

The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Traditional Japanese Arts: Through the Tea Ceremony

日本の伝統的芸術におけるノンバーバル
コミュニケーションの役割—茶道を通じて

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従来日本の伝統文化は特にその芸術面においては、外国人に理解されにくい部分が多いといわれてきた。それは東洋的思想と日本人の非言語的手段（ノンバーバルコミュニケーション上の表現）が欧米的なそれらとの共通点が少なく、神秘的、あるいは美学的分野の奥義を理解しないと十分に把握することが困難とみなされてきたからであろう。当稿においては、それらの日本的な芸術分野の特徴とも考えられる幾つかの観点を説明するため、日本芸術や思想の粋を代表する芸術の一つともみなされている茶道の一部を例として取り上げてみたいと思う。

I. Objectives of the Research

It has often been said that the estheticism of the Oriental arts is hard to comprehend in the Westerner's mind because of its esoteric mysticism. This paper attempts to identify and discuss various elements observed in a Japanese traditional art form that might contribute to such an impression, particularly those features which are nonverbally meaningful in the Japanese cultural scenes. The article is intended to give the reader an understanding of hidden aspects of the Japanese mind in their interpersonal relationship as well as their attitudes of appreciation toward the natural environment.

II. Methods of Research

In order to deal with such a huge area of consideration includable in the Japanese cultural esthetic domain, the author has chosen the familiar art form of tea ceremony as a fit representative of the various aspects of the Japanese culture. It seems to the author that the tea ceremony contains representative features of many activities that make up the whole of the culture. In the practice of the tea ceremony, one comes into contact with traditional cultural concepts in religious philosophy, culinary arts, calligraphy, literature, and the like. Also it touches upon the technology and esthetics of crafts and artistic creation of items of ceramic, textile, metal working, paper, wood and bamboo.

Our analysis here uses the subcategories of the disciplines of the nonverbal communication, which are now widely accepted not only among the communication specialists but also psychologists and sociologists, to examine the esthetic phases of Japanese culture. Thus we can look at the human interactions in the form of analysis of nonverbal conduct classified in kinesthetic, territorial, olfactory,

proxemic, tactile, chronemic and other characteristics of the interactions of Japanese people.

III. Nonverbal Entries in the Tea Ceremony

A. Sounds and Silence

1. Sounds and Their Nonverbal Implications

One of the more operant elements in tea ceremony is the awareness of the sounds in the serene atmosphere of silence of the tearoom. A good example of this is the sound of hot water boiling in the iron kettle (chagama). It is likened to the sound of the wind blowing through a pine forest, called "shorai (松籟) or "matsukaze" (松風) and these names are used in referring to the kettle sound. Absorbed in listening to this sound resembling the winds blowing among the evergreens, the guests in the room immerse themselves in Nature away from the mundane world. This "matsukaze" is one of the six classified sounds of a boiling tea kettle called "kama no roku-in" (six sounds of kettle)¹.

Contrary to the Western cultural taboo which discourages making any obvious sound as you drink soup or beverages, making a discrete slurping sound as you partake either the foamy, fluffed green tea called "usu-cha (thin tea)" or the tea which is made in a more formal occasion called "koi-cha (thick tea)" is considered a gesture of appreciation to the host. Such audible gesture is intended to convey the deliciousness of the green tea.

Another sound-making gesture is also expected at the completion of drinking the offered tea by making a short, sharp sipping sound (called "nomi-kiri or "drink cutting"). This is a nonverbal message to the host that the tea prepared by him was very tasty and so good that the guest made an effort to get the very last drop out of the bowl.

