Culture, Nation, and the Tea Ceremony
―文化・ネーションと茶道―

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Few practices are simultaneously as exotic and representative, esoteric and quotidian, instrumental and sensual, political and cultural as the Japanese tea ceremony. While most Japanese have never participated in a formal tea gathering, and to many its arcane procedures remain rather alien, the practice is still recognized as a defining constituent of Japanese culture, integrating arts, manners, and sensibilities deemed peculiarly characteristic of the nation into a single, striking form. The tensions through which this emerged is the subject of this talk.

What I do in my research is unpack this seemingly natural link between tea ceremony and Japaneseness – that is, how it's Japaneseness was established historically, how it has become central to the organizational structure of the tea world, how it is embodied in the physical enactment of the practice, and how tea practitioners invoke Japaneseness in actual tea performances.

Today I'll give brief introductions to a few elements of this larger project. First I'd like to introduce the practice itself, to give you a sense of the flow of a full fourn-hour formal tea gathering. Then I'll briefly talk about the history of tea ceremony and the role of Japaneseness in its 20th century spread among women. Finally I'll bring in some ethnographic work that I've carried out on contemporary tea practice to show how practitioners invoke Japaneseness when doing tea.

One of the things that's quite interesting with tea ceremony is that it's very Japanese not just to foreigners, but to the Japanese themselves. This is surprising because often times what might be labeled "national culture" is taken for granted in its home context. For example, most often when buying rounds at a pub, one doesn't think of it as particularly British, it's simply what one does. But it's when you go out for a round with someone from the Netherlands, for example, who may want to "go Dutch" and split the bill that the Britishness of the custom is evoked. Traveling abroad one may be struck by the boisterousness of Italians or the precise punctuality of German trains that makes one aware of the Britishness of the way things are done back home. That is, most of the time, comfortably at home in our national boundaries, we are like fish in water. But this is not the case with tea ceremony, which is so often very Japanese not only for foreigners, but for Japanese themselves. How and why this is the case is what I will explore today.

I'm not sure how many of you have attended a full tea gathering. Maybe some of you fortunate enough to have lived in Japan or traveled there, and have been exposed to a short performance of *usucha*, or thin tea. But a full tea gathering is much more sumptuous and extensive – a four-hour social occasion in which a multi-course *kaiseki* meal is served in addition to

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bowls of thick tea and thin tea. I'd like to take this opportunity, then, to walk you through the flow of a full gathering and a few ways the material components of the practice work to evoke a sense of Japaneseness.

Meiji

Though in the Tokugawa Era, proficiency in the tea ceremony was a social skill any man of cultivation was expected to possess, when the Shogunate eventually collapsed in the 1860's, there was no guarantee that the practice would survive, let alone flourish, in the drastically altered conditions of Meiji Japan. The Sen iemoto were bankrupted, and the daimyo were dissolved. But the tea ceremony remained too deeply associated with the exercise of power to be discarded. Indeed, the ascendent capitalist elites taking over society's helm, adopted the cultured practices of prior rulers, in hopes of tempering their image as ravenous economic animals.

These businessmen – the heads of Mitsui, Mitsukoshi, the Tobu Railroad, and the like, along with numerous politicians – not only a spurred a thriving market for famous tea utensils, now being redefined as objects of art and treasures of the nation, but also their gala tea gatherings were attended by the powers-that-be and lavishly covered in the press. The iemoto-less daimyo-style tea they practiced had found a new carrier.

The immediate future of merchant-style tea, however, appeared grimmer. Bankrupted by the Meiji Restoration, the Sen families sought to forge ties to the new imperium by claiming that tea training provided a means for cultivating the Confucian values all good imperial subjects should now possess. As one iemoto declared, the true purpose of tea was to preserve the "national essence," and he argued that tea, as "the basis of national morals and national manners."

