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**Drinking Country:
Flows of Exchange in a Japanese Valley**

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Drinking Country: Flows of Exchange in a Japanese Valley

Drinking in Japan is a serious business.

On the one hand, the fact that Japanese men (and it is mainly, though not exclusively men) like to drink together has contributed to the growth of a national alcohol industry that includes such breweries as Suntory, Asahi, and Kirin, and a host of *sake* rice wine manufacturers boasting particular traditional and regional tastes.¹ Of these, Suntory started out by producing wine, but is now the largest and oldest distiller of whiskey in Japan (its Suntory Old is the world's best-selling whiskey), as well as being a major producer of spirits, beer, wine and soft drinks. It produces and distributes Carlsberg in Japan, and manages a whisky distillery in Scotland, together with wine producers in France and Germany. Consolidated sales of the 173 companies in the Suntory Group come to about \$12 billion. For its part Asahi, which owns the Nikka whiskey distillery, has annual sales of about \$9 billion, *Asahi Super Dry* (Japan's most popular beer), and a 46.2 per cent share (the largest) of the beer market in Japan. Kirin, which used to be Japan's leading beer brewer, has sales of approximately \$10 billion. Like its main rival, Asahi, it runs a group of companies with such diverse interests as soft drinks, (functional) foods, restaurants, distribution, pharmaceuticals, engineering and real estate. The consumption of alcohol, therefore, has contributed to the post-war development of giant Japanese corporations employing tens of thousands of people, with worldwide operations in all kinds of different related – and seemingly unrelated – businesses. This kind of corporate structure in itself has been seen to mark a particular kind of Japanese capitalism – alliance capitalism (Gerlach 1992)

The fact that Japanese men like to drink together has also ensured that there are all kinds of places where they can drink – from *akachōchin* red lantern eateries and beer halls, via plain watering holes (*nomiya*) to, frequently expensive, bars that go by such misleading generic names as *club*, *snack* or *stand*.² These different kinds of drinking establishments tend to be found together in different parts of every city or country town, catering to different types of clientele. In Tokyo, for example, exclusive Japanese restaurants and bars, frequented by politicians working in and around the nearby Diet, can be found in Akasaka. The area around Shibuya station, on the other hand, has more affordable and more popular places to eat and drink, since it is here that young people gather day and night. Each district's entertainment area (known as *sakariba* [Linhart 1998]) in which its various drinking establishments are found thus takes on a certain characteristic atmosphere, depending on whether it is catering to media professionals (Ginza), young people (Roppongi) or students and academics (Yotsuya).

But drinking is serious business in a different sense of the phrase. Japanese drink very often in order to pursue and successfully conclude business negotiations of one sort or another. This much is by now well known among those Europeans and Americans who have had even indirect dealings with the Japanese. Indeed, it has been cause for wonder and comment since it seems that business consists of two totally different worlds that together form the Siamese twins of Japanese welfare capitalism. One is a public, daytime world of light, in which businessmen meet and enter into formal negotiations. This strictly businesslike association, with little apparent concern for developing long-term ties, the Japanese call 'dry.' The other is a more intimate,

twilight, 'happy hours' world of darkness, lit by neon signs and the painted smiles of more and less attractive hostesses whose job it is to murmur sweet nothings and keep their clients' glasses full, while praising their – often better unremarked – renderings of popular *karaoke* songs. This world is known, somewhat poetically, as 'the water trade' (*mizu shōbai*) and is said to provide the informal heart that enables formal business negotiations to be concluded. This more intimate approach to business the Japanese appropriately refer to as 'wet.'

Under such circumstances, it will hardly surprise my readers if I continue by saying that drinking is a serious business for any anthropologist engaged in the study of forms of social organisation in which men are the main protagonists (like a rural community, company, fire station, or *sumō* wrestlers' stable). It is 'serious business' because when Japanese men drink, they tend to let slip pieces of information and gossip that, in the world of light, they keep to themselves. I say 'let slip', but such knowledge is not necessarily revealed out of indiscretion or inability to control the effects of alcohol. It may very well be consciously imparted and politically motivated, in order for the speaker to see what reaction he gets out of his drinking partner and whether they will be able to build a relationship of mutual trust together.