Another communication aspect by the use of sound is that of the striking of the "dora" (a gong) used to signal the start of the second part of a formal tea ceremony. Upon hearing the first note, the guests who were waiting at the "machiai" (a waiting pavilion) will squat down and bend their heads downward so that the deep sounding gong tone will pass over their heads. This sound then has not merely the function of notifying the readiness of the next step of the entertainment, but it is a request for them to also allow the sound to cleanse and purify their minds in this humble kinesthetic posture before reentering the tearoom.²

2. Silence and Its Nonverbal Implications

Although there are prescribed phrases or sentences verbally uttered between the host and the main guest ("shō-kyaku"), who is seated at the head of the line of the invited guests during the formal part of the ceremony, the guests generally refrain from talking. This may give an outside observer the impression that little communication occurs during most of the long course of the tea ceremony. However, there are numerous actions or behaviors conducted silently and there are unspoken meanings in almost every action either by the host, his assistant or among the guests.

One example of such is that when all the guests have finished eating the "kaiseki" meal (simple yet esthetically well arranged with seasonal foods which takes hours of preparation), they will, in unison, slide their chopsticks simultaneously onto the trays so as to make a single dropping sound which will signal to the host, who is waiting outside the closed door, to proceed on to the next step of entertainment. In other words, the wordless sound of laying down the chopsticks is used to communicate to the host the conclusion of the meal, instead of someone verbally conveying the message.

B. Territoriality and Proxemics

1. The "Kekkai" of One's World

One of the Confucian principles in human relationship is "bun" which means one's personal identity or one's area of control -- not necessarily in a possessive sense but more in mental or spiritual sense in relation to others. The word "bun" is often used in idiomatic expressions, for example, "bun sō-ō" which carries the meaning that one's bearing, manners and conduct should match his social position. The border of one's "bun" is known as "kekkai". The "kekkai", which may be either physical or figurative, will delineate the extent of the "bun" and also designate the point that separates a person's "bun" from that of another.

In the world of tea ceremony, one's "bun" is expressed in several different modes. An observable example of this is the "kekkai" designating the host's work area. In arranging the tea utensils in the tearoom in preparation for the ceremony, there is an ornamental instrument called "furo-saki" which is placed ahead of the charcoal brazier ("furo") and the hot water kettle ("chagama"), opposite the place where the host will sit. The "furosaki" is placed there in order to make a physically observable border ("kekkai") between the "bun" territory of the host and other areas of the room.

Another appearance of "kekkai" is in the fabric borders ("heri") of the tatami mats in the Japanese-style room. The "heri" are normally made of hard cloth and are used to bind the long sides of a tatami mat. They are customarily black in color, although other colors may be used for special rooms. In the tearoom ("chashitsu") each participant sits on a tatami mat behind this black borderline. The black "heri" line is considered the boundary line ("kekkai") of his world, separating his space from others.

That is why when the tea bowl is brought to him with the tea in it, the bowl will be placed first outside of the black line by the host's assistant ("hantō"), which signifies that the tea bowl is outside of his "kekkai" border -- not in his "bun" yet. Then the guest is expected to receive the offered bowl of tea by taking and placing it inside the black "heri" line before he partakes of the tea -- making the bowl his personal possession in a sense.

The small-size folding fan ("sensu") carried by each guest at a tea ceremony is not intended for waving to make a cooling breeze, but it is used as a tool to express one's territory of "bun", separating

his world from others. Greetings within the tearoom between and among the host and guests are done in the kneeling/sitting position, facing each other. One places his "sensu" laterally in front of his knees and bows with hands touching the "tatami" while speaking. The placing of the "sensu" in this manner creates a physical symbolic barrier, and thus this small tool makes a movable "kekkaï" in order to mark his territory of "bun".

This practice is best seen at the beginning and end of the ceremony, when all the guests bow to the host for a formal greeting. During the tea ceremony, the host does not carry a "sensu" and each guest places his "sensu" on the "tatami" behind his back - removing all barriers to open communion and enjoyment.

