

Japanese Tea Ritual, Dynamic Mythology, and National Identity

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Abstract

This paper discusses the way in which tea ritual is conveyed and creatively manipulated in a manner that helps engender a sense of national identity. While it appears to the outsider that tea practitioners emphasize the preservation of a static tradition, experienced insiders realize that *chadō* (茶道) or the “Way of Tea” is constantly changing. Since *chadō* is often presented as the quintessential manifestation of Japanese culture, viewing tea ritual as an instrument for communicating images of Japanese national identity may further our understanding of the manner in which the constantly shifting cultural imagery of such rituals contributes to creating the illusion of shared memories and collective history. As Befu points out, “as society changes, the former definition of self-identity no longer suffices and a new one must be created” (2001:3).

I. Introduction

In 1984, then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone posed for photographs while performing Japanese tea ritual on Election Day (Kelly 1984:64). In 2002, officials at Japan’s National Space Development Agency announced a plan to include a tea room in their section of the International Space Station (Murphy 2002). Clearly, even when confronted with the most dramatic restrictions on time and space, the Japanese will feature tea ritual when they want to make a symbolic statement about what is most important to them as a nation. In this paper, I would like to emphasize the way in which tea ritual is conveyed and creatively manipulated in a manner that helps engender a sense of national identity. While it appears to the outsider that tea practitioners emphasize the preservation of a static tradition, experienced insiders realize that *chadō* (茶道) or the “Way of Tea” is constantly changing.¹

Since *chadō* is often presented as the quintessential manifestation of Japanese culture, viewing tea ritual as an instrument for communicating images of Japanese national identity may further our understanding of the manner in which the constantly shifting cultural imagery of such rituals contributes to creating the illusion of shared memories and collective history. As Harumi Befu points out: “as society changes, the former definition of self-identity no longer suffices and a new one must be created” (2001:3).

Ritual is not static. It can function as a dynamic vehicle for individual and collective change. Victor Turner observed that the multivocal symbols employed in ritual permit it to function as a mechanism which “adapts and periodically readapts the biopsychical individual to the basic conditions and axiomatic values of human social life” (1967:43). Munn similarly proposed that ritual should be interpreted as “a symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meaning on the one hand, and that of social action and immediate event on the other” (1973:579). In this presentation, I emphasize the manner in which *chadō*'s panoply of multivocal symbols associated with both its material culture and higher order values functions to synthesize the disparate historical experiences of Japan's people within their highly stratified and, formerly, unusually segregated social system.

The “Way of Tea” is rich with dynamic imagery essential to its integrative function. Duncan Bell uses the term “mythscape” to represent “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly” (2003:63). He also asserts that “memory can be externalized only through multiple acts of remembrance, through social interaction” (2003:65). Tea practice and ritual performances are such “acts of remembrance.” But, for the most part, the events they commemorate and the individuals they celebrate are not part of the personal experience of the participants or their ancestors: They are collectively edited “mythscape.”

The linkage between myth and ritual has been debated among anthropologists ever since Robertson Smith initiated the discussion in 1899, stating that “in almost every case the myth was derived from ritual, and not the ritual from the myth” (1899:19; see Doty 2000:336–348 for further discussion). I would like to suggest, however, that in the case of Japanese tea ritual, a more fluid relationship exists

between memory, ritual, and national identity—one in which ritual creates the kind of “temporally and spatially extended discursive realm” in which Bell proposes the myth of nationhood may be “forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly.” I will begin with a discussion about the way in which tea ritual is transmitted to students.

II. Giving Tea Students a Vision of the Past

One of the first things a novice learns is that watches are not worn in the tea room. Teachers accompany this proscription with the formulaic explanation: “There is no time in the tea room.” In fact, the tea room is a model universe where rational notions of both time and space are suspended. Regarding space, Okakura Kakuzō, author of the famed *Book of Tea*, asserts that the “ideal” tea room is a four-and-one-half mat room (*yojōhan*, 四畳半) said to have been modeled on the dwelling of Vimalakīrti, a Buddhist lay mystic who supposedly accommodated the entire universe in his nine-foot square hut. Okakura interprets Vimalakīrti’s miracle as “an allegory based on the theory of non-existence of space to the truly enlightened” (Okakura 1956:60). However, in addition to encompassing the universe in his dwelling, Vimalakīrti was also able to cause its inhabitants to re-experience the various existences which had formed their “roots of virtue” (Watson 1997). This is exactly the kind of vicarious encounter with the past Japanese hope to undergo in the tea room. They are seeking, among other things, the fundamental sources from which the common vision of national goodness emanates. Thus, the teacher immediately establishes the tea room as the kind of “temporally and spatially extended discursive realm” Bell describes.

