



MAKING TEA, MAKING JAPAN

CULTURAL NATIONALISM
IN PRACTICE



KRISTIN SURAK

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Kristin Surak



STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Surak, Kristin, 1976– author.

Making tea, making Japan : cultural nationalism in practice / Kristin Surak.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-7866-4 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8047-7867-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Japanese tea ceremony. 2. Nationalism—Japan. 3. National characteristics, Japanese.

I. Title.

GT2910.S854 2012

394.1'5—dc23

2012021000

Typeset by Bruce Lundquist in 11/14 Adobe Garamond Pro

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Preface

The origins of this investigation of the relationship between the tea ceremony and Japaneseness are personal as well as scholarly. In 1999, a friend, like many eager to share “Japanese culture” with foreigners, asked if I would like to visit her tea ceremony class, and I, like many foreigners eager for a taste of “Japanese culture,” accepted her invitation. After watching the students make tea, I was given the opportunity to try my own hand at the intricate procedures. Though my memories of that day have worn thin, I still recall my utter confusion at how to do something as simple as pick up a tea bowl while trying to follow the teacher’s directions, “Left hand, right hand. No, right hand . . .” But I went back the next week, and the week after.

More than fulfilling an exoticized image of “real” Japanese culture, the tea class offered me an entrée into wider Japanese society. At the time, I had been teaching English on a rural island for about one year, but my language skills were poor and I spent my free time with other foreigners in neighboring areas. Joining the weekly tea class allowed me to enter a local home, make local acquaintances, and, above all, learn the local language. I acquired the phrases to humbly deflect rather than complacently accept compliments, the elaborate vocabulary for marking degrees of formality and position in hierarchies, and the nuanced ways of recognizing efforts by and impositions on others. As my command of the language grew stronger, acquaintances became friends, and I felt more secure in participating in the social worlds around me.

As it has done to many other practitioners, the tea practice—the preparation procedures and modes of interaction at lessons—began to mold my foreign body into forms regarded as distinctively Japanese. Expected to be different and not to understand, newcomers to Japan are assumed to bring unfamiliar customs to local interactions that may jar locals into awareness

of what is generally taken for granted. This sense of the out of place or the odd, this feeling of strangeness or discomfort, is handily encapsulated in the term *iwakan*. As my years studying tea progressed, however, I was increasingly told by people, “You don’t create a feeling of *iwakan*. Your movements are so natural.” In some cases, the compliments referred to the strict movements, determined by a kimono, used in tea practice. “You don’t give off a sense of *iwakan*. If I look at you from the back, you look like a Japanese. The way you stand and sit is completely natural—just straight up and down.” Or “You look just like a Japanese. From the back, you can’t even tell you’re a foreigner at all.” The extended time spent interacting with practitioners and conversing at tea lessons provided opportunities to absorb the torso movements, the head nods, the two-handed gestures made with reserved expression that constitute the taken-for-granted ways the body is inhabited in Japan. Occasionally some felt so comfortable that they momentarily “forgot” I was a foreigner, complaining about the West or immigrants and then catching themselves with an embarrassed laugh, “Oh, I forgot you’re American.” My retooled body quietly helped to put people at ease, mediating the shock of foreignness.¹

Yet I was not Japanese. Foreigners—particularly white Westerners—are often accorded a special status in Japan, and my research benefited from a widespread interest among the locals in sharing their culture with those from elsewhere. I received many invitations to dinner, and even to stay the night, from tea teachers eager to offer hospitality to a visitor from abroad. These opportunities to extend our encounters beyond tea spaces enabled me to better situate the role of the tea ceremony in their personal lives.² As a foreigner and a researcher, I was granted more mobility than most in the tea world, where a teacher’s permission is often necessary to attend a tea gathering elsewhere, and where a student is expected to remain with the same instructor over the course of her or his life, unless moves or other extenuating circumstances cut short the relationship. Moreover, the people I met were often keen to introduce me to tea exhibitions at local museums, accompany me to public tea events and formal gatherings, or even invite me to often exclusive formal tea gatherings.

But over months or years, even special status fades, and at the sites where I invested the most time making tea, I was saddled with the same expectations and obligations as everyone else in the end. These are most stringent for younger women, who often lament the difficulties of negotiating the hierarchical relationships in tea classes, where “you are ordered around, you

are treated as though you know nothing, and you can't talk back," as one informant described it. Eventually, however, my sympathy upon hearing such stories shifted to empathy. At one site I attended as a student I, too, began to be scolded for "mistakes" while making an honest effort. After a lesson during which we practiced the roles for a formal tea gathering, the teacher asked us what problems we noticed. I had been playing the part of the main guest—the person responsible for asking about the utensils the host making the tea had chosen for the day—and volunteered that I had forgotten to compliment the host on the silk pouch used, which had been made by a famous artisan. I had taken notice of the slip because during the preparation, the host had skipped past the opportunity to talk about the pouch in the rigid order of the discussion of utensils. But that didn't matter. As I knelt silently before her, the teacher berated me for several minutes for my rudeness and insensitivity, asking if I had learned anything at all in my years of tea training—harsh but not uncommon treatment coming from traditional teachers. Even the special pardon recognizing language difficulties was rescinded over time. When the teacher held formal gatherings, I, like every other student, was expected to read, memorize, and discuss at length the obscure names of utensils and craftsmen handwritten in ornate script on records of the gathering—and was sternly scolded if I failed. Sometimes, to my regret, I was treated like everyone else.