2. Territorial Indicator "Sekimori"

In our daily life, normally such verbal expressions as "Do not enter!" or "Off Limits!" indicate prohibition to entering into a certain territory. In the tea ceremony, however, there are nonverbal indicators that are more esoteric or esthetic in manner. When the guests enter the garden of the teahouse area, it is necessary to follow a stepping-stone path, which may divide and go in several directions. In order to indicate the correct path to the tearoom, the host will place special stones on the branches of the pathways which are not to be used. These are small stones that are tied by thin ropes, and they are called "sekimori-ishi" which literally means the "stone keeping the border line".

Giving it this name "sekimori-ishi" is to personify the stone, vesting it with a role to guide (and at the same time, not let in the guest into the wrong domain of the garden) to the appropriate building of the teahouse. This naming of "sekimori-ishi" is somewhat romantic to the Japanese because in the ancient Nara period (around the 8th century), soldiers were sent to watch and guard the shores from foreign invasion. Poems contained in the old Manyōshū anthology³⁾ include a love theme of missing sweethearts or husbands who are sent to the far remote location as "sekimori" guards.

C. Kinesthetic Characteristics

1. Movements from Noh Performance

Those who participate in or observe the tea ceremony may notice that the host's manner of walking on the "tatami" mats or while carrying the utensils in and out of the tea room has a physical resemblance to the style of "Noh" performers. Also the host's assistant ("hantō") as well as participating guests may walk on the "tatami" mats with foot steps mimicking the "suri-ashi" (rubbing step) style of the Noh performance.

When a Noh performer walks in "suri-ashi" style, he touches the floor with the heel first, settles the foot flat on the floor, slides the foot forward, and at the end of the step he lifts the toes slightly up and then down. The process is repeated for the next step by the other foot. It is a common walking style used in Noh play.

Also when the servers (host and his assistant) bring in or take out the utensils from the room, they walk holding both arms with elbows slightly out and rounded (not straight forward), roughly forming a circle between their bodies and the object they are carrying. This movement also is the application of the Noh performance. If we recall that the tea ceremony had its foundations laid and developed during the Muromachi Era (1392 to 1573 A.D.), which coincided with the development of Noh Art, it is easy to understand why each art shares kinesthetic as well as esoteric factors.

Similar nonverbal behaviors are observed in the "Kōdō" (the Way of Fragrance) that was also developed in the Muromachi Era as an artistic contest in which guests compete in identifying incenses and communally appreciate the fragrances of the various kinds. The use of the "sensu", manner of walking, and handling of utensils in "Kōdō" also reflect the practices of tea or Noh.

2. Three Modes of Bowing

As observed in Japanese daily life even today, there are three ways of bowing, which are kinesthetically classified as "shin"(most polite and formal), "gyō"(less formal) and "sō" (informal). The first "shin" is a deep bow done by lowering the head close to the "tatami" mat with the palms of both hands totally touching the mat. Since this is the most formal bowing, it is done in the beginning and at the end of the tea ceremony by both host and all the guests at the same time. Also "shin" bowing is used by the "shō-kyaku" (the main guest) and the host("teishu") during the time the guests have an opportunity to inquire about the utensils the host has provided for the occasion.

The second "gyō" is a bow which inclines the upper body only about 45° and is used as a symbol of courteous behavior in less formal occasions either between the host and the main guest or among the guests themselves when they communicate during the course of the ceremony.

The least formal bowing behavior of "sō" style is a leaning forward of only several degrees and is used when a guest greets another guest on either side with a verbal greeting "Osaki ni" (meaning "I will be partaking of the tea ahead of you" or "I will be taking a look at the utensils ahead of you"). Here there is an interesting contrast with the Western phrase "after you", using instead an expression of "ahead of you".

D. Olfactory Environment for Purification

When entering the tearoom, a guest will notice the fragrance of incense used by the host, one from among various types depending of the day's theme. Incense is used as an integral part of the tea ceremony. One of the most popular is "byakudan" (sandal wood) imported from the South East Asian forests. The aroma of the incense fills the room with the notion of pure air, inviting you away from the mundane world into the world of purified ambiance. In order to insure an unadulterated atmosphere for the incense fragrance, the flowers used for a tea ceremony are chosen from among those kinds that emit the least scent. The decorative flowers' scent will then not interfere or clash with the aroma of the

incense to give the maximum effect of the olfactory environment.

