’
- (17) Ato Zenondo Chiaa toka ne. “Masshiro”, Konoyaroo, hajimekara aratte neejan.  
‘And then there’s Zenondo Chiaa (a laundry detergent)  
“Pure white!!!”, they say. **Fuck it!!.** Those clothes are brand new!!’
- (18) Damedayo omae.  
‘You cannot do that.’
- (19) Saikin no rokku konsaato ittemo waza torashii. .  
‘Recently even rock ‘n roll concerts are stupidly theatrical.’
- (20) Tokyo Kid Brothers ne,  
‘Such as Tokyo Kid Brothers.’
- (21) A, iruiru.  
‘Ah, yes, those guys ... .’
- (22) Ippai iru.  
‘There are many like them ....’
- (23) Jaa, tachiagaroo, te wo tsunagoo, utao tte,  
““OK, then let’s stand up, hold hands, and sing together”, they say.’
- (24) Rompaa ruumu ka, **konoyaroo.** (Laughter)  
‘Are you in the Romper Room (a TV toddler’s program)? Fuckers!!’
- (25) Kudaranain da yo, yatterannain dayo  
‘It’s so silly. I can’t stand it.’
- (26) Shobai ni natten dakara ii daro?  
‘It’s business, so it is OK, isn’t it?’
- (27) Baka wa tsuite kurun dakara ii daro?  
‘Idiots go along with them, so it’s OK, isn’t it?’
- (28) Boku wa utaimasen, terebi de ikkyoku dake dewa boku no uta ga wakarimasen.  
‘One of them says, “I do not sing. I will never sing only one song on TV. They would not understand me just by listening to one song of mine”.’
- (29) Dattara shinguru-ban dasu na yo, **bakayaro** (laughter)  
‘If that’s the case, do not sell singles. Fuck it!!.’
- (30) Okoruzo, honto. ‘I am getting angry, really.’
- (31) Sooiu no ooin desu yo ne.  
‘Yes, you have those things.’
- Theme 2: About Popular TV soap operas  
Sub-theme: 1.
- (32) Terebi demo shichooritsu ageteru bangumi roku na mono nanda, daitai.  
‘Even the majority of TV soap opera dramas which

- get such a lot of viewers are trash.’
- (33) Ironna bangumi arimasu yo ne.  
‘Yes, various dramas can get a lot of viewers.’
- (34) Mito Koumon. toka, kudarainanda.  
‘Dramas like Mito Koomon are stupid.’
- (35) Are, ninki arun da ro?  
‘That program is so popular, isn’t it?’
- (36) **Yoboyobo no jijii ga** zenkoku nanka arukeru wake neen daro, **omae.**  
‘A doddering old man cannot walk all over the country, y’know what I mean?.’
- (37) Terebi damo no shooganai daro.  
‘It’s a TV show. It’s ok.’
- (38) Senshuu Sendai ittara, konshuu Nagoya ni irundaze, omae.  
‘He was in Sendai last week, and this week he is in Nagoya, y’know!.’
- (39) Hajime kara dase, kono **kuso jijii.**  
‘Take out (that ID) at the beginning, you bastard old man!!’  
(Referring to the *inroh*, a small lacquerware case carried like a wallet, which has a carving of Mito Komon’s family icon. At the end of the each story, Mito Koumon takes out the inroh and the people notice that he is a retired lord. Then everybody kneels down while he says, *Hikae, hikae, hikae.* ‘Watch out.’).
- (40) Hoide musume yuukai sarete, ottotsan korosarete mo  
‘And a girl was kidnapped, and her father was killed.’
- (41) Moo chotto yoosu o miyoo nante, kitanai.  
““Let’s look at the situation”, he says. It’s dirty”
- (42) Kitanaitte koto naidaro.  
‘It’s not that dirty.’
- (43) Hikae, hikae, hikae, nante  
““Watch out, watch out,” he says (at the end of each story, revealing his identity as a lord.)’
- (44) Hajimekkara dase, **kono kuso jijii** (huge laughter)  
‘Take that (your ID) out from the beginning. This bastard old man.’