So, too, with the anthropologist himself. On every occasion that I have embarked upon fieldwork, whether in a remote pottery community in Kyushu or a large advertising agency in downtown Tokyo, I have found myself being tested for weaknesses during drinking sessions with informants-to-be. Could I hold my drink? Could I sing? Would I – could I – become a trusted drinking companion? Was I all that I made myself out to be – an anthropologist – or was I, perhaps, a government spy or tax inspector in disguise? What was it that, as an anthropologist, I *really* wanted to find out about them? And what would I do with all the information they gave me?

As I say, in Japan drinking is primarily for and by men. This is not to say that women do not drink. Of course, they do. Many of the hostesses and *mama-sans* I have met over the years hold their drink far better than the men they serve. At least one Japanese woman friend of mine can drink me under the *kotatsu* table at any time of the day or night. But in general the kind of drinking that goes on among businessmen in city bars, or among farmers and potters in country homes, places women in a secondary, subservient role as hostesses or housewives preparing and serving alcohol and the occasional titbit of food for their male visitors. As the local postmaster in the valley where I lived between 1977 and 1982 once – perhaps a little crudely – put it: "The men, they drink *sake*, and the women, they gossip. That is our form of entertainment."³

Drinking Occasions

In spite of the connection between the business of drinking and an urban lifestyle, the rest of this essay will be about country people drinking and the exchanges – of sake cups and stories – that took place in a rural valley. It is now two and a half decades since I first set foot in the Ono valley, leading up towards the pilgrimage site of Mount Hikosan, near the border between Oita and Fukuoka prefectures in northern Kyushu. But the drinking that I did with local people during the four years that I lived there remains indelibly etched on both my memory and my liver.

Perhaps I should have heeded the warning greeting all those who enter the winding valley road that leads out of the enclosed plain surrounding the country town

of Hita. “The Ono Valley,” reads the calligraphy on a giant roadside bowling pin, “Does not admit drunken drivers.” I later learned that there was ample justification for these words. During my stay there, the Ono Valley was designated by the local Hita police as a ‘model village’ – not because of the tasty *nashi* pears or famous folk crafts that some its farmers and potters produced, but because its inhabitants as a whole had the highest rate of recorded drunken driving in the whole of the (very broad) area that came under Hita’s local government administration.

My drinking companions were in general rather proud of this official recognition of their alcohol-related practices. They joked about how they might be designated a ‘super-model village’ if the police were to find out about and take into account how much they *really* drove (that is to say, without getting caught) under the influence. They also interpreted the designation as indicating that they imbibed more alcohol than any other community in the Hita plain. They were, in short, ‘real Kyushu men.’

So, what kind of alcohol did people in the Ono and neighbouring valleys drink? When and where did they drink, and for what purposes? Their alcohol consumption can, I think, be usefully separated into two basic social categories. People either drank Japanese rice wine (*sake* or *nihonshū*),⁴ or occasionally a sweet potato distilled liquor (known as *shōchū*), which was almost invariably shared – in the sense that men drinking would exchange drinking cups among themselves. There were certain occasions when men would not exchange cups while drinking sake, but these invariably had to do with particular festivals that took place in each of the hamlets scattered along the fourteen kilometre length of the valley.⁵ For the most part, however, drinking sessions would be limited – in terms of both alcohol quantity and imbibing time – only to the staying power of participants. As such, they might involve a number of different venues, from valley home to city bar (hence the drunken driving).

Alternatively, men in the Ono valley drank beer, whiskey, and whatever else they could lay their hands on, including wine. This they did out of their own glasses. They would drink together, of course, but not go through the exchange ritual that characterised sake drinking. This shift in drinking pattern occurred most obviously in local Hita bars, where men often turned from sake to beer, whiskey or wine. The move from valley to town thus tended to mark a shift from communal to individualised drinking pattern, although this was by no means fixed. Men *did* drink beer with friends in their valley homes or local sake shops. They occasionally exchanged glasses. They were also known to drink sake in the downtown bars.

People in the Ono valley used to drink together in a number of differing combinations. For the most part, formal drinking encounters involved one or two representatives of each household making up a particular community or hamlet (*buraku*).⁶ Depending on the community, there could be as many as nine or ten regular gatherings of this sort every year – primarily to celebrate local deities. In Sarayama, for example, household representatives met six times a year to celebrate Kōshinsama, three times for the fire goddess Akiyasama, and once for the god of trade, Ebisusama. Each household took it in turn to host the festivity.

In addition, however, all households in a community would send one or more of its representatives for other, non-regular drinking sessions. These special occasions might be to mark a man’s 41st birthday, the raising of the main roof beam (*mune-age*) of a resident’s new house, or the purchase of a new car (on the principle that one’s good fortune should be shared, if only to avoid unpleasantness). On such occasions, a man might well invite friends and acquaintances from other communities in the

valley, so that these gatherings would be more mixed, last longer and, as a result, often be rowdier.