The "toko-no-ma", an alcove made by a raised tatami section, is decorated with a hanging scroll which bears a calligraphy expressing Zen Buddhist thought and a vase made from ceramic or metal (or basket for a more informal occasion) with seasonal flowers. Here, fundamentally three things are kept in mind in selecting the tea flowers. One is as already mentioned that they should have no or little scent. Secondly, bright-colored or large sized flowers such as sunflower, peonies or modern European flowers such as tulips or roses are shunned. The third point is to avoid "kinsenka" flowers, that is a kind of flower that bloomed at the time Sen no Rikyū committed "seppuku".⁴⁾

E. Direction

One of the interesting nonverbal features in tea ceremony is that it predominantly reflects the dextral or right-handed culture in its environment and practice. Although there are some variations among the different schools of tea ceremony, an example of this is that the host and guests entering and walking into the tearoom will step first with the right foot, but when they go out and exit, they will use the left foot first. Another example is that the host's position is on the left side of the room and the guests are seated along the right side, facing the host. Since the host's left side is always toward the wall or "fusuma" (paper-covered door), he will serve the tea he makes for the guests with his right hand. The "shōkyaku" (main guest) is necessarily seated next to the "tokonoma" at the right end of the row of guests, with other guests ranging to his left.

There are several examples of dextral pervasiveness in the handling of tea utensils. When arranging the utensils to be viewed and appreciated in the "haiken" session, the host, as well as guests, will first place the "natsume" (tea-caddy) in front of himself to the right side before putting the "chashaku" (tea-scoop) on its left side since the "natsume" is considered of a higher importance than the "chashaku". When taking the tea bowl into his space of "bun", the guest will do so always by his right hand. The fan, which is used to show one's "kekkaï" as explained before, is also handled by the right hand. When either receiving or returning any utensil, one first turns it around to face the receiver in a motion to the right (clockwise). Likewise before a guest partakes of the tea in the bowl, he/she turns the face of the bowl away to the right (clockwise) to avoid drinking from the front side or over the main design of the bowl. The host will use his right hand to handle the "hishaku" (water ladle), "chasen" (tea whisk) and many other utensils in the same right-handed manner. From these kinds of practices, the dominance of dextral culture is ever evident in the tea ceremony.

F. Other Representative Features

1. Theme of the Day

One of the most esthetic and appealing features of the tea ceremony is the way it is coordinated with the season. The host's theme of the day when the tea ceremony is held will clearly reflect the

current season of the year. Invited guests are notified usually in written means about a month ahead that the forthcoming tea ceremony will have a certain theme. The theme may range from a pleasant one, such as a "cherry blossom viewing" ceremony, to a most somber death commemoration of Rikyū.

The theme set for the day of the tea ceremony is then evident in how the occasion is presented. Guests will dress in accordance with the season and solemnity of the occasion. The hanging scroll (which often displays a brush writing of a phrase from Zen Buddhism), the tea flower arrangement ("chabana"), and the tea confectionary (which is molded or shaped to reflect seasonal features such as flowers, birds, fishes, ocean waves, etc.) all will come to express the nature of the occasion. This display of coordination of theme is one of the elements the guests should enjoy and becomes a topic of discussion with the host, giving him the opportunity to mention where these items come from or how they are prepared or obtained.

2. Other Features

Features related to utensils such as the tea bowl, lacquered "natsume" (tea caddy), and "chashaku" (bamboo tea scoop) are also to be appreciated and to be admired by the guests because these are not only seasonal and fit for the occasion, they might be the heirloom of the host, passed down by generations from ancestors who had historical importance. To do the process of admiration of the utensils, the guest bends over with his arms or elbows resting on his thighs so that while he handles an item, the distance to the floor is minimum should he drop the precious, irreplaceable heirloom. This kinesthetic movement is expected of the guest whenever he lifts the utensils from the "tatami" floor.

