Local cultural study through the creation of a college brand sake: Reflections on the sake making project at Keiwa College

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I. Introduction

As a foreigner living and working in Japan, I have come see the sake brewery as one of the foundations of Japanese culture and food culture. The adaptation to climate, the natural cycle of rice to sake, the unique culture of sake brewers, the mastery of bacteria and microorganisms, the detail and precision of sake making — all these things are representative of Japanese culture, yet remain hidden from the everyday lives of most Japanese.

In 2002, I became the first foreigner to participate in the national sake tasting competition as Niigata’s representative in Tokyo. As part of my preparation and research, I worked for a short time in 3 sake breweries in northern and central Niigata prefecture. During these times, I lived and worked directly with traditional touji, or sake brewmasters. In 2007, to promote the newly founded Niigata seishu tatsuujin kentei shiken (Niigata Sake Master Test), I became one of 14 honorary tatsuujin (masters). As one of the goals of this honor was to promote Niigata sake, I began wondering what I could do from the standpoint of a post-secondary educator — how I could turn sake into an educational material (textbook), the brewing process into a local cultural studies syllabus. In March 2007, I got the idea to make a college brand sake from Professor Takeo Koizumi of Tokyo Agricultural College, whom I met at a speech in Shibata. He spoke of the “Daigaku no daiginjo” project at Kyushu University, where students produced and marketed their own sake, and suggested afterwards that I do something similar at Keiwa. I was inspired by this suggestion and immediately began making a syllabus/sake-making plan for my upcoming second year seminar. Shortly thereafter, I contacted Kanemasu Brewery in Shibata and together made a one-year working plan to create, bottle, and locally market an original Keiwa-brand sake.
II. The Process

Our first year of sake making consisted of 10 participatory fieldwork events, plus in-class textbook and materials study.

(1) Rice planting  （田植え）（May）

The year’s activity began with rice planting. We joined “Oretachi no sake o tsukuru kai” (俺たちの酒を造る会), a community sake making group, and planted a special sake rice variety called gohyakumangoku in a rice paddy enclosed by mountains in the Sugatani area of Shibata city. Along with my students, around 80 people planted rice on an area of 1 tan (approximately 1000 square meters).

In class during the spring semester, we studied about sake rice varieties, particularly focusing on varieties common to Niigata. One interesting thing about varieties like gohyakumangoku, koshitanrei, or ippon-jimei is that they are relatively recent — all created in the past 50 years — and reflect a conscious effort to create the best rice suited for the environment and sake making techniques of a particular area. What we call “tradition” or “culture” is painstakingly created and preserved by strong human effort — it is not just something that happened a long time ago. It is a continuing process, connected to contemporary society and, by a short extension, students’ lives.

(2) Rice harvesting  （稲刈り）（September）

In the beginning of September, when the Niigata summer days are still hot, we harvested the sake rice and hung it to dry at Kanemasu Brewery. Students learned traditional techniques of cutting and binding the rice from experienced local farmers. In total, we harvested 200 kg of rice, the necessary amount for our project.

(3) **Kouji-making → Mori**  （麹づくり→盛り）（November）

Making kouji was the point where the rice we harvested took its first steps to becoming sake. In November, after the sake rice had been dried and polished, we entered the brewery and began sake making. From this point began an experience that few Japanese of any age have—and yet, this is the real Japan. Making kouji rice is a 7-step process requiring around 48 hours to complete. We participated in one step, mori（盛り）. The kouji rice is spread out on a long, wide table, broken up, and divided into smaller sections to facilitate fine temperature control. Mori was an important step...
for students because they could actually get involved up to their elbows in the kouji rice — it was a very physical experience, as their own sweat joined the delicate balance of sake flavors. The students learned with their own hands and bodies how kouji is made, and through this a deeper, unspoken connection was born. The room where kouji is made is called the kouji muro. At about 30 degrees, it is the warmest room in the sake brewery, and can provide a welcome respite to the cold elsewhere.