The Japanese are well known for hyperbolic compliments: an obvious foreigner who utters a simple *arigatō gozaimasu* as "thank you" may be applauded for speaking perfectly fluent Japanese. Certainly I have received my fair share of this sincerely offered flattery not to be taken literally. But experience also cultivates the sensitivity for knowing when their phrasing reflects the platitudes of social graces and when it expresses a more genuine surprise or deeper impression. Sometimes the practitioners I talked to would never get past offering pat explanations of the tea ceremony crafted for foreign ears, but with experience these are easy to spot and, reflexively analyzed, offer useful clues to wider social processes. Occasionally, with time, such formalities would segue into more sincere discussions. In such cases, I was treated as a fellow tea practitioner, who understood the gritty reality that lay under the sheen of spiritual ideals, recognized in the aside, "You know how it is."

Not only was I a foreigner, I was also a tea practitioner, and the balance and overall relevance of these two ways of identifying me shifted both between and within interactions. As a foreigner, my tea network was more diverse than

that of most, with even recent acquaintances eager to take on the mantle of cultural ambassadorship by sharing their interest in the practice. Because I was almost always asked about what I was doing in Japan, sometimes a conversation with a stranger on a bus could lead to an invitation to a tea gathering. The uncle of an acquaintance might have attended high school with the head (an *iemoto*) of a particular school or style of tea preparation. The friend of a friend might take me along to a local tea festival. As I got to know people involved in a number of tea organizations, I asked them to introduce me to other practitioners—both typical and notable—in order to explore the tea world's variety. The personal introductions were essential for chipping away at the barrier often erected between “Japanese” and “foreigners,” with its idealized explanations, and making possible more matter-of-fact conversations.

The accumulation of time and information led to a change, as I was treated less as only a foreigner and more as a foreign researcher, a foreign tea practitioner, or even simply a researcher or a tea practitioner. My own tea training—ten years of lessons leading to a teaching certification—also aided this process. When visiting a class, I would often help out with preparations behind the scenes, where the formality of the tea room (and the formality of a visit by a foreign researcher) is broken and everyday conversations and complaints are heard. Washing tea bowls was often as informative as watching the tea being made. Extra hands are appreciated at larger tea gatherings, and I volunteered to help at as many as I could. When longer conversations emerged during slower moments, I told people I was conducting research on the tea ceremony and asked about their experience. In such cases, I was treated as a (foreign) tea practitioner, who could be relied upon for competent help in the back or front room.

A decade of tea training also helped me understand the often specialized talk that occurs in tea settings as practitioners converse about utensils, artists, and tea masters. But, more importantly, it enabled me to see how people act within, or manipulate, the strictures and structures of the tea world. The years spent kneeling in front of the boiling kettle were essential for differentiating between a genuine compliment and a back-handed compliment, or recognizing when a mistake has been made but purposefully ignored. The time also cultivated a deep awareness of the embodied practice of making tea, on which I draw heavily in this book.

But no matter how “natural” my bodily comportment became, and no matter how much tea expertise I accrued, I was still a foreigner in Japan carrying out fieldwork. To the extent that I have examined how these iden-

tifications affect the data produced and collected, they have been not hindrances but resources. Because my very presence primed the relevance of Japaneseness in interactions, I draw heavily on occasions when my involvement was peripheral or nonexistent: tea demonstrations by Japanese for Japanese, tea books written in Japanese for Japanese, tea television programs produced in Japanese for Japanese. Explicit references to Japaneseness are common in all of these sites, providing rich material for studying the relationship between this practice and national identity.

Data Collection

The book that has resulted draws on several years of historical and ethnographic research in Japan, subsequent to my initiation into the tea ceremony. The bulk of the fieldwork was carried out between August 2006 and February 2008, supplemented by evidence gathered on earlier and shorter trips during the summers of 2002, 2003, and 2005. To ensure some exposure to regional differences, I chose three locations for the ethnographic and interview research: Tokyo, Kyoto, and Awaji Island, representing the country's metropolitan center, traditional capital, and rural hinterlands. I also carried out brief fieldwork trips to Niigata on the western coast and Aomori in the north.