Types of material used for a flower vase will also be governed by rules depending upon the occasion. If it is a serious, more formal tea ceremony, the vase should be white or blue porcelain or "kara-kane" (made of copper and iron). The next rank for a less formal setting will be non-porcelain ceramic. Then finally those made from bamboo or plant vines will be used for a casual, informal occasion.

Therefore the theme of the day will set the tone of formality and the choice of utensils and decoration will follow from that. The content of the scroll for the "toko-no-ma" will influence the choice of flower vase and the material the vase is made of will determine the type of place-mat (if any) on which it is to be displayed in the "toko-no-ma".

In another feature, electricity is traditionally not used for lighting in the tearoom. It is considered by the tea specialists that a bright-lit tearoom interferes with the atmosphere and detracts from the ambiance of the occasion. Instead, natural light coming through the "shoji" (paper-windowed door) and from the window will be enough. For an evening ceremony, however, an old-fashioned lantern with oil and string ("tankei") is used for a dim light.

3. Naming of the Utensils

Although the following statement will be beyond the theme of nonverbal elements of the tea ceremony, the author would like to add the feature of poetic naming of the utensils -- another unique feature of the tea ceremony. Starting from the "natsume" (tea caddy), its partner "chashaku" (a bamboo tea scoop, hand-carved by a tea practitioner), the tea bowl and even the powdered green tea itself, bear poetic names ("mei" in general term). For instance, a well-known historical art object called "Namida" (Tears) is the poetic name given to the tea scoop carved and presented by Hosokawa Sansai, one of the closest associates for Sen no Rikyū. The legendary tea caddy, supposedly owned and used by Yōkihi, most favored concubine of Emperor Gensō during the 8th century in China, carries the poetic name, "Hatsu-haha" or the first flower. Many of these are now national treasures that are not made public and not easily viewed today.

IV. Conclusion

In this writing, the author attempted to point out and discuss some of the more typical nonverbal characteristics of the Japanese culture to be found in the tea ceremony. By pointing out the implications to be conveyed by various nonverbal features of sound and silence, territorial and proxemic characteristics, kinesthetics, olfactory environment, and other representative features, the author hoped to aid better understanding of meanings beyond the superficial.

There is often more than meets the eye (or ear) when the observer does not have the cultural background knowledge to recognize meaning when it is intended. We have no nonverbal communication "dictionary" to go to when we encounter actions and physical aspects of a different culture. There is certainly much more that could be said about these and other features of Japanese culture which time or space does not allow here, so this cannot but be an illustration of what needs to be done to provide an alternative to such "dictionary". Hopefully the foregoing will aid non-Japanese readers toward better comprehension and appreciation of the esthetic themes of the Japanese culture. The beginning of such insight can perhaps be the foundation to understanding the mind and beauties of Japanese traditional thinking.

NOTES

- 1) "Kama no roku-in" are: gyogan (魚眼), kyūin (蚯音), kishinami (岸波), tōnami (遠浪), matsukaze (松風) or shōrai (松籟), and muiin (無音). 原色茶道大辞典, p. 223.
- 2) After the "kaiseki" meal the guests go out of the tea room and relax a few minutes, which period is called "naka dachi", at the "machiai" pavilion. The "dora" gong is a nonverbal cue to notify the guests that the tea room is ready for the next "koi cha" (thick, kneaded tea) ceremony.
- 3) The *Manyōshū* anthology is the oldest anthology of poems existing in Japan. It consists of 20 volumes and is thought to be compiled by Ōtomo no Yakamochi (大伴家持) during the last half of the 8th century.
- 4) Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591) is attributed to be the founder of the tea ceremony. As a result of a political clash, he was

ordered to commit "seppuku" (ceremonial suicide) by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) .

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