(4) Mixing the primary ingredients (仕込み～留添え) (November)

The traditional 3 step mixing method (san-dan-shikomi, 三段仕込み) divides the process of combining the primary ingredients of sake (rice, water, kouji and yeast) into three steps spread out over 4 days (the second day, odori, is a day of rest to give the kouji and yeast bacteria time to propagate and gain strength). Each day is given a unique name: the first day is called hatsuzoe (初添え, “first addition”), the second, odori (踊り), the third, nakazoe (中添え, “middle addition”), and the fourth, tomezoe (留添え, “final addition”). Our class participated in tomezoe, the final step. On the day, we carried the sake rice, which had been washed and soaked beforehand, to the koshiki (甑), a large traditional vat for steaming rice. There, the rice was steamed by the kamaya, the worker in charge of steaming the rice, tending to the fire, and preparing hot water when necessary. When the rice was steamed, we made hinerimochi, a traditional technique of checking the quality of the steaming job.

Next, we carried the steamed rice to the houreiki, a belt-conveyor driven machine for cooling the rice to the appropriate temperature and degree of moisture. Incidentally, this was one of the few motor-driven machines we used in the brewing process — our sake was almost entirely hand made. After cooling, the rice was carried, two people at a time, to the small fermentation tank. Students also carried the necessary amount of water by hand, using the tame, a traditional bucket used for transporting liquids. Finally, students had their first chance to try stirring the new sake with the kai, a long pole, and also heard advice from the touji, Mr. Itoh.

(5) Watching the moromi (醗の当番, moromi no touban)

After the final addition (tomezoe), a fermentation period of nearly 4 weeks began. During this time, we held our regular seminar class at the sake brewery, visiting the sake once a week to check its progress. We stirred our sake using the kai and per-
formed other small jobs, checked the test data, sampled the sake, and photographed the surface of the fermenting moromi. It was an interesting for my students to watch their sake change from week to week, in appearance, color, size of bubbles, and above all, taste. As the sake slowly took shape over the month, students also had the feeling that it was becoming more of their own creation. Even the feeling of stirring the sake with the kai changed. It was also a rewarding change to hold class at the sake brewery: every sake brewery has a unique atmosphere, and by studying at Kanemasu Brewery, students had the opportunity to experience this slowly and reflectively. Brewery tours are not uncommon, but the true character of a sake brewery can only be absorbed through hours, weeks or years of work and reflection — human perception attuned to the pace of fermentation.

(6) Pressing (上槽, jousou) (December)

Near the end of December, just before Keiwa College’s winter vacation, we pressed the fermented sake in a traditional process known as jousou. The moromi (fermenting/fermented sake) is poured into bags called sakebukuro. Next, the top of the bag is folded over and whole thing is laid it into the fune, a large metal bin where the pressing takes place. Each bag holds about 5 liters of fermented moromi. After placing all the sakebukuro into the fune, the touji opened the spout on the bottom and our freshly pressed sake came gushing out like a mountain spring. Seeing their sake for the first time, 7 months after planting the rice, was a moving experience for the students. We finally tasted the product of our year’s work. The students were impressed — drinking with near complete knowledge of what had gone into making the sake. After the pressing was complete, we transferred the sake to a large tank. When the sake had settled for a few days, Kanemasu filtered, pasteurized and bottled it for us. We now had 900 small bottles of Keiwa sake to introduce into the community.

(7) Naming and labeling (January)

The brand name, Keiwa no sake Wa (敬和の酒 わ) was developed by the students in class over the course of several brainstorming sessions. In December, when I first suggested thinking of a name for our sake, students replied that they couldn’t name the sake because they hadn’t finished it yet. They hadn’t tasted it. They hadn’t seen its face, so they couldn’t name it. After the pressing process, when students
knew the taste, we began the deciding process. Every student submitted at least one idea for a name/concept, then all were discussed and debated in class. The student who suggested *wa* said that this hiragana *wa* contains both Keiwa’s *wa* (the same *wa* used in the Japanese word for peace) and the *wa* denoting a connection between people. As one of our goals was to use this sake as a way of making deeper connections with Shibata, this concept was chosen by the class.

Next, we worked on the label design. I brought in many examples of sake labels, old and new, from in Niigata and around Japan. We talked about the role of a sake label, what a label should convey with respect to sake. What is the label saying, about what, and to whom? We wanted a design that would appeal to young people in their early 20s, yet not be too light. In the end, we used a photograph we had taken at the rice planting as a background, and overlaid the hiragana character ȋʻȍ over it in such a way that the students in the photo appear to be walking inside the character. Then, we checked with Kanemasu brewery about what data we needed to include on the bottle in order to sell it legally. Finally, the seminar students and I all sat down at the computer together and finished the design. We printed it ourselves, took the labels to Kanemasu Brewery, and applied the labels to the first 200 bottles by hand as a way of seeing them off what had become our “children” into the world.