The tea room is modeled on the boundless Void, but it is very clearly contained within four walls. Doors and the directions of movement are symbolically important for their relationship to Taoism or *ommyōdō* (陰陽道) and because entrances and exits are important events on the ritual stage. When a beginning student enters the tea room, he or she is confronted with a bare space. The floor is covered with *tatami* (畳) mats. Some of the walls are plastered in clay and others are formed of sliding screens (*shoji*, 障子) or panels (*fusuma*, 襖). The most sacred part of the room is the alcove or *tokonoma* (床の間),

which contains, at a minimum, a hanging scroll or vase of flowers. The student will soon learn that directions in the tea room are described in terms of movement toward or away from the *tokonoma* and that his or her every step must reflect an awareness of this fact.

The tea room is dominated by the presence of the *sensei* (先生), the teacher whose title literally means “born before.” He or she sits in a traditionally designated position in front of the main pillar or *tokobashira* (床柱) of the alcove. For two thousand years, the spirit of the house has been believed to reside in the *tokobashira*. The *sensei* is the root of the tree—a tree which grows out of Japan’s oldest native, prehistoric traditions. An experienced teacher never moves from his or her position at the base of the mnemonic tree. Complex movements are verbally described, never demonstrated. The illusion of permanence must not be dispelled. It is visual and concrete. Interestingly, the teacher’s position is also symbolically associated with the trigram for “danger” in the directional symbolism of the *I Ching* (See Anderson 1987 for a more complete discussion).

By their simple presence in a traditional room, students are being introduced to a synthesis of the native system of spatial symbolism, represented by the *tokobashira*, and a system of directional symbolism imported from China early in Japanese history. Moreover, as these two systems of spatial symbolism are being integrated, social classes formerly separated are also being paradigmatically melded: The location of the *tokobashira* was critical to rural native dwellings, while the directional principles of *ommyōdō* were particular to the knowledge of the urban, educated elite and hired ritual specialists.

The first few months of instruction reinforce the student’s sense of ritually maneuvering in a four dimensional universe. The tea environment, like the ideational concept of “Japan” conjoins time and space. The student must attempt to kinesthetically master both dimensions. The slow pace of the tea room represents a real change of tempo for most Japanese. It requires taking a step backwards in time and a reorientation of their sense of regional identity: The tea world runs on Kyōto time. The main tea schools have their headquarters in Kyōto and it is there that most of the important events in tea history have taken place. The pace of life in Kyōto is slower than that of Tōkyō, Ōsaka, and Nagoya, home to forty-four

percent of the Japanese population. Tōkyō residents are said to wrap their *kimono* (着物) shorter than do Kyōto natives, so that they can walk faster. If students have *kimono* or are willing to buy them, they are taught how to manage their garments gracefully. Repetition and the presence of senior students skilled in these matters make the unaccustomed postures seem natural. By putting on the costume of the past and making it their own, students assume both the physical and mental attitudes of their predecessors. Wearing the relatively unchanging garment of the past not only drapes them with their national identity, but synthesizes social classes. The present differs from the past in that every modern practitioner dresses as a member of the *samurai* (侍) class—there are no nobles or peasants. As Maurice Halbwachs says: “society tends to eliminate from its memory everything that could separate individuals or distance groups from one another” (1975:290).

Students soon learn that the complex choreography of the tea room cannot be memorized: It must be internalized. One of the most important aspects of tea training is learning to synthesize knowledge acquired by observation with that which one “remembers with the body” (*karada de oboeru*, 体で覚えろ). Paul Connerton notes that:

Our bodies, which in commemorations stylistically re-enact an image of the past, keep the past also in an entirely effective form in their continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions. (1989:72)

Kinesthetic knowledge is thus imbued with a sense of personal veracity that cannot be attained through the simple study of texts. Detailed drawings of the placement of utensils in the tea room have been handed down for hundreds of years, but information conveyed orally is more important.