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Example 2, Dialogue 2. (Referring to TV soap opera *Touyama no kinsan*, “Cherry Blossoms”)

- (1) Kao mite wakannee no ga irezumi de wakaruwake nee daro, **bakayaroo.** (laughter, applause)  
‘How can you recognize him by seeing his tattoo, when you cannot recognize his face, fuck it.’  
(Turning now to TV soap opera *Kore ga Seishun da*, “Teenagers”)
- (2) Onna no maneejaa ga mata dete kite,  
‘(That ugly) junior auxiliary girl is on it again.’
- (3) Mite, taiyoo ga shizunde ikuwa. Taiyo ga tottemo kirei-da-to.  
““Look, the Sun is setting. The Sun is so beautiful,” she says.’ (Laughter)
- (4) Yoshi, taiyoo ni mukatte dash! nante,

““OK. Let’s dash to the Sun”, they say.’

(5) Doko ikunda, **konoyaro!!**

‘Where are you going to? Bastard!!’

(Both quickly run to the back stage without bowing.).

Takeshi’s talk is extremely fast, probably the fastest of the all *o-warai* comedians. In the 42 sentences of this

performance, Takeshi swears ten times, *bakayaroo*, *konoyaroo*, *kuso jijii*. He swears every time that a sub-theme sequence ends. This swearing functions as a punctuation to complete each of the sequences. When he swears, the audience can safely burst into laughter, assuming this sub-theme has ended, and the sequence will move to the next sub-theme as shown below:

Table 3. Takeshi’s manzai sequence	
1. Presenting a topic (hearsay (direct/indirect citation))	Topic 1.
---te, datte, chatte,	
2. <i>Tsukkomi</i> ‘innocent backchanneling’	↓
-----arimasune, aru ne,	
3. Swearing	
konoyaroo, baka yaroo, kono kuso jijii	
Laughter	
1. Next topic	↓
	Topic 2.

Indeed, Takeshi has been criticized for having such violent vocabulary and fast speech, but he maintains this style, saying, “Do not take seriously what an *o-warai* performer does. *O-warai* is an *o-warai*.”, emphasizing that *o-warai* is the other side of the reality or truth (Martein 2006).

It is also worth noting that Beat Kiyoshi’s *tsukkomi*, Kiyoshi, merely functions as a foil to the *boke*. Kiyoshi tries to control Takeshi only twice, when Takeshi gets offensive about the rock ‘n roll singer in (19) to (25), and later when Takeshi points to a part of the audience. Beat Kiyoshi as a *tsukkomi* is helping the process of the sequence, and even accelerates Beat Takeshi’s linguistic violence, soliciting more laughter. In this *Manzai*, Beat Takeshi and Beat Kiyoshi’s duo *Tsui Biito*, ‘two beats’, follows a traditional *manzai* structure of interaction. In some *manzai* duos, the *boke* sometimes slaps or hits his *tsukkomi* partner, soliciting laughter. This apparently cruel or violent action,

Beat Takeshi’s severe criticism is aimed at popular mass culture, and people who are commonly expected to be paid respect. In this sense, Beat Takeshi’s is the child who says that the emperor is naked. With that, everyone finally starts laughing, confirming that they have the good eyesight and sense to agree that the emperor is indeed naked. Beat Takeshi nags at popular culture or popular incidents from a supposedly innocent, ignorant, unvarnished point of views.

Beat Takeshi derides the highest-rated mega popular TV dramas, popular food, the detergents that most many housewives buy, etc. – in other words, the things that the majority of the audience is buying, watching, and eating. The audience members, accused for their stupidity as mindless consumers, laugh

continuously and hysterically, with feelings both of self-accusation and of contentment that they are the same as everyone else.

This self-destructive laughter is further accelerated by Beat Takeshi’s nagging of his audience. His swearing at the audience, together with *boke*’s nagging toward the *tsukkomi* or hitting or slapping the *tsukkomi*, actually stimulates the performance. The audience again feels safe and secure when this nagging is repeated.

Example 3. Referring to a massively popular TV soap opera for high school children.

- (1) Onnna no ko no maneejaa ga detekite, taitei busu de ne.  
‘A female assistant (to the sport club) appears. Usually this kind of girl is ugly.’
- (2) Kingyo-bachi no soko mitai na megane kakete,  
‘(She is) wearing glasses with lenses as thick as the bottom of an aquarium.’
- (3) A, souiu kao nan desu yo. (Laughter)  
‘Ah, that kind of face. (pointing his index finger to a member of the audience.)
- (4) Cya, cya, yubi sasu na, yubi wo.  
‘Hey, hey. Don’t point your finger.’