Other large drinking gatherings were usually connected with work or school. The Ono Pear Growers' Association, for example, would hold regular six monthly meetings that were followed by sake drinking among men who lived for the most part in the lower half of the valley. The Ebisusama festivity in Sarayama, mentioned above, was exclusive to the potters of Sarayama, although one or two local pottery dealers might be invited to participate. The two local primary schools in the valley also provided opportunities for plenty of drinking among parents at their children's sports days, *kendō* Japanese fencing competitions and other similar occasions.

Smaller gatherings of men, either at home or in a local sake shop, also took place regularly, though with no particular fixed pattern. Foresters might drop by a potter's workshop on their way home from work and go down to the nearby noodle shop for a few bottles of sake (in winter) or beer (on a thirsty day). Someone wanting to buy a piece of land might find himself spending several evenings sharing sake cups with the seller and their two go-betweens during the course of (what might often become protracted) negotiations. Certainly, the conclusion of any kind of business – whether a land deal, kiln contents sale, forest clearing, or whatever – would be followed by the sharing of sake among participants. If an agreement between people was in any way involved (like the promise to sell a particular piece of land at a particular price), those concerned would formally clap hands – ideally in front of a witness from the household of the man making the promise – and seal the agreement with sake.

Finally, the general importance of sake in the valley may be seen in the fact that it was presented to different community and household deities, including the ancestors, on special occasions (very often with rice cooked in one form or another). Bottles of sake were also the main gifts given to communal occasions – such as the annual outing of the *sōnenkai* adult men, a community archery or other sporting occasion – usually by those especially invited from outside or by inside members unable to attend the festivity concerned. This was primarily because people in the Ono valley, like those living in the village of Suye in nearby Kumamoto Prefecture during the mid 1930s, were always ready for a party. Like Ella Wiswell, I was frequently “impressed by their seemingly limitless capacity to find occasions for them” (Smith and Wiswell 1982:73).⁷

Drinking Exchanges

My focus here will be on formal drinking encounters, when a large group of men (and women) would gather for one of the specific purposes outlined above and drink an unlimited quantity of alcohol.⁸ Such ceremonial occasions tended to follow a typical pattern. First, representatives from each household in a neighbourhood or work association would gather at the place where the festivities were to take place. If this were – as it often was – a private house, each guest would on arrival make his way to the parlour (or *nando*), an informal living room where family members gather to eat, socialise, or watch television. While awaiting the arrival of other guests, his talk would focus on the host's household members or the outside world – the rapid growth of the former's children, the quality of his pears in the orchard outside, and so on. The neighbourhood or work association itself would never be mentioned.

Once everyone was assembled, the host would ask people to move into the main guest room or rooms (*zashiki*),⁹ where low tables were laid out across the top and down the sides of the room(s) in the shape of an inverted horseshoe. I use the words ‘top,’ ‘down,’ and ‘inverted’ because the *zashiki* is marked by the presence of a ‘sacred dais’ or *tokonoma* which is built into every country house and is considered to be the most important part of the building. As a result, only the most important people can sit with their backs to the *tokonoma* (and gaze out across the closed verandah into the surrounding garden). Thus guests would always sit in this position, while their hosts sat facing them in a ‘lower’ position. In the event of several guests, the eldest man was asked to sit at the ‘top’ of the room, with the second-eldest placed to his right, and the third-eldest to his left. The fourth-eldest then took up his position at the second-eldest’s right, and so on down the two lines of tables to the youngest man present. Then, and only then, were participating women able to take up their places – again theoretically in order of age, although in practice they were much less particular about who sat exactly where. As a general rule, perhaps, it might be said that the older a man or woman was, the more particular he or she tended to be about being seated according to seniority; and that men tended to be more particular than women about seating order.

Once everyone had taken up their positions and was kneeling formally in front of their places, the host formally greeted and welcomed his guests from the very bottom of the room. The most senior member among those present would then reply to the host’s greeting. His formal speech used to repeat, in its highly ritualised series of set phrases, the distinction between host and guest households, but then blurred it by reminding everyone why they were gathered together that day. The rarer the occasion, the more detailed that information, and the greater the stress on the occasion itself. The host would then be thanked for providing a place for everyone to gather, visitors thanked for taking the trouble to come, and a toast proposed. At this point, the women would get up from their places at the bottom of the room and, from the inside of the inverted horseshoe, fill the men’s sake cups from the bottles already heated and standing on the table tops. The speaker would raise his voice and shout “*Kanpai!*” (“Glasses dry!”), to be joined by a chorus of voices as those present lifted up their cups and downed their contents of sake in a single gulp.