Lessons begin with learning how to handle basic utensils, particularly how to ritually purify them. A sense of purity (*sei*, 清) is one of tea ritual’s four most highly revered values. The other three are social harmony (*wa*, 和), respect (*kei*, 敬), and a Buddhist kind of tranquility (*jaku*, 寂).² A ritual environment which is pure, harmonious, and respectful creates the kind of tranquility, practitioners seek. Purity has been important to Japanese since prehistoric times. The first Chinese annals to record encounters with the

Japanese reported cultural practices related to purity and pollution (Tsunoda and Goodrich 1951). But, as Mary Douglas points out: “In chasing dirt . . . we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (1966:2). The impulse to equate order, purity, and aesthetic appeal is powerful in Japan. Indeed, the very fact that the tea room is a highly ordered and ritually pure environment makes it both visually attractive and particularly “Japanese” to tea participants.

One of the first things that a student discovers is that every tea utensil is significant. Regardless of whether an object is a National Treasure (*kokuhō*, 国宝)³ or an inexpensive practice piece, there is a proper and respectful way to handle each item. Its status is not based on monetary value. Its meaning is more important: An individual tea utensil can represent a famous person or group of people. It can also signify specific moral and aesthetic qualities associated with them and their historic milieu (in addition to eliciting seasonal feelings and poetic imagery). The use of utensils with historical associations helps integrate participants with the past. Although they may practice with copies, and their ancestors may have never seen or touched the originals, historic tea utensils are part of the collective patrimony of modern Japan. Visiting museums with collections of such utensils and studying books and magazines about them are popular pastimes among tea practitioners.

After a few months of studying the handling of diverse utensils and observing more senior practitioners, the student will begin to employ what he or she has learned in a basic tea procedure or *temae* (点前). Over the years, a tea practitioner will study hundreds of *temae* which vary according to the season, the utensils used, the ritual’s function, and the degree of formality. The idea that what the student is seeing and hearing is part of an unbroken (and, in theory, faithfully accurate) tradition stretching back centuries is critical to creating the ritual’s historicity. Although it is acknowledged that various procedures have been modified in small details over the centuries and that other *temae* are of recent vintage, modern practitioners feel, for the most part, that they are replicating the exact movements of their predecessors. When tea people witness or participate in a *temae*, they, for the most part, believe they are “seeing” the

past faithfully re-enacted. However, even more importantly, they are unconsciously negating the passage of time. It does not matter whether outsiders view their environment as archaic and their movements as ritualistic: Repetition and total immersion in the Way of Tea creates a completely natural atmosphere for participants—it is their current reality.

III. Preserving Tea Utensils for Future Generations

The tea utensils used in practice and at tea gatherings also convey symbolic messages of a shared national heritage. If a utensil has great importance, it may be contained inside a series of nested boxes written on by a sequence of owners. The writing on the box is called *hakogaki* (箱書). Any tea utensil may be stored in a box with such an inscription. If a tea utensil is new (or discovered without a box), the owner, dealer, or artist may ask a tea master to certify its quality by writing on the box. This guarantee is called a *kiwame* (極め). A tea utensil without a box is one of questionable origin. At tea gatherings, the guests may ask to see the box of a particularly interesting item, such as a tea scoop or scroll. The reason to view a box is that the calligraphy provides additional information about previous generations of tea practitioners and a further link with the past. Recognizing the historical significance, literary reference, or pun associated with a utensil such as a tea scoop's (*chashaku*) poetic name is satisfying to tea participants and gives them both a sense of familiarity with and belonging to Japan's aristocratic high culture. Utensils without names or historical provenience lack a higher level of meaning. The message is that, whatever its artistic merits, a utensil without a place in the context of the collective memory is of little value.

Even though a student may be learning the most rudimentary tea procedures and handling practice materials, the teacher will make a consistent effort to expose the novice to utensils with seasonal and historical associations. A tea teacher must collect a variety of implements in order to teach different procedures. Some will be copies of famous pieces and others will be original pieces of art. They may have been purchased, inherited, or received as gifts. To the extent the teacher's collection permits, he or she will vary the utensils used in class to express seasonal themes and to commemorate historical events important to tea practitioners. For example, a thin tea container in the shape favored by Sen Rikyū, the

founder of the Sen tea lineages, would be traditionally used around the time of his death day memorial in March.

The way in which the past is presented in the tea room is carefully prescribed. Of course, many utensils are copies of famous pieces. . The histories of such utensils have been recounted in collections of tea anecdotes for centuries. But, they are accorded the same respect as the originals and often inspire the student to do further research in the copious literature on tea utensils or view the originals at museums. Diligent practitioners learn to recognize the products of various kilns and artists and familiarize themselves with the history associated with each.