(8) Marketing and selling the sake

In April, 2008, our sake went on sale, exactly one year after the project had begun. The price was determined by Kanemasu brewery — 600 yen for a 300 ml bottle. Thanks to help from Kanemasu, we were able to distribute and sell our sake at 9 local sake shops in Shibata city. Initial contact to the shops was made by Kanemasu, but 2 months after selling started, seminar student teams visited each of the participating sake shops to ask how the sake was selling, what kind of opinions the customers had, and any advice shop owners might have to improve the product in the future. During the summer, as a result of this fieldwork, students created a map of shops in the city where our sake was available.

Students also created original advertising materials for their sake. In order to sell sake made by college students, especially by humanities students, a persuasive narrative is necessary. In the first place, student-made sake is not particularly unusual, but it is more typically in the realm of agricultural science or brewing departments.
A sake made by cultural studies students is still a somewhat rare; in that sense, we felt
the need to create a new kind of story, one that placed sake making firmly in the field
of local cultural studies. The success of our sake depended on the recognition of sake as
culture.

Our first appeal was to people connected to our college — other students, semi-
nar students’ friends, family, staff, and graduates. We were fortunate to get newspa-
er coverage in Niigata Nippou and the Japan Agricultural News, which in turn led to In-
ternet exposure. We found quickly that selling and marketing the sake was the most
difficult step, and was the area where we had the most to learn. Looking back, it
seems that we could have marketed the sake more effectively.

III. Sake as an educational material

As an educator, my approach to the project was to treat a bottle of sake as both a
textbook and a local cultural artifact. One bottle incorporates history, culture, craft
and technique, science, the culinary arts, design and writing (title and label), as well
as business and economic aspects. In that to fully understand sake, we must examine
all these things individually — and likewise be brought to a greater understanding of
their combined interaction — it is the ultimate comprehensive study tool. Approaching
sake as an educational material for a local studies syllabus, I identified three general
areas of emphasis: Environmental study, agricultural study, and the study of Japanese
craftsmen culture (in the case of sake making, touji).

Through the combined study of agriculture and local food culture, we can find
the connection of sake to rice farming, and to the development of new varieties. This
leads to a consideration of Niigata’s climate and it effect on the resulting food culture.
For example, Niigata’s long sunlight hours make it ideal for producing rice suited to
sake making, while the shorter winter sunlight hours help create the low temperatures
necessary for brewing Niigata’s representative tanrei taste. Likewise, Niigata’s heavy
snowfall has the effect of cleansing the air of airborne impurities which could other-
wise spoil the sake.

Above all, the consideration of sake as a cultural representative leads us to the
role of microorganisms, particularly kouji, yeast, and lactobacillus. For example, sev-
eral key Japanese fermented foods are produced from kouji (particularly yellow kouji),
which can only grow well in this particular environment — Japanese people, Japanese
climate, Japanese bacteria collaborate to create Japanese fermented food culture. We began our sake making seminar with the question, “Why do Japanese drink sake?” This quickly leads to others: “Why do Japanese eat natto? Or, more to the point, why don’t Americans eat it?” Looking at these questions from the cultural position of climate and microorganisms, we can respond that it is not simply a matter of taste, but because the traditional production of these foods is only possible in one place. And without careful preservation and observation of that place, and the climate, life and people attached to it, that food culture will be irrevocably destroyed. Sake as culture arises from the inevitability of a place.

In addition to a variety of cultural studies, students also have a chance to participate in the community and develop social and communication skills that may help them in job hunting. This one year sake making project was an invitation for students to vote with their bodies for something that is more alive than they had ever imagined, to join in a system where their choices actually mean something, where they could see and feel the effects of their choices directly.

There are four key concepts that I wanted to convey to students in this project:

1. The value of taking responsibility for the creation of something from beginning to end.
2. The inherent, non-transferable value of work and of making something together.
3. The act of becoming a cultural participant, joining in the creation (rather than simple preservation) of a culture that is alive — and dependent upon each participant.
4. The mastery of words that can only describe this place — if we don’t know where something comes from, then we have given up caring about (and being able to understand) that place. Likewise, if we don’t care about that place, we can’t completely care for our own place, either. A humanities education centered on local cultural studies can supply the beginnings of the necessary vocabulary for understanding and reconciliation.