This marked the end of the first stage of any formal drinking encounter. Immediately after the *kanpai* toast, participants would shift from a kneeling to cross-legged sitting position on their cushions and refill one another’s cups.¹⁰ They might well start sipping soup and dipping into the dishes of food in front of them, but drinking was what counted for it is a man’s ability to drink and talk or sing which marks him out from among his fellows on such occasions. So, while some of the women might linger in the inner space of the room, each man would pour sake for his neighbours on either side and have his cup filled in return, as they talked – still rather formally – about the weather, food and work, before shifting to more informal conversation about community events and local gossip.

It was at this point that a man would start to exchange sake cups with his neighbour, and the second stage of the party began. By ‘exchange’, I mean that, when his cup was empty, instead of waiting for it to be refilled, a man would pick it up by the foot rim, balance it between the tips of his fingers and offer it to someone sitting nearby. As he did so, he would call out the other person’s name, and raise the hand with which he was holding the cup very slightly once or twice – both to attract the other’s attention and as a characteristic gesture of humility from someone offering a gift. The receiver would take the cup – usually with an exclamation of (feigned)

surprise – bow his head slightly, again raise the cup (this time in a gesture of humble acceptance), and allow it to be filled by the other man from one of the bottles on the table between them. He then downed the sake and almost immediately returned the cup following an identical set of formal expressions and gestures.

So long as a man exchanges cups with his immediate neighbours, the flow of conversation tended not to be affected immediately in any appreciable way. However, the first exchange would be a signal for those concerned to shift from informal gossip to somewhat more intimate exchanges about how events previously touched upon more formally may affect them. Once he had exchanged cups with those on either side of him, a man would pass cups to others sitting further up or down the table, going through the same formalities.

Provided that those with whom he was exchanging cups were within arm's reach, a man tended to remain seated where he was. But as the gathering gained alcoholic momentum, men would find themselves exchanging cups with others several places away from where they were sitting. Since it is rude to drink on one's own without exchanging cups, and since it is also not good form to trouble one's neighbours by asking them to pass one's cups up or down the table, at this stage a man usually got up from his allotted place and took his cup directly to whoever he had in mind. This would involve either making one's way along behind one's neighbours, or stepping across one of the low tables into the empty centre of the room.

This shift from immobility to mobility in participants' cup exchanges can be said to mark a party's third stage and usually occurred about ten to fifteen minutes after the proposal of the formal toast. Why did this happen? Quite simply, to enable a man to initiate conversations with others not in his immediate age group. It was from this time that the gathering started to become a 'serious' drinking session and usually at this time, too, that women would have withdrawn to talk, drink and eat among themselves at the bottom of the room. This stage was marked by complete verbal, even physical, informality and there were few, if any, restrictions on who said or did what to whom. Moreover, whereas the first stage of formal speeches was conducted in standard Japanese (or as near an approximation to it as local elders can manage), the second and third stages would be marked by people's reverting to dialect, as they spoke in their 'own' language and not some 'foreign' tongue imposed upon them (through schooling) by outsiders living far away in Tokyo. Country drinking meant country talking, too.

But who initiated this third stage of the party? In the old days, it was an unwritten rule that a man could only exchange cups with someone sitting immediately below him – in other words, with someone younger than him. Protocol forbade him from passing his cup up the table to an older man (cf. Befu 1974:200). This meant that the shift to the third stage was in large part determined by the elders, since it was they who could get up and move down the room to drink with younger men. Of course, a certain amount of lateral movement was also permitted, since people of approximately the same age used to (and still) sit on opposite sides of the room because of formal seating arrangements. They could cross over to exchange cups with men of their own age. Ultimately, however, it was the old men who controlled sake cup exchanges and thus the shift of any drinking encounter from a formal gathering to wild party.

Drinking Talk

But why do all these cup exchanges take place? As with everyone else in the world who drinks, the men of the Ono valley love to talk. What they talk about is what is of interest here.