The ethnographic work set out to map the tea world from multiple points. Four classes, which I attended for one year or more, became bases for my exploration, and these were supplemented by an additional four sites, where I visited lessons less regularly but multiple times. In some cases I recorded informal group discussions with the participants, and at two places I videotaped classes. One-shot visits were carried out at an additional ten sites, including community centers, hotels, private homes, and the headquarters of several tea schools, and I observed several high school and college tea ceremony club meetings, as well as junior high school tea performances. Public tea demonstrations were another focus of ethnographic inquiry, and I attended a number as a visitor or a participant, including community tea performances sponsored by municipal governments for local residents, tourist tea performances at hotels and temples for Japanese and foreign travelers, and ritual tea services at temples held in celebration or remembrance. Becoming a member of one tea school's national association, I took part in official meetings and training sessions, and got to know the organizations that structure the tea world from the inside. I also attended or assisted at numerous small formal gatherings (*chaji*) and large-scale gather-

ings (*chakai*) that dot the calendar of most tea aficionados. While many of my observations were with people affiliated with the Urasenke school of tea, which accounts for a majority of practitioners, I spent extensive time at lessons, gatherings, and in conversations with tea participants of other schools, including the Omotesenke, Mushanokōjisenke, Edosenke, Dainihon Sadō Gakkai, and Sekishū schools.³

In addition to this ethnographic work, I conducted semi-structured interviews with over one hundred tea practitioners, including housewives, students, policemen, school teachers, office workers, real estate agents, monks, geisha, and the simply rich and leisured, in addition to the iemoto heads of tea schools and others formally employed in the tea ceremony industry and related sectors, including tea producers, sweet makers, and museum curators. The participants ranged in age from their late teens to their early nineties, and included over three dozen men. I also informally interviewed fifty people from similarly diverse backgrounds involved with tea. Finally, to develop a picture of the relationship of nonpractitioners to the tea ceremony, I took field notes after several dozen informal conversations with those not directly involved in the tea world, including bartenders, hair cutters, taxi drivers, and regulars at the local pub.

The historical investigation was carried out in Kyoto at the Chado Research Center, where I collected information from tea ceremony periodicals, and in Tokyo at the National Diet Library, where I examined tea ceremony depictions in etiquette books. The Textbook Library in Tokyo and the Tokyo Women's Christian University Library provided additional sources, including school textbooks and women's magazines from across the twentieth century.

Acknowledgments

In the process, I accrued many debts to the scholars and friends who aided me along the way. Rogers Brubaker has provided indispensable guidance since the project's inception, and his penetrating insights and criticisms improved the work beyond what I initially thought possible. Combining acumen and affability, Andreas Wimmer offered invaluable suggestions, while Morgan Pitelka cheered me on as he read several in-progress drafts. Christine Guth and Joshua Mostow took the time to give detailed feedback on the entire manuscript. Other scholars in the United States and United Kingdom provided intellectual and moral support, especially Adrian Favell,

David Fitzgerald, Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Wesley Hiers, Angela Jamison, Rob Jansen, Jack Katz, Jaeun Kim, Justin Lee, Herman Ooms, Iddo Tavory, the participants in the Comparative Social Analysis Seminar at UCLA, and the members of the Japan Research Centre at SOAS. While carrying out the fieldwork, I benefited from the academic assistance of several scholars in Japan, including Kobayashi Yoshiho, Satō Kenji, Satō Shigeki, Tanaka Hidetaka, Tanimura Reiko, Ueno Chizuko, and Yoshino Kosaku.

Friends in Japan made me look forward to every opportunity to return to the field, and I am particularly grateful to Aragaki Kaeko and family, Kunita Akiko, Maejima Akiyo, the Nishioka family, Takashi Aiko and the Kida family, Toyoda Maho, Uchida Keisuke, and the bunch at Petticoat Lane. Others outside Japan were consistently encouraging, especially Giulia Andrighetto, Kheya Bag, Jodi Blumstein, Sung Choi, Theo Christov, Nick Elliot, David Koussens, Alex Malthias, Irene Padavic, Raj Pandey, Federico Rossano, Barbara Schmenk, Yasemin Soysal, Sarah Teasley, and Michelle Tierney. For their support over the years, I am thankful to my family: John, Judy, and Sarah.

My research benefited from generous grants or fellowships from the Fulbright-Hays Program, Japan Foundation, Terasaki Center for Japanese Studies, Sasakawa Foundation, and UCLA Graduate Division. The book was written in London and Florence while I was a Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Fellow at the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, and a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute.

This project could never have been undertaken without the generosity of the numerous tea practitioners, teachers, and friends who opened their doors to me, took the time to talk with me, and shared a part of their lives with me. I am grateful for their kindness. *Okagesamade.*

A Note on Transliteration

I follow the standard English-language academic conventions for transliterating Japanese. Names are written in the Japanese order of the family name before the given, and words common in English, such as Tokyo, are written without macrons. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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Introduction

Nation-Work

Few practices are simultaneously as exotic and representative, esoteric and quotidian, instrumental and sensual, political and cultural as the Japanese tea ceremony.¹ While most Japanese have never participated in a formal tea gathering, and to many its arcane procedures remain alien, the tea ceremony is all but universally 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 paradoxes of the tea ceremony offer an unusually rich ground for considering some of the still unresolved questions of nationality today.

Nationalism and Nationness

Broadly speaking, two kinds of literature have dominated thinking on this topic. On the one hand, and starting much earlier—at least four decades ago—scholars have examined the rise and spread of nationalism as a political mobilizing ideology and movement, aiming to create or expand a nation-state. Opinions have divided over the origins of nationalism—whether it is a purely modern phenomenon, going back no further than the