More crucial for the iemotos' immediate survival, though, was another social change. Under the Tokugawa, tea ceremony was the reserve of men. Under the former neo-feudal order, some women learned the practice as a form of etiquette training, but they were endowed with only a thin knowledge of the basic procedures, and no records indicate they hosted formal gatherings. Under the Meiji regime, however, women were not only increasingly liberated from status restrictions, but they were expected to contribute to the national polity of which they too were now part – even if a lesser one. From the 1890s, local educators at a number of girls' schools incorporated tea training as a part of the curriculum and extra-curriculum.

The iemoto quickly latched onto this trend not only donating utensils to girls' schools, but teaching classes at them as well. In the nation-making atmosphere of late Meiji, girls' home economics and etiquette textbooks increasingly emphasized the tea ceremony as part of the long and unique history of Japanese manners. Tea was described as essential to the "qualities of our country's women and of the ways of our country's people of the past," and proffered as a guidebook for the state-supported ideal of the "good wife and wise mother." The national image of the practice was further disseminated in school history textbooks, which generally included a section on Rikyû and tea practice during the glorious period of territorial consolidation under Nobunaga and Hideyoshi.

The iemoto benefited greatly from this tread, for young women were particularly well-suited to become

a lucrative pool of customers. In particular, because they could make use of the iemoto's certifying authority beyond the tea world. Included as part of a dowry, iemoto-issued certificates imparted official assurance of a woman's worthiness as a wife. (The elite businessmen had little need for such external validation of what was, for them, largely aesthetic entertainment.).

But women remained, of course, second-class citizens, and down to the end of the Taisho period (1912-1926), the iemoto could not compete on the scale of tea prestige with the Captains of Industry collecting priceless utensils for their own free-form ceremonies. But the financial crisis of 1928 turned the tables, as the Robber Barons passed from the stage. Their financial and geriatric decline opened a space for maneuver, in a Showa Japan of escalating militarism and ultra-nationalism.

In the 1930s, a rising chauvinistic tide saw increasing official energies invested in defining the particularities of the Japanese, and the tea ceremony served a useful tool in these endeavors. In just one example, the Ministry of Education's *Kokutai no Hongi* (Cardinal Principles of the National Polity) of 1937 – which, with a circulation in the millions was must-reading for anyone in the school system, both on the archipelago and in the colonies – enrolled the *wabi* aesthetic of tea as a prime expression of the national spirit. It described, for example, that…"This spirit in which an impartial concordance is created, reversing the time-honored discrimination of rank and occupation, accordingly nurtures the spirit of selfless duty."

In this atmosphere, the iemoto were able to claim the limelight for themselves. The decade witnessed two national tea events commemorating the 350th anniversariess of a grand tea gathering by Hideyoshi and of Sen Rikyu's death. These mega-events – which drew over ten thousand attendees, were broadcast on national radio, and garnered extensive newspaper coverage -- placed the iemotos' tea preparation on display to the nation as the epitome of tea practice. In the news coverage, the iemoto wove their wares into a nationalist narrative, declaring that "in [the tea of] Rikyû…is a culture of *wabi* whose spiritual basis accords with the national essence of the Japanese people." These events were followed by a series of best sellers by academics and arm-chair intellectuals, rallying Rikyû's tea as a means to transmit a self-sacrificing militaristic nationalism to the populace.

From Symbolic Power over Tea to Symbolic Power over Japanese Culture

But this did not last long. By 1945, imperial collapse and military occupation left the iemoto, as earlier at the fall of the Shogunate, once more in a potentially precarious position, exposed to attack as remnants of a discredited patriarchal tradition that had become adjuncts of an authoritarian order. Though over almost three centuries they had accumulated significant symbolic power, they had yet secured it as a routine attribute of their calling

Briefly, they were able to do so by refashioning their position in society in two complementary directions. Economically, they would convert themselves into modern business corporations, in syntony with the high-speed Japanese capitalism of the post-Occupation period. Socially, they would ascend to the status of cultural elites at a time when culture was one of the few legitimate arenas for nationalist expression. As the defeated Japan redefined itself as a peaceful "Country of Culture" (*Bunka Kokka*), the iemoto

crafted new roles for themselves as cultural ambassadors, who use the tea ceremony, as a "synthesis of Japanese culture," to represent the country at the highest levels of international exchanges. (Indeed, the head of the dominant Sen family is Japan's actual Cultural Ambassador to the United Nations.)