It is important to understand some tea utensils are well-known outside the circle of tea practitioners because they have played significant roles in Japanese history. For example, when the victorious warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) entered Kyōto in 1568 to help assert the questionable claims of the fifteenth Ashikaga *shōgun*, Yoshiaki (1537–1597), the leader of the opposition, Matsunaga Hisahide (1510–1577), prudently surrendered a famous thick tea container called *Tsukumo* (つくも)⁴ to Nobunaga. The gift also inspired Nobunaga to embark on a “famous utensil hunt” (*meibutsugari*, 名物狩). As he consolidated his hegemony, the tyrant systematically acquired the famous tea utensils of defeated lords and potential allies. Some he passed on to retainers, in effect, redistributing power and prestige throughout his territories. As Connerton says: “the objects endowed with the greatest symbolic power are those which display the quality inherent in the possessor by clearly demonstrating the quality required in their appropriation” (1989:87). When copies (*utsushi*, 写し) of such famous utensils as *Tsukumo* are used in modern tea rooms, practitioners are quite literally “seeing” a selectively edited (and, usually, positively interpreted) version of history.

Tea practitioners take the curatorship of utensils seriously because each object represents part of the collective experience. A tea practitioner never knows when he or she may be called upon to unpack, pack, clean, or otherwise handle a piece of history. The work which takes place behind the scenes at a tea gathering requires every bit as much training and discipline as preparing tea. Such attention to cleanliness

and detail also contributes concepts of national identity. Participating in acts of purification help define those who are “insiders.” Sharing a knowledge of esoteric practices also helps define group membership. The activity which takes place in the preparation room (*mizuya*, 水屋) is as ritualistic as those which take place in the tea room. Evan Zuesse suggests: “We also find rituals taking shape in conformity with a general sense of what is right and fitting to do in the context of a given situation” (1987:408). For Japanese, knowing how to work harmoniously in the preparation area and properly handle utensils evokes the manners of an ideal society. In a very real sense, tea utensils are independent of individual ownership. They are temporarily entrusted to individuals, but they belong to the tradition. They are tangible links to the fictively constructed shared past.

IV. The Timeless Experience of Tea Ritual

Lessons are only one part of the student’s experience. The teacher periodically holds a variety of tea gatherings celebrating seasonal themes or memorializing focal ancestors in the tea lineage. Sometimes, teaching associations hold collective tea events which give the novices their first initiation into the larger tea world.

There are many different kinds of tea gatherings ranging from picnic-like outdoor gatherings to solemn tea offerings at temples and shrines, but the most challenging and rewarding event for the host to prepare is an intimate, three and a half hour event where three to five guests are invited to share food and tea—the *chaji* (茶事). At other kinds of tea gatherings, the size and venue of an event can easily dominate, but it is most feasible to create an atmosphere of timelessness at a *chaji*. *Chaji* are paradigmatic events which include the preparation of both thick and thin tea, two charcoal procedures, and an elaborate meal.⁵ One of the most important things to understand about tea ritual is that it is different from the kind of non-participatory ritual where a group of people passively watch a ritual specialist perform, perhaps punctuating the experience with formulaic responses or performing some kind of token action.

Evan Zuesse (1987) divides ritual into “confirmatory” and “transformatory” varieties. Rituals which serve to reconcile the transcendental with the mundane while preserving the integrity of each domain are confirmatory. In contrast, transformatory ritual functions to reintegrate parts of the cognitive structure which are threatened by change. For Japanese, participation in *chaji* is a confirmatory experience in the sense that their inclusion and knowledge of etiquette emphasizes “belongingness” and social harmony (*wa*, 和). In fact, the ancient name for Japan is “the land of *wa*” (Tsunoda and Goodrich 1951). Japanese things are *wamono* (和物). Japanese food is *washoku* (和食), and so on.

Being an actor within the spatial and temporal boundaries of the tea room is playing on an ideal national stage created in microcosm. The experience may also be transformatory, because it takes place outside the mundane framework of modern life. Westernization may impinge on every aspect of modern Japanese life but, in the tea room, the new and the old are seamlessly integrated. The ritual convincingly reconciles modern practitioners to multiple eras of Japanese history and promotes a unified, if idealized, vision of the past.

It is important to understand that tea practitioners are not re-enacting the past in the sense that a Civil War buff participates in a mock battle. Years of training, seeing and handling tea utensils, and conversing about them, coupled with associated tastes and smells, *acculturate* tea practitioners to the past in the same way that a person from one country becomes familiar with the sights, smells, sounds, and tastes of an adopted land. While outsiders may wonder at the archaism of the ritual, the participants are completely comfortable with their surroundings. Etiquette and movement have become second nature. The combination of historic and seasonal symbolism and sensation seamlessly blend past and present—an illusion essential to the concept of national identity.