Example 4. (At the last show of a TV program, to the audience)

- (1) Hontoo wa omaeramitai na kyaku, daikkirai dattan da yo!!  
‘Actually I have always hated audiences like you!!’  
(At a *manzai* show, 1980)

Example 5. (Referring to rather slow response of the audience to Takeshi’s *manzai*.)

- (1) Kyo wa osoi n dayo naa.  
'Today, the audience's response is so slow.'
- (2) Osoi yo, yatte rannai yo.  
'It's that you are so slow. I cannot stand it.'

In this way, Beat Takeshi has remained the severest critic of society, popular cultural phenomena, politics, economy, and social welfare. This radical attitude was probably applauded because the audience heard what they felt but could express publicly. Secondly, Takeshi's nagging on the audience also excited the audience, tickling their feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness, or even their inferiority complex. Both of the causes for Takeshi's laughter were supported by the bubble economy in 1980s Japan.

#### 4.2. Sanma

Sanma has been physical, slapstick comedian, not linguistically critical. He mimics others, soliciting laughter. Then he laughs about what he is doing, what the other comedians are doing, and what the audience is saying or doing. He laughs in an extreme way, rolling on the ground. Meanwhile, Sanma has never been politically incorrect. Although he is the only speaker of the Kansai dialect, which is considered loud, rough, and central to *manzai*, Sanma has never been aggressive, but has shown his emotional sensitivity, and is often described as a person who has emotional warmth despite his silliness. Complemented by his slim build and face, which perfectly match his stage name Sanma (a thin fish eaten in fall/mackerel pike), the reasons for his popularity are in stark contrast to those of Beat Takeshi.

#### 4.3. Tamori

The younger generation does not widely recognize Tamori as a comedian, as he currently appears mostly as MC for a singing show and a lunchtime variety show that has lasted more than 25 years. Tamori gained popularity as a radio comedian, verbally imitating celebrities and using gibberish to mimic foreign languages. His mimicking of foreign languages gained radio popularity over 30 years ago, and then he was brought to TV, starting as host of a daily *o-warai* show called *Waratte ii tomo!!!* ('Of course you can laugh!') His laughter is focused on verbal and nonverbal mimicry and mockery.

The Big Three originated from different places. Sanma is from the Kansai dialectal area; Tamori is from Fukuoka, Kyushu, and therefore uses a language close to the Japanese standard; and Takeshi originates from Tokyo's Asakusa district-the *shitamachi*, the downtown, dominated by the common people's linguistic features and lifestyles. Takeshi's linguistic verbosity is associated with the Tokyo Shitamachi dialect. It is considered rough but at the same time frank, unpretentious, and emotionally warm.

#### 5. Aftermath

More than 20 years have passed since the *manzai* boom that made Takeshi a big star, the groundbreaking comedy TV show *Oretachi Hyokin-zoku* which launched the careers of many young comedians, and the Yoshimoto Kogyo Company's opening of comedian schools in Osaka and Tokyo that held thousands of students.

Sanma continues to be a TV man, Takeshi has moved to film directing, and Tamori became a genteel MC, except for one midnight TV program where he returns to his own jokes. Having become a celebrity and having run into a string of serious trouble such as attacking a journalist's office, a near-death traffic accident, etc., Beat Takeshi has gradually lost the extreme radical stance and violence of his performances. Besides appearing as a regular guest on certain shows, Takeshi started teaching film directing at an arts university. Tamori also has a regular show, which has been continuing for almost thirty years every weekday. The Big Three have gone the route of established comedians: from *manzai/rakugo* performers, to solo comedians, to MCs. They have also taken disciples, as traditional comedy veterans used to do, producing several younger comedians; although the schools established by Yoshimoto Kogyo have also been producing prominent comedians. In this way, Takeshi, Sanma, and Tamori have established the standard career path for comedians. After the Big Three, many other younger comedians have become popular, some gaining prominence in fields other than comedy.