This branding association could also serve as a pitch for marketing a new range of business endeavors. Traditionally, iemoto reaped their profits from the sale of tea certificates, classes, texts, and publications – what might termed "tea expertise." But from the mid-twentieth century onwards, they diversified their business interests by opening publishing houses, architectural firms, travel agencies, and even junior colleges, in what is now a half-billion dollar industry. As tea was elevated to the rank of overarching cultural synthesis, the iemoto claimed authority over not simply tea practice, but Japanese culture in general. Asserting that Japanese culture was succumbing to a host of modern ills, they marketed their books, dinner plates, language courses, and cruise ship tours as a means to recuperate its true essence.

Typical sales pitches run along these lines: "traditional Japanese ways of life are withering, " we need a "Japanese attitude to life of which we can be proud."

Or, "In this confused society, the good taste of a Japanese life is being lost." The salve? "The tea ceremony, [which] can return society to its true abode.".

Symbolic escalation and market expansion went hand in hand.

The success of the iemoto in ensconsing themselves as the epitome of Japanese refinement is revealed in their post-war marriage patterns. One iemoto has secured a match with the Tokugawa family – a prospect inconceivable under the Bakufu – while another has married a cousin of the emperor, an imperial connection whose chance for mention is rarely missed.

With yet more publicity, the pinnacles of elective office invariably pay homage to the iemoto. Every year, the incumbent Prime Minister and an entourage of top bureaucrats attend in the first week of the New Year, a celebratory tea preparation the main complex of one of the Sen branches Tokyo. This spectacle, relayed to the public by press and television, stages the continuity of the role of Japanese rulers in the practice of the ceremony since the time of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, as well as the novelty of the status of the iemoto in presiding over it.

Little could better illustrate the passage of symbolic power from its accumulation to routine exercise.

Conclusion

The Japaneseness of the tea ceremony, as a concentration of national meanings, has been captured and secured by the iemoto in a historical process of wider significance. In the first stage, the iemoto projected the authority to define and certify authentic tea onto single master figures – the iemoto. Grounding legitimacy in genealogical connections to Rikyû, the iemoto then transformed a variety of innovative tea practices into a body of formalized knowledge that could be inherited and controlled. Administrative mechanisms developed to enforce this authority, including the elaboration of a curriculum and certificate system, and the inception of standards of utensil value and taste, based on the iemoto's genealogical authority.

Throughout this period, the tea ceremony – though not the tea of the iemoto – was wedded to the apex of political power, state connections that facilitated its later nationalization. In the first phase of the accumulation of symbolic power, the main competitor to the iemoto was the warrior-style daimyo tea, which remained the variety of choice among the dominant classes through the Tokugawa, Meiji, and Taisho Periods. This shifted with the decline of its latter day carriers, the business elite, in the 1920s, and the subsequent mobilization of cultural activities for the war effort. This combination enabled the iemoto to start annexing associations between tea ceremony and the Japanese nation diffused through etiquette and history textbooks in the school system, as they began to represent themselves as the living embodiment of this pediment of Japanese culture.

But it was not until after the war that the political need for promoting Japan as a “Land of Culture” enabled the iemoto to become icons wielding symbolic power over not simply over tea practice, but Japanese culture in general, ensconsing themselves firmly among the country’s elites. The iemoto could then employ a conflation of tea and Japanese culture to market new lines of product beyond their traditional base tea knowledge proper. At this point, a second stage has been completed, as symbolic power is exercised as a routinized practice.

While the tea ceremony is somewhat idiosyncratic, due to the concentration of power under the iemoto system, the mechanisms of authority accumulation and exercise are broadly generalizable. The elaboration of administrative techniques enables the constitution and regulation of a cultural field, print and broadcast media magnify its importance beyond the boundary of direct participants to broader society, elite networks aid in elevating symbolic status, and historical junctures can temper or facilitate these endeavors. These processes enable actors to lever a cultural practice into symbolic national status while transforming the cultural field itself by material investment in its national meanings.