Students began the project at 19, still largely unacquainted with alcohol. By the time the sake was bottled, they had all become 20. They could legally drink, yet few of them would choose sake. Through this project, students created the sake which
accompanied them into adulthood. The first sake they drank as “adults” and “citizens” was their own sake. Besides producing future sake fans and supporters of local Niigata sake, I hope that it created a memorable experience and will serve as a symbol of what kind of adult, what kind of community member and cultural participant, they will become. I hope the students can use their own sake as a key to the human community they are set to enter.

IV. Implications and potential of the project

Small-scale sake making connected to the concept of shin-do-fu-ji 心土不二, that is, the Japanese idea that the soil and the body are not separate. Water, rice, clean air, bacteria — the same things that nourish humans also create a symbiotically related, distinctive Niigata food culture. At the same time, local sake (jizake) is a representative local food. The rice is grown locally, the water is local, and the yeast and koji are cultivated by touji in the breweries. Even the brewing techniques themselves are unique to Niigata, passed down from the Echigo touji and adapted to Niigata’s particular climate and resources.

The study of sake as a culturally relevant, representative local product leads students to the fundamental challenge of ensuring or increasing food safety through local production, building connections between consumers and makers. “Food safety” cannot come simply from a label, or even from a government certification system. Through an active, locally-based connection, the role of “consumer” can be redefined to incorporate a new understanding of locally-produced food such as sake not simply as epicureans or consumers, but as partners and participants in production. Producing locally, rather than simply eating locally, is a key: “making” naturally leads to “consuming”, but the opposite may not be true. “Knowing a farmer’s face” is not enough — for that, a camera is enough. We need to join with the farmer in the annual win or lose battle that is agriculture. We have to wake up with the farmer at 4 AM; we have to lose sleep with the farmer over concern for the rice crop.

Although many young people in Niigata may have had the experience of planting rice as part of comprehensive studies in elementary or junior high school, few children or young adults from non-farming families have much experience after that. This is an educational problem, since rice planting, like any meaningful agricultural act, cannot be fully or even partly understood after doing it just once.
Furthermore, the understanding of a child, the understanding of an adolescent, and the understanding of a young adult are all different — even while doing ostensibly the same work, the meaning that is carried away in the heart differs according to age and development.

Thus, one thing I regret about this process of sake making is that students could not be fully involved in the rice’s growth. Although planting and harvesting are interesting, important, and cultural meaningful steps, students missed out on the caring stage in-between, the careful watching and day-to-day sense of judgment necessary to see a crop through to its end. Of course, it can be said that this is a larger problem with comprehensive studies programs in Japan in general. There is a need for a food education that provides deeper, and perhaps more dangerous, experiences — where our actions or lack of actions, good or bad farming techniques, can decide whether we succeed or fail. The joy in creating, the satisfaction of harvest, is balanced against the relief that we did not fail, the fear, now passed, of what might have been. Without this anxiety, perhaps students will not completely feel that this is their crop.

I would like students to be able to spend a few days, even a week or a month in a sake brewery. I had this experience when I worked at the three sake breweries and it changed my perception of sake absolutely. In the craft of fermentation as well as in agriculture, the work at hand cannot be ignored, and there is no escape. It doesn’t matter if it is cold, if we are tired, or sick — the kouji and yeast neither know nor understand this. They are not waiting for humans. If the touji fails to follow through, 24 hours a day, the sake will fail, and all will be lost.

Ultimately, for a human being it is really only possible to intimately understand a small area of land — a few rice fields, a river, a small factory. Even every small sake brewery has its own distinct personality and history, its own particular community of bacteria and microorganisms that cannot be reproduced. For this reason, what works in one sake brewery may not work in another. Sake making is a student’s first invitation into a unique community; it is a cultural project aimed at creating local citizens, community members. Furthermore, as a kind of food education (食育) for college students, the goal is to foster knowledgeable citizens and consumers, members of a community connected by food production, with a shared understanding of local culture based on san-do-fu-ji. In this lies one of the most compelling ongoing potentials of “local brands” created by college students.
References