Chapter I

The Nature of Tea Ritual

INTRODUCTION

Following the Way of Tea (chadō) has three main components: dō, the philosophy; gaku, the academic content; and jitsu, practice. As an anthropologist, I was initially intrigued by the relationship between the philosophical content of Tea (dō) and the way in which these beliefs develop and are expressed, that is, the scholarly aspects (gaku) of tea ritual (chanoyu). However, in the course of ten years of actual practice (jitsu), I became convinced that analysts without extensive tea-room experience are unlikely to produce meaningful research on this fascinating subject.

Tea must be interpreted in context. The purpose of this book is to better prepare the reader to appreciate chanoyu by anticipating his or her need to locate the event among its historical, social, and symbolic coordinates. By sharing my understanding of the relationship between Tea and universal concepts such as those of religion and ritual, I hope to stimulate others to think analytically about the "Way of Tea."

Despite the fact that chadō is one of the richest, most sophisticated, and vital products of the human mind, westerners know very little about it. There are good reasons for this. Tea is not easily accessible to the casual observer. Anyone in Japan or near a large Japanese community may have a chance to observe the ritual preparation of tea, but, without disciplined and conscientious study, the symbol system, which conveys its meaning, cannot be interpreted. Chadō is a "way" of life and it assumes a lifetime commitment. Brief exposures to Tea produce little insight.
Happily, the doors of the Tea world are beginning to open to non-Japanese. In the last thirty years, it has become possible for people outside Japan to study chanoyu seriously and to take part in Tea’s yearly cycle of events. The grand masters of Urasenke have been particularly active in stimulating this trend. They have encouraged people from many nations to practice at their headquarters in Kyōto and have made it possible for many more to study in their own countries. Some, like myself, have been privileged to do both.

PUTTING THIS RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

My perspective as ethnographer and tea student seems to perplex both fellow-practitioners and professional colleagues, so I would like to be very clear about my biases. Let me begin by emphasizing my belief that an anthropologist’s first obligation is to his or her informants. We have historically been guests in other cultures and we have a real obligation to respect our hosts. This is particularly true in a world where the fragile tissues of traditional culture need to be cherished and protected more than ever.

As an initiate of the advanced level (okuden) of the Urasenke tea school (those of the ‘secret’ or orally transmitted tea procedures) and an assistant tea instructor, I have accepted an obligation to adhere to orthodox exegeses of Tea philosophy. This includes respecting the interpretations of meaning espoused by my superiors in the school hierarchy as well as their right to dictate goals and procedures. By custom, the ultimate arbiter of meaning in all Japanese schools of the traditional arts (iemono) is the grand master or (o)emono. I and all my fellow students enter into a social contract with our (o)emono and those senior to us historically and in terms of practical experience. They dedicate their lives to developing and sharing chadō, and we agree to respect the tradition and pass it on intact.

Accepting this responsibility raises questions about my objectivity among fellow professionals. Some seem to confuse the mental posture necessary for producing a critical analysis with that of being strictly critical. But, there need be no conflict between commitment to the subject matter and its faithful presentation. I will discuss some of the less desirable aspects of the tearoom behavior as they contribute to our understanding of Tea’s value system. But, experience has taught me that it is
counterproductive, both intellectually and in terms of interpersonal relationships, to discuss deviation in situations where a clear conception of the norm is lacking.

It should be obvious that I am not presenting my work as that of an impartial observer—I doubt if any ethnographer honestly could. Anthropologists select their area of specialty because some aspect of it is attractive to them. The quality of analyses produced by individuals who do not like or respect the people with whom they work should be suspect.

My perspective is exclusively that of an anthropologist who is learning ritual in a uniquely circumscribed and highly structured environment (that of the tearoom). Because I have been functioning under these particular circumstances for many years and have cross-checked my information with numerous other practitioners and the written literature, I feel confident that my training differs little from that of native participants and that it is comprehensive (for my level of expertise). I do not, however, claim my experience is typical or exemplary in any way.

As regards my academic outlook, I prefer not to identify with either the posture of the super-objective "ivory tower" scholar (the etic position) or hypersensitive insider (the emic position). My approach to ethnography is best described by Robert Feleppa's (1986) linguistically based research model.