#### 6. O-warai and gender

Historically, traditional *manzai* and *rakugo* were exclusive male professions, excluding women from performing. However, there have been female performers as early as the 1920s; though the gender markedness theory still works for Japanese comedians. When the comedians are women, they are marked as *onna o-warai geinin*, woman comedians. The following list shows the differences between female and male comedians:

##### 1. Pin-geinin 'solo comedian'

There are almost no female comedy duos, although there have been a few trios. There is also no show in which a group of female comedians appears regularly. Like the veteran male comedians, veteran woman comedians may later host a show, but so far only one woman comedian, who speaks the Osaka dialect, is known for that.

##### 2. Slapstick or self-condescending

Woman comedians are not socially critical, although current male comedians are not critical, either. Some women become comedians by dieting publicly, showing their body size before and after, or by carrying out physical challenges. In some shows they swim or do

gymnastics, often stumbling or falling over. Those who used to be office ladies, newscasters, or housewives are now becoming comedians.

### 3. Performers of only one skill: mimicry

Woman comedians imitate female celebrities, singers and politicians. They also imitate women of certain categories, such as high school girls, department store clerks, department store elevator girls, aestheticians, beauty salon workers, etc. They get laughs by mimicking voice quality, intonation, and mannerisms such as answering mobile phones, calling, or writing text messages.

Female comedians are not active performers in a sense of making fun of others. They become comedians by being passively made fun of, looked at, stared at, and evaluated. On a TV show hosted by a male duo called London Boots, for example, woman comedians and some other female celebrities are given rankings. The themes of the rankings vary, but many times they are like ‘who is the best woman to go out with or make a

pass at?’ etc. The rankings are compiled from random surveys and interviews among salaried men, company executives, etc. Hearing the comments of the interviewees, the woman comedians give counter comments and argue with other woman comedians. This show seems to depict women’s rivalry over beauty and popularity, etc., as the image of woman comedians.

Except for one woman comedian called Kaminuma Emiko, who started her career as a comedian in 1971 no woman comedians are given a status as a veteran comedian, to the level of hosting a TV show. Kamimura Emiko hosts a weekly half-hour cooking show, compared with male comedians who get to the status of hosting variety shows or comedy shows. This ratio shows a distinctive difference between male comedians and female comedians.

Table 4 explains the relationship between the development of skills and career, represented by Big Three.

**Table 4. *Gei* Performance skill**

nonverbal/physical	→	verbal/ linguistic	→	meta-discourse
Style (hair, clothes)		mimicry		
Physical features		mockery		
Sanma	→			
Takeshi		→		
Tamori	→			

**Table 5. Career of a comedian**

<i>Manzai</i> .				
<i>Rakugo</i>	➡	solo performer	➡	hosting shows (accepting disciples)

The majority of comedians become popular by having only one to two skills. Sanma, Takeshi, and Tamori became the Big Three because they have mastered all disciplines, and finally achieved a winning edge as multifunctional celebrities, who now play roles as masters of ceremonies of a number of variety shows.

## 7. The change of space and the structure of *o-warais*

As the performance space shifted to TV, significant changes have been observed in the relationship between the performers and audience. As in the case of *manzai*, the internal relationship between the *boke* and *tsukkomi* also developed in a different direction. Some *boke*’s become independent as solo comedians, or the *boke* and *tsukkomi* each play their own role. Each has his own TV show, such as an interview or quiz show.

More than anything else, the role of *tsukkomi* has tended to become blurred. The role of the *tsukkomi* partner has shifted to the audience. The camera men constantly direct their lens to the audience, showing their response to the performance. TV viewers laugh

looking at the studio audience laughing.

Three other significant changes should be pointed out, as below:

### (1) Costumed performers

Some comedians become comedians in a certain fixed costume. Razor Ramon Hard Gay always appears in black leather underwear, while Kobayashi Yoshio appears only in bikini bathing suits. Performance in costume was also initiated by Takeshi and Sanma, each of them appearing in tight-fitting body suits under the names Takechan-man and the Devil-man.

### (2) Party jokes became the object of laughter

Tamori’s *Misshitsu gei* ‘closed room comedy art’ — simple ironic jokes on verbal and nonverbal mimicry. This is comedy that used to be performed at drunk pub gatherings among friends, i.e. an amateurs’ party performance that became a TV studio performance. Likewise, jokes and humor performed among friends and peers also made their way into *o-warai* TV shows.



