

OTHER NATIONS

American countries are experiencing the same unhealthy transition. It is a process, DeWalt concludes, in which "some people are devouring the cattle, while the cattle [in effect] are devouring some people."

Japan's Geisha

"The Art of the Geisha" by Liza Crihfield Dalby, in *Natural History* (Feb. 1983), Box 4300, Bergenfield, N.J. 07621.

To Westerners, Japan's "geisha girls," with their powdered faces and traditional garb, seem exotic and slightly sinful. Most Japanese, reports anthropologist Dalby, have the same reaction.

Yet the geisha are not prostitutes. The first geisha were male entertainers in 17th-century Japanese brothels. No women entered the profession until 1751, but by 1800 they had claimed the profession for themselves.

At first, geisha were Japan's fashion trend-setters. But as the Japanese began following Western styles during the 1920s, the geisha became instead informal "curators" of traditional Japanese culture. Today, geisha (literally, "artists") provide witty conversation and classical Japanese dance and music for wealthy male connoisseurs at exclusive teahouses, mostly in Tokyo or the old imperial capital of Kyoto.

Geisha enjoy private lives unique among Japanese women. They take lovers rather than husbands, and a few have wealthy "patrons." But they are "ladies of the evening" only, not "ladies of the night." "Men who imagine they will find a geisha for a one-night stand," says Dalby, "will be disappointed."

"Most Japanese," she notes, "have probably never met a geisha." In fact, there are only some 17,000 geisha in Japan today; their median age is 40. Tradition once demanded that a geisha's daughter follow in her mother's footsteps, but no longer. And the profession's peculiar status in Japanese society makes recruiting difficult.

On the one hand, because of their role as preservers of tradition, geisha are respected and considered "more Japanese" than any other group, says Dalby. (Few young Japanese women are willing to accept the stern discipline and artistic training required to enter the profession.) Yet, because geisha challenge the notion that marriage is the only proper path for Japanese women, there is more than a hint of disrepute in their image.

Thus, while "prominent Japanese will proudly present an evening of geisha entertainment to the visiting queen of England," Dalby observes, most would be aghast should their daughter enter the profession.