Feleppa views ethnography as a work of translation, pointing out that: "Translation does not reflect pre-existing structure, it creates a structure" (1986, 250; the emphasis is Feleppa's). He goes on to explain that while linked to the cognitive framework of both the observer and the subject, the translation itself must be viewed as an independent framework for description rather than a distortion of another reality.

Like a responsible translator, I have tried to create a model that is scrupulously faithful to the vocabulary and grammar of Tea as it is experienced by my teachers and fellow students. My work can be labeled that of an insider only to the extent that Tea practitioners recognize it as descriptively accurate. I reject a predominantly outside or "objective" approach because I have found explanations of meaning presented symbolically in the tearoom and in the Tea literature fully adequate and reconcilable with anthropological theory. Let us consider some of these ideas.
SOME FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS ABOUT TEA RITUAL

An introduction to the religious aspects of Chadō

Much evidence suggests the relationship between tea ritual and the larger cultural milieu should be evaluated by the criteria applied to the cognitive systems we call “religions.” To begin with, the words selected by Japanese to describe Tea in English clearly propose a direct correlation between Chadō and religion.

Okakura Kakuzō (1863–1913), the scholar whose work effectively brought Tea to the attention of the western popular consciousness, labeled Tea “the religion of aestheticism” and “a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence.” He also said Tea is “a religion of the art of life” and “a sacred function at which the host and guest join to produce for that occasion the utmost beatitude of the mundane.” Finally, he observed that “Teaism was Taoism in disguise” (Okakura 1956, 34). The present grand master of Urasenke, Sen Sōshitsu, also says “Tea is the practice or realization of religious faith, no matter what you believe in” (Urasenke Newsletter [Winter 1978], no. 15).

If Sen Sōshitsu and Okakura Kakuzō are correct, the task of analyzing the “Way of Tea” can best be accomplished by: (1) exploring definitions of religion and ritual appropriate to systems of thought such as Tea philosophy in the light of their potential contribution to our understanding of Chadō. And, (2) investigating the manner in which the actual practice of tea ritual manifests its underlying rational.

Exploring definitions of religion

One of the most thought provoking definitions of religion is that of Clifford Geertz. He maintains that religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1973, 90).

Geertz emphasizes the manner in which a particular set of symbols functions to create a psychic environment conducive to the creation of a perception of reality that relieves the anxiety
normally associated with the suspicion “that life is absurd and the attempt to make moral, intellectual, or emotional sense out of experience is bootless” (Geertz 1973, 108).

Religion, Geertz suggests, achieves its ends through ritual “by inducing a set of moods and motivations—an ethos—and defining an image of cosmic order—a world view—by means of a single set of symbols” (Geertz 1973, 118). In other words, in the course of acting out an ideal or postulated cosmic order, ritual practitioners make alternatives seem plausible, not only in an explanatory sense but also as a paradigm for interaction with the ambient physical (and social) environment.

Geertz's definition emphasizes the fact that the communication of meaning in religion takes place through symbols. It also highlights the two central functions of religion: (1) postulating an ideal order to existence, and (2) providing a way for humans to alter or adapt to their perception of that system. Finally, it accentuates ritual’s role in reconciling the real and the ideal.

The problem with Geertz’s definition is that it provides no criteria that allows us to distinguish between behaviors pertaining to worldly concerns from those centering on cosmic anxieties and strategies for dealing with them. There is no doubt that one can make something like a religion out of a political ideology, for instance, but the meaning that religion has for the individual requires a condition of desired personal satisfaction not spelled out in this particular case.

For comprehensiveness and analytical utility, I prefer to work with Norman J. Girardot’s definition. He defines religion as “a system of symbolic thought and action that is ‘focused on salvation’ and interpretively grounded in mythical or cosmological ‘formulations of a general order of existence’” (Girardot 1983, 6). Girardot also maintains that “religion as a cultural system of symbols is concerned with a means of transforming, temporally or permanently, some ‘significant ill’ that is seen to be part of the cosmological or existential order of human life” (Girardot 1983, 6).

(See that Girardot does not refer to “salvation” as being saved from damnation or oblivion, a prominent characteristic of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Salvation can also mean being rescued from Chaos, a central concern of Eastern religions.)

The strong point of Girardot’s definition is its emphasis on salvation, an idea that I interpret as providing a personal link...
between the concept of cosmological order and individual behavior. Finding salvation is finding the means to transform that “significant ill” to which Girardot refers. What this definition lacks is Geertz’s notion of clothing cosmological imagery with an aura of veracity—an idea that has significant implications for the role of rituals, like those associated with Tea, in religion.

What is a “ritual”?

The functionalist approach to interpreting ritual To most English speakers, the word “ritual” connotates a particular class of formal, solemn, and repetitious events. However, as we have just learned, Geertz’s and Girardot’s more careful analysis suggests that rituals can also be viewed as physical behaviors that integrate a culture’s higher-order cognitive models with the daily lives of its members.

Most inquiries into the character of ritual have focused on answering two central questions: (1) Why do people engage in the behavior? And, (2) How do they achieve their goals? Those concerned primarily with discovering what ritual “does” take the functionalist approach, while those interested in the way ritual works concentrate on structure.

Norman J. Girardot contends that the aim of all religious behavior is “periodically recovering in this lifetime a condition of original wholeness, health or holiness” (1983, 7); while the grand master of Urasenke, Sen Sōshitsu XV, says the purpose of practicing chadō is: “to realize tranquillity of mind in communion with one’s fellow men within our world” (Sen 1979b, 9). Girardot is speaking in theoretical terms and the grand master is referring specifically to Tea, but they are saying the same thing—people engage in religious ritual because they feel it can help reconcile them with the incomprehensible.

Evan M. Zuesse’s concepts of “confirmatory” and “transformatory” ritual provide additional insight into this phenomenon. Zuesse believes events intended to reconcile the transcendental and the mundane while preserving the essential integrity of each domain may be identified as confirmatory ritual. In contrast, transformatory ritual serves to regenerate or reintegrate parts of the cognitive structure when its integrity is threatened by internal or external change. Zuesse sees the main function of both kinds of ritual as anchoring the perceived order in higher realms (Zuesse 1987).
The idea that an individual or group practices ritual to confirm or transform their perception of universal order has important implications for understanding tea ritual. Tea history and observations of tearoom behavior strongly suggest that disparate personal interpretations of external conditions may compel some of the religiously inclined to focus on preserving the "mythical or cosmological formulata of a general order of existence," while others concentrate on rectifying whatever they perceive to be a "significant ill." In practice this means that some ritual practitioners seek merely to confirm the "fitness" of their relationship with the "Ultimate," while others actively attempt to symbolically transform themselves, the transcendent order, or both.

While Zuesse's bipartite approach to ritual function has the potential to illuminate some of the continuities and juxtapositions that synthesize tea history, tea practice, and the Japanese perception of chanoyu, the utility of his terminology is severely constrained by restricting its application to categories of behavior perceived as strictly dichotomous. For example, Zuesse labels taboos, blessings, rituals of meditation, and some kinds of prayers "confirmatory"; while, he considers rituals of initiation, healing, and divination "transformatory."

My research suggests that some very inclusive and complex rituals, like chadō, may be alternately or concurrently "confirmatory" or "transformatory," depending on the immediate spiritual requirements of their ritual constituents. In fact, practitioners' ability to reconcile a ritual's symbolic content with the ambient cultural milieu by selectively emphasizing either "confirmatory" or "transformatory" aspects of the behavior may determine the evolutionary viability of the activity.

I believe every tea event mirrors the ambiguity created by the dual confirmatory and transformatory constituents in its development. The strain is minimal in the more advanced tea procedures (temae) and offertory ritual (kucha and kencha) because these rites are solidly rooted in the confirmatory tradition of temple Tea. They serve mainly to define humans not only in relation to higher powers but also to explicate the cosmic model. The conflict is most intense at the more secular chaji because these private gatherings incorporate the imagery of practitioners who aspired to manipulate perceptions of the transcendent through tea ritual as well as those determined to maintain the system unchanged.
Over the centuries, a distinct bias in favor of the confirmatory element in tea ritual appears to have developed. Even though the dress, manners, and surroundings of tea ritual are radically different from those of their daily lives, modern Japanese practitioners seem to leave the tearoom with a strong conviction that the "correct" order has been confirmed.

In the tearoom, the diverse Chinese and native elements in Japanese culture are synthesized and made coherent. The social order is reinforced through subtle etiquette. The rhythms of temporal existence are celebrated and the bounty of nature is glorified. Even the products of Japanese material culture are enshrined.

By behaving properly in the tearoom, the host and guest participate fully in a cooperative act of ritual world maintenance. Indeed, tea practitioners appear to perform these functions so effectively that other Japanese have come to perceive such ritual specialists as their proxies in this complex cognitive process.

This is not to say transformative elements are completely missing from modern tea practice or that it is in any way a "failed ritual." No statistics will ever reveal the relative percentages of people who practice tea with confirmatory vs transformative intentions. After all, even Sen Rikyū (1522–1591), the greatest tea master who ever lived, admitted to having experienced chanoyu true to his ideal (which was fundamentally transformative) once or twice in his lifetime. The important issue here is that, though the intent of practitioners varies, chadō always fulfills a function beyond the simple preparation of tea. How it does so is an equally important area of inquiry.

*The structuralist approach to analyzing ritual.* Victor Turner was one of the first investigators to suggest approaching the problem of examining ritual from a structuralist perspective. He suggested making a careful inquiry into the interrelations between the components of ritual. His work, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual,* had a catalytic effect on the debate. It presented the symbol as "the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviors" (Turner 1967, 19).

Turner believed that "each kind of ritual might be regarded as a configuration of symbols, a sort of 'score' in which the symbols are notes" (Turner 1967, 48). He also suggested that rit-
uals were integrated into a larger cultural context by multivocal symbols and observed that ritual was a mechanism which "adapts and periodically readapts the biopsychical individual to the basic conditions and axiomatic values of human social life" (Turner 1967, 43).

Raymond Firth refined this symbolic approach to ritual structure by substituting a linguistic conceptual model for Turner’s musical metaphor. He defined "ritual" as "...a symbolic mode of communication, of 'saying something' in a formal way, not to be said in ordinary language or informal behavior." He also suggested "This idea of 'not to be said' in an ordinary way means that a special character of ritual is its reserve, its apartness, its 'sacred' quality. Its "grammar" is different from that of ordinary language." (Firth 1973, 176)

Furthering the trend toward looking at ritual "from the symbolic 'inside out' (rather than the functionalist 'outside in')," Nancy Munn elaborated upon this linguistic imagery. She concluded that ritual should be interpreted as "a symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meanings on the one hand, and that of social action and immediate event on the other" (Munn 1973, 579).

Munn also observed that particular symbols appear and reappear in different contexts within a culture’s ritual matrices. She deemed it essential to investigate these units both in terms of what informants say they mean and with respect to the various social arenas in which they appear. It was her contention that, because symbols convey messages in a variety of ritual situations, they are endowed with the power to condense meaning and, ultimately, to mediate the relationship of the individual to the community at multiple levels of consciousness and utility (Munn 1973).

Munn’s concept of ritual as "ritual message system" has important implications for the analysis of tea ritual. She defined "the ritual message system" as "all the forms and rules governing these forms that pertain to the ritual process as a mode of expressive communication (e.g. the symbols, the action sequences, and the rules governing these; the categories of participants and their modes of participation, etc.)" (Munn 1973, 580). In other words, Munn was not concerned merely with the meaning of individual symbols but with the way in which they relate to each other in a wider cultural milieu. As
we shall see, this concept is critical in attempting to understand chadō.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

It should be becoming increasingly obvious that there is much more to a tea gathering than ladies in pretty kimono fluttering over exquisite ceramics. As the work of the forgoing theorists suggests, phenomena like Tea can be fruitfully investigated from both functionalist and structuralist perspectives. My purpose in writing this book is to propose some avenues of inquiry and establish a factual basis for further discussion.

The chapters on tea history that follow are intended to help the reader understand the way tea ritual developed. The section on the modern tea school explains how tea practitioners learn to perform tea ritual, and a detailed description of a tea gathering ensues. The book concludes with some thoughts concerning chadō’s relationship to Japanese culture at large.

Throughout, we will be seeking the answers to three main questions derived from Geertz’s and Girardot’s definitions of religion: (1) How does tea ritual aid in formulating a general order of existence? (2) How does it focus on salvation? (i.e. How does it transform some “significant ill’ thought to be part of the cosmological or existential order of human life?”) And, (3) How does it clothe the resulting concept of order with an aura of factuality that influences and alters the practitioner’s approach to everyday life? I hope that in seeking the answers to these questions, the reader will become inspired to travel a little further along “The Way of Tea.”