V. Conclusion

Political theorists suggest that there are two paradigms for national identity: the civic nation and the ethnic nation. Bernard Yack writes:

The myth of the *ethnic* nation suggests that you have no choice at all in the making of your national identity; you are your cultural inheritance and nothing else. The myth of the

civic nation, in contrast, suggests your national identity is nothing but your choice: you are the political principals you share with other like-minded individuals (Yack 1996:198).

During the Meiji Period, Japan's new leaders carefully reviewed the available options and chose a Prussian model for the *civic* nation, a model particularly amenable to the military. It was, however, not an image which resonated with the population at large. The solution was to create a *civic* nation based on the Prussian model and a Japanese *ethnic* nation to support it.

Meiji era (1868–1912) Urasenke grand master Gengensai is renowned for extending tea practice to a wider, and more socially inclusive, audience. In doing so, he established tea ritual as an icon of the *ethnic* state as opposed to a forum for the elite.

By the clever strategy of identifying the study of tea ritual with the national interest and promoting its inclusion in girls' school curriculum, the tea lineages were freed from their traditional dependence on the feudal lords, and tea ritual became both a popular pastime and a national icon.⁶ Involving the rank-and-file with the arts not only fostered a sense of identification with national achievements but also helped gloss over the injustices of social stratification. For the price of a ticket to the *kabuki* or a lesson in tea ritual, everyone could briefly share in the life-style of historic elites. For most Japanese, the history of their ancestors was one of privation and exploitation—not memories likely to strengthen identification with the privileged class. But, the mythscape of loyal *samurai*, beautiful ladies, and saintly tea masters, particularly as it is presented in the tea room, was, and is, an experience that they can savor with pride.

Notes:

1. The words “ritual” and “ceremony” are problematic for those of us who write about Tea in western languages. Japanese tea practitioners writing in English prefer to use “the Way of Tea” to emphasize the comprehensiveness of the life-style and deemphasize the idea of static performance. “Ritual” and “ceremony” create similar problems for anthropological theorists. Some anthropologists have tried to distinguish social ceremonies from religious rituals. Firth defines “ceremony” as “an interrelated set of actions with a social referent, and of a formal kind, that is, in which the form of the actions is regarded as

being significant or important , though not valid or efficacious in itself” (1967:73). In contrast, he suggests that rites are similar sets of formal actions which are efficacious, seen as valid, and have an other-worldly quality. Such attempts to distinguish religious ritual from civil ceremonies have never been wholly successful. As Zuesse points out in discussing sacrifice: “The aim of such ritual is to enact and perhaps even regenerate the structure of reality, the deep structure that consists of a certain pattern of relationships and their dynamic regeneration” (1987:408).

2. Originally, Murata Shukō (1392–1573) put forth the concepts of *wa* (harmony), *kin* (respect), *sei* (purity), and *jaku* (tranquility) as the tea ritual’s central concepts. Sen Rikyū (1522–1591) modified this formula by replacing *kin* (謹), a character designating sincere and modest reverence, which conveys an implication of social stratification, with *kei* (敬), a more egalitarian form of respect.

3. A system of designating “National Treasures” was created in 1887 by the Japanese Ministry of the Interior under the Cultural Properties Protection Act. As of 1989, there were about a thousand National Treasures which included buildings, sculptures, ceramics, paintings, etc. The choices of art works included on the list may be somewhat politically motivated, as the Japanese government is said to have selectively chosen articles which embody the orthodox vision of Japanese history. Some tea utensils and tea houses are included among the National Treasures.

4. *Tsukumo* means “Ninety-nine.” It was given this name by one of its previous owners, tea master, Murata Shukō (d. 1502), because it cost him ninety-nine copper *kan*. (One *kan* could buy two *koku* of rice, enough to feed two people for a year.) It is also called *Miotsukushi* (Seaweed Salt, 濤標).

5. Thick tea (*koicha*) differs from thin tea (*usucha*) in that the former is a viscous beverage in which approximately fourteen grams of tea are suspended in 175 ml. of water for five people, while the latter is a less viscous combination of 1.75 grams of tea in approximately 100 ml. of water.

6. Interestingly, women seldom made tea in public before the Meiji era. As Japanese men turned to western business and military models, women were invested with the responsibility of maintaining many aspects of traditional culture.

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