As the sake flows, men talk about matters that are closest to their hearts or on their minds. This means that conversations with fellow men are potentially political, in the sense that they may well start discussing matters that affect the hamlet, school or work association of which they are a part. In other words, drinking encounters provide occasions for participants to further their intra-community interests. As a result, a man always needs to be alert while drinking, keeping an eye on the rest of the room, weighing up who is talking to whom and putting two and two together from his knowledge of local affairs. This means that cup exchanges are themselves political, for a man will take advantage of the custom to join a conversation in which he senses that he might have a vested interest. If he is a smart strategist, he will ensure that his membership of a drinking group appears both fortuitous and casual. He thus needs to chart his way around the room, working out how best to start drinking with the man he has in mind in as 'natural' a way as possible so that, when they do meet, their encounter will not attract the attention of others. Of course, this is not as easy as it sounds – if only because all the men have strategies of their own at parties and are likely to start moving around the room independently at any moment. Still, it is almost inevitable that they will get together at some stage during the course of this third stage of drinking and discuss whatever matter of common interest it is that they share.

But, again, we have to ask: why is such strategising necessary? Here we need to go back to the system of age grading that in former times prevailed in this part of Japan. In almost all formal matters, it was the old men (born around the turn of the 20th century) who had held positions of authority in the valley. It was they who were heads of households, they who were chairmen of village councils, agricultural associations, school committees, and so on. As mentioned above, it was they who sat at the top of the room at every drinking session and they who, until the 1960s, determined the course of drinking encounters.

By the mid to late 1970s, however, the 'rule' about not passing a cup 'up' the table to older men had been relaxed. As a result, it was not the elders, but those men aged between 40 and 60 who became most active in exchanging sake cups during the third, informal stage of a drinking encounter. It was they who were first to get up from their seats and move around the room, they who drummed up support from their juniors and took up communal issues with the elders. They were the men who vested themselves with power as they took over control of exchanges at drinking parties.

And what did they talk about that was so important? This depended very much on the kind of gathering that was taking place, but in general their topics of conversation echoed social divisions of one sort or another. These were of age and gender, on the one hand, and of household, community, valley, prefecture and country, on the other.¹¹

Household matters within a hamlet or community often brought out a lot of rancour among men drinking in the Ono valley. These are, after all, matters closest to home. So one household head would be castigated for charging more for his pottery than had been agreed upon by the Cooperative; another lambasted for going back on an agreement to sell a plot of land to a neighbour; a third ridiculed over a clash with a relative that almost led to the cancellation of his daughter's marriage. A fourth would be criticised for postponing a purification ceremony and endangering in some way the lives of his neighbours. As Ron Dore (1978:266) has eloquently put it in his description of a mountain village in central Japan:

The ‘harmony of the village’ has its cost. Underneath the placid landscape there are geological faults – a personal incompatibility, a clash of economic interest, a belief that one has been cheated – along which tensions build up which require occasional release.

In the Ono valley, the eruption of such tensions could even lead to the occasional fisticuffs, with plenty of drunken hands ready to restrain the combatants and make sure that no really serious harm occurred, and drunken heads that, in spite of their inebriation, would recall very clearly the next day who had said what to whom and with what results. Indeed, night-time arguments often formed the unspoken sub-text of daytime activities. This was where the power of the middle-aged men usurped the authority of the elders.

Community talk, however, tended to be more jocular. There was often less at stake. One story that inhabitants of Sarayama liked to tell was about a neighbouring pottery community, in which a tree juts out rather incongruously into the middle of a brand new road. People said that three generations ago there had been an argument between the heads of two households over a piece of land. One of them, who felt cheated, planted a tree in such a way that its shadow would eventually fall over his neighbour’s yard and prevent his pots from drying there. And so it came to pass, until the local authority decided to widen the road through the village to enable tourist buses to pass by more easily. This meant cutting down the offending tree, which the current head of the house that owned it absolutely refused to allow. As a result, at this one point only, the road narrows and the neighbouring potter still does not have all the sunshine he needs to dry his wares,

This kind of story was intended to show how good the storyteller’s community was, in comparison with all others, and thus marked a division between in-group and out-group within the Ono and neighbouring valleys. Similar stories occurred whenever a hamlet resident died, and men gathered round at the back of the kitchen to prepare rice for the funeral feast. In due course, alcohol made its necessary appearance and they would start comparing their own community customs favourably with those of neighbouring communities. As part of the identification with the community, as well as of individual households, in which they lived, men also liked to tell stories of the past: of how they used to have to dig graves and got frightened by skeletons that they unearthed; of how they went together on a communal outing and got so drunk that they could hardly remember what they did or where they were. Nostalgia in drinking stories thus also played an important part in sustaining community identity.

Another kind of story contributing to this sense of being ‘country people’ was that contrasting a local community with those who lived outside the valley. One tale that was repeated quite frequently during my stay in Sarayama was one in which tax inspectors came up from Hita to check how much rice was being harvested and, at the same time, search all the houses in the hamlet to ensure that nothing illegal was going on. This meant that everyone had to rush home and hide things under the floorboards, behind the ancestral altars, and anywhere else they felt was safe. On this particular occasion, the local residents decided to serve the inspectors some food and drunk, but one of the live chickens they were plucking slipped out of their hands and fell into a cesspool. Instead of washing it, the men just cut it up and served it raw (with ginger and soy sauce) to the inspectors, while they themselves ate a different bird. Their victory became the sweeter when the inspectors despatched two men to buy more sake from the brewery at the bottom of the Ono valley and one of them managed – with two deft strokes of a brush – to change the inspectors’ hand-written demand note

for three bottles into five. They thus got free of charge two extra bottles for their next party. The local community had totally outwitted members of the local government.

By playing on a nostalgia for the past, and yet by including people who were still alive, stories like this very often subtly praised the elders. The man who changed the tax inspectors' demand note for sake had, in 1977, just retired as head of the Potters' Cooperative, but was still chairman of the Ono Valley Local Council and had plenty of say in both hamlet and valley matters during the next half dozen years. In some important respects, he was resented by younger household heads, but their clear admiration for what he had done for them over the years was obvious in the way that they told this story (and other tales about other older men).

Another story illustrating the superiority of an Ono valley community over Hita residents concerned the local bus company and incidences of 'night crawling' (or *yobai*) into the room of the conductress who – in the days when it seemed more economical not to send an empty bus down the valley late at night and up again in the early morning – stayed overnight in the hamlet at the top of the valley.

Here gender became an unstated theme. Night crawling was a fairly common topic of conversation and laughter among men who took both pride and pleasure in instructing a foreign anthropologist in how best to open a wooden shutter noiselessly at night (urinate on it first), and then walk soundlessly on *tatami* rice straw mats (unroll the *obi* sash that tied one's *yukata* sleeping robe and tiptoe along it) (see Moeran 1998a:20). They also liked to boast of their own purported prowess at *yobai* and tell of certain funny incidents (like failing to wake up in the morning and being obliged to have breakfast with the girl's parents). This particular story related how a young conductress was taken off into the night by a young man who tried to make love to her in a disused charcoal-burning kiln nearby. At some point, it seemed, they were overheard. The alarm was raised and a fruitless search for the culprit ensued. The bus driver, who also stayed overnight (but in a different house) in the same community, threatened to report the matter to his employer, but was dissuaded from so doing by the hamlet headman who pointed out how such an incident would bring dishonour upon the girl's family, the bus company and the driver himself. It would therefore be better if he, the headman, approached the bus company to suggest that the bus no longer remain in the hamlet overnight (as the driver wanted). The driver agreed to this, but the headman did nothing and it was only when a second conductress was molested that action was taken – by the driver.

The main issue taken up by this story was the maintenance of the community's integrity in the face of the outside world – especially when it involved officials of a transport company based beyond the Ono valley in the town of Hita. This was achieved by sound argument (plus devious practice), which in itself led to further trouble. The fact that virtually no consideration was given by my companions to the women involved in this story reveals how men in the valley were firmly convinced that women were socially irrelevant (see Moeran 1998a:186). This issue of gender was, however, not limited to men in the valley, but characteristic of men from Kyushu who were – still are – firmly convinced of the validity of the commonly heard phrase "Honour men. Despise women" (*danson joshi*).

In a way, stories involving the local bus company might be seen as rural farmers' symbolic victory over urban business and, by implication, over Japanese corporate capitalism and the social change it had inevitably wrought in the lives of people inhabiting the Ono valley. One tale, for example, focused – with great relish – on how the bus driver would be entertained by his hosts from time to time during his overnight stay in the hamlet and later be persuaded to drive everyone down the valley

in his bus for a second drinking session (*nijikai*) in the bars of Hita. On one occasion, so the story goes, the driver was so drunk that the bus ended up in a rice field and all the local farmers had to clamber out and heave the vehicle back onto the road.

In this way, stories told during sake drinking in the Ono valley established a series of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls with which men variously identified. The smallest doll was the household, which fitted into the community doll, