

## *Written on the Clouds: Poetic Names in Chanoyu*

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### **Abstract**

Object reverence has always been an important part of Japanese culture throughout the centuries. Mono or objects in a traditional Japanese society were viewed in a cosmocentric perspective, therefore the world of objects has been mythologized and poeticized. Though inanimate by nature, objects may be treated as if they are alive, even sacred, and they can be given poetic names. The world of tea created the perfect environment for mono providing the stage for the objects to perform. Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony, is an interdisciplinary complex, a synthesis of arts, crafts and multiple cultural elements brought together in the ritual of preparing, making and sharing a bowl of tea. Tea epitomizes the Japanese penchant for elevating seemingly ordinary objects to the level of art. Their participation in a tea gathering is of supreme importance as the utensils are communicating with people in a non-verbal way. Often, they are given poetic names and their lineages are documented. These names – “poetic names” – play the central role in crafting of the narrative of a tea gathering – tea performance. They bridge non-verbal and verbal elements and give a voice to otherwise silent objects. Based on the study and the analysis of the official records of the tea gatherings, I will identify the role the poetic names play in the Chanoyu narrative, provide classification of the poetic names, and determine the criteria for the selection of objects based on their names.

Keywords: Chanoyu, Aesthetics, Culture, Mindfulness, Sensory Design, Intercultural Studies

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## Introduction

Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony, is an interdisciplinary complex, a synthesis of traditional Japanese and world arts and crafts combined with multiple cultural elements and brought together in a creative ritual of preparing, making and sharing a bowl of tea. It nurtures unified awareness through the refinement of all six senses in harmony and tranquility. Unlike many other meditative practices, this happens without detachment from but in the real world with its colours, tastes, sounds, fragrances and textures. Contemplative arts in Japan don't just exist in a well-protected environment far away from the real life, they exist, survive, and flourish right in the middle of the busy life of the great cities, often right in the factories and companies. It is not uncommon to see a flower arrangement right at a busy train station, passed by the thousands of people a day. Chanoyu literally means "hot water for tea" and is seemingly centered around preparing making and sharing a bowl of tea. However, tea as a beverage is not central to Tea as a practice. It is the cultural complex that has been created around the beverage that is the base for the contemplative practice. Chanoyu has adapted and encouraged creation of many objects both Japanese and non-Japanese to be used in tea. It provided a context for all these myriads of objects to exist, co-exist and by learning about these objects that often have a poetic name, we access "cultural keys" to the otherwise closed to us doors.

## Chaji

At the heart of tea practice lies the form to which all the elements lead and to which they connect. This form is called *chaji* in Japanese and is often translated as a "formal tea gathering". However, cha is tea and ji can be translated as "thing", "reality", possibly, "truth" even; so chaji then can be translated as the "essence of Tea practice". No matter what translation we select, I feel it is better left in Japanese.

Sanmi Sasaki categorizes seven basic forms of *chaji* and mentions fifteen other variations. (Sasaki, 1996) Given that tea can be offered (performed) on any occasion in human life, there virtually is a possibility of tremendous number of variations. However, they are all connected through the fact that they follow the same basic structure or the account that presents connected events.

I suggest that *chaji* can be considered a form of contemplative narrative. The host tells a story to the guests of his/her choice. The story is woven with the help of many different elements – season, time of the day, quality of light; place, space, objects selected and arranged in multiple compositions, as well as human connections. Also, it unfolds with the help and active participation of the guests.

Because contemplative type of narrative relies on such factors as place, space (place where practice occurs), time and people who are invited, it can never be repeated in the same way. Each time is unique and is treasured for that. This "once-ness" of tea is what likens it to an oral tradition of storytelling or to a theatre performance that relies on natural setting with its light, weather and other variables. What sets it aside from a traditional performance is the role of guests and so called "artistic functionality" of its components and objects used. Chaji has a very clear structure and a sequence of elements.

## Implements on the Way

There are myriad objects used in Tea. One formal tea gathering uses over four hundred utensils. They are collected carefully throughout one's life of practice, often being passed down from generation to generation. *Dōgu*, translated as “tea utensils”, – *Dō* being the Way and *Gu* – implement, utensil, are really messengers. They are selected to be taken on the Way. Personal taste then is just one of several reasons to acquire an object. *Chanoyu* provides a context for these various utensils and sets a “stage” or setting for the objects to tell their stories united by the host's vision. This setting is very different from a museum display. Tea objects are to be used, not simply admired by the participants or left in a glass case to be looked at from a distance. They are used, touched and looked at while being held thus becoming an integral part of the process. Guests don't just look at the art objects and talk about them. People are actually living the art. *Chanoyu* creates a symbiotic relationship between practitioner, artist and spectator.

The creations of a "toriwase", an assemblage of myriad objects for one tea, lies at the heart of chanoyu practice. The word is a combination of two verbs: to pick and to put together. It is a profound skill critical to the accomplishment of the tea person. No objects are selected solely for their beauty; they are chosen as much for their functional suitability as their beauty. Their function is twofold; firstly, to serve perfectly as a utensil and secondly to act as a part of an assemblage which creates the best environment to welcome the guests and reflect the theme chose by the host. Individual and personal, toriwase is also a strict and profound practice whereby one's personal attachments and ambitions are set aside for the sake of others. It is a perfect reflection of what we would call the design process. Concern for others takes central place in the design process of "toriwase". Objects are not just perfectly placed in space next to each other. They are selected according to the form of the human body in terms of shape and placement while acknowledging the occasion and the particular guests. Toriwase is similar to monogatari or narrative, novel, literary work. “Object reverence” has always been an important part of Japanese culture. Mono or object in a traditional Japanese society was viewed in a cosmo centric perspective; therefore, the world of objects has been mythologized and poeticized. Mono are often animate and carry the energy of ancient traditions within. Their participation in a ritual, ceremony or matsuri festival, for example, is of supreme importance as they are communicating with people and with kami gods in a non-verbal way. There is a particular inner connection between a human and an object (even an everyday one) in Japan. Japanese pay quiet attention and are particularly impressed by objects, which result in a necessity to peer closely, to establish a connection with the object. Cleanliness is not only a hygienic quality, but also spiritual. Each object has its place and often its own “palace”- many layered boxes made of a special wood in a particular way. Some will even have a poetic name.

## Poetic Names

From a distance a simple black lacquer tea container called “yozakura” (“cherry blossoms at night”) looks plain and unadorned but upon close inspection a subtlety faint design of a blossoming cherry tree done in black upon black materializes. Each flower is different and there is only one way to properly close the lid. One is only able to notice it upon careful mindful observation.

The bamboo tea scoop accompanying the container might be given the poetic name. For example, one simple old bamboo scoop has been given a name of “iezuto”, “souvenir” and a

homonym to “(I) cannot tell.” It refers to a poem about a man who, astonished by the beauty of cherry blossoms, wanted to bring a branch as a souvenir to his lover but on the way all blossoms fell. “I cannot tell” refers to both indescribable beauty and unspeakable sadness. Such relations between the objects built over the course of a chaji gathering are woven into the fabric of a story where poetic names become bridges between the objects and the current of the narrative.

The first objects to receive poetic names were the chatsubo or the tea jars. Tea was a precious commodity and after being picked in May will be carefully packed into a ceramic or pottery jar and taken to the mountains to keep it cool through the heat of summer. Naturally, thick tea containers chaire received the names as well. So did the bowls used for hick tea and the tea scoops often made from bamboo. By giving a name to an object tea people chajin empowered the particular objects recognizing the presence of their soul, their spirit. The name would be given by a grand master of a tea tradition or a so called “person of virtue” such as a priest of a temple. However, we also see a lot of names given by the artists themselves. Made in 1990 a raku bowl by Jikinyū (then Kichizaemon) has a name of 碎動風鬼 (saidōfūki). It translates into English as “Human Heart in Demon’s Form” and derives from the treatise by Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) describing the various roles in a Noh play. This teabowl looks outrageous in terms of its appearance and isn’t strictly speaking suitable for tea but in its outrageousness we see both the loyalty to the spirit of the first raku master and break through to the space of no limits.

A very different shigaraki teabowl has a name 月の影 (tsuki-no kage) and draws on poetic anthology of Hyakuninissū, poem number seventy nine about the clear and pure moonlight. “Kage” means both shadow and silhouette, even phantom. Knowing the poem, selection of a silhouette translation seems appropriate.

Poetic names, and sometimes “poem-names” (when the whole poem becomes a name), can be seasonal or not seasonal. These days, the names that are not connected to the season, the ones carrying more philosophical meaning are given to the teabowls and tea scoops used to prepare thick tea koicha. Koicha is the central element of chaji, its culmination and its most important part. It is made and partaken in silence except for a short, scripted dialogue that is centered around the poetic names. The name of the teascoop in koicha will be connected to the calligraphy used a couple of hours earlier and is one of the most important pillars of toriawase.

Teaspoons used for usucha or thin whisked tea and main okashi (sweets) always have a seasonal poetic name. Tea epitomizes seasonal appreciation, which is so important in Japanese culture. Saijiki or encyclopedia of seasons opens a fascinating world of micro seasons where the seasonal phenomena, foods, sweets, and the poetic names continuously change every two weeks or so. These changes are acutely reflected in toriawase and subsequently in the selection of the utensils according to their poetic names. Surely, nobody can have a perfect toriawase for every two weeks of the year but attending the tea gatherings, as well as the exhibits of chanoyu utensils and even permanent exhibits at the museums is a great learning opportunity. The students of tea practice, usually going to their teacher’s house or a place of practice three times a month. When they perform a temae, they are asked to come up with their own “gomei” or poetic names for a teabowl and a teascoop. This becomes a practice of its own and the students are supposed to study the seasons, literary background of the seasonal phenomena etc. to come up with a suitable gomei. While the seasonal names must be always true to the season and even to the micro season, they also are part of an

overall experience in the tearoom and can allude to a particular shared memory between the guest and can certainly create a new one for the future.

## **Conclusions**

Aesthetics and the sense of beauty in Japan occupy a special place and are at the foundation of the Japanese national identity. It doesn't just exist as a faraway ideal but is included in all daily activities of the ordinary people. To study Japanese aesthetics means to better understand Japan and the Japanese people. At the same time, we can transfer these attitudes and approaches to our own lives, cultures and communities. Mara Miller writes: "The value of Japanese aesthetics lies less in the knowledge they give us about the Japanese... than the truths they expose about the human condition..." (Miller, 2011).

Chanoyu, Japanese tea ceremony, is a rich and all encompassing interdisciplinary cultural complex that has penetrated every corner of the Japanese society. Chanoyu elevates everyday activities to the level of art and brings art closer to people and their daily life. By studying tea and about Chanoyu we have an opportunity to examine important cornerstones of Japanese culture and apply the knowledge in a variety of ways.

While every culture has seasonal awareness, in Japan it has been taken to a completely different level, so much so that it can be considered a separate discipline, and this is unique to Japan.

Poetic names in chanoyu are an invaluable and endless resource that opens the doors into history, literature, aesthetics and helps us to better understand Japan, the Japanese, as well as ourselves and the world. The study of gomei also helps to cultivate attention, awareness, and mindfulness.

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