(3) The TV camera has the most power

Shows such as Candid Camera, or shows involving passers-by and audiences, have become essential. As TV viewers watch the show through the camera lens, their scope of view is also defined by the camera. At the time of laughing, the camera captures the laughing audience as well as other comedians laughing, many times with their hands clapping. At shows without a live audience, the broadcasting staff – camera men, sound mixers, etc. – are shown to laugh loudly. The laughing of the staff at the back is also heard, encouraging TV viewers to laugh.

(4) Laugh track and repeated captions

Laugh tracks started being used in the mid 90s. Also, TV captions started being deployed every time there is a surprise or funny expression in a comedian's

or guest's dialogue. The caption appears more than once, having the phrase in bold, eye catching fonts in different colors.

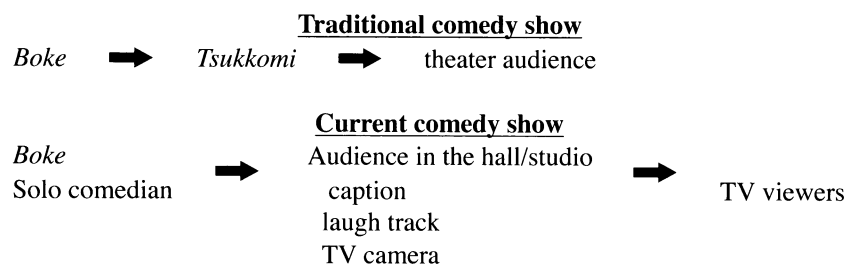
(5) Popularization of profession

As a result of (2), (3), and (4), many more people started to think that they can become professional *o-warai* performers, by going to the Yoshimoto Comedian Schools, asking prominent comedians to be their masters, or entering comedian competitions. Becoming *o-warai* comedians began to be considered the best way to become popular among women, rather than getting stylish, or just being good looking.

(5) Comedians are becoming idols.

The following table shows how the relationship among performers and audience has changed.

Table 6. Traditional comedy show and current *o-warai* show



In traditional *manzai*, a funny object is made funnier by the *boke's tsukkomi* partner, then by the audience. The audience laughed at the comedian's being helped or mediated by the *tsukkomi*. Those performances were traditionally carried out on the theater stage. There was a clear boundary between the trained professional comedians and the audience. However, with the stage moving from theaters to TV studios, the distance between the audience and performers became shorter. At the same time, the function of *boke* became rather obscure, and gradually the conventional relationship between *boke* and *tsukkomi* seems to have changed in two ways, i.e., (1) the *manzai* duo breaks up and each of them starts performing solo. Many times the *ex-boke*, talkative one tends to become *boke*. And (2) *tsukkomi* partner started to have his autonomy, by often initiating dialogues.

The more *o-warai* programs spread, the less political *o-warai* shows became. The themes of laughter, which used to be rather political and meta-discourse oriented, are not easily found nowadays.

### 8. Conclusion: blurring the boundary between *o-warai* and everyday talk

Discussing the current situation of *o-warai* shows in Japan, writer Tsutsui Yasutaka states that current comedy shows are not funny at all.

They become funny because the audience at each show pretends that the object is funny, constantly laughing. The other comedians who are listening to the talk at the show also laugh with their hands clapping (Tsutsui 2010).

As mentioned by Nomura above, indeed, the Japanese linguistic community needs laughter. Even apparently *sad or serious narratives need occasional laughing and giggling*. In rather sad films such as *Tokyo Sonata* or *Okuribito*, (The Departed), themes for laughing are inserted here and there.

In this economically and socially depressing Japan, everything should be laughed at, everyone should be laughing, and the object of laughter itself should be within the proximity of everybody. Laughing can be caused by linguistic mistakes, and by somebody's private life, including their marriage and divorce, fighting with their spouses, their parents getting senile, or their having traffic accidents or getting diarrhea. This popularization of *o-warai* helps to increase an opportunity for people, including not only young people but also housewives, to start thinking of a second career as comedians.

With the comedy arts moving from town theaters to TV studios, the comedy shows transformed themselves to a comprehensive art for anybody, including children

and seniors. At the same time, the definition of those who make laugh, those who laugh, and those who are laughed at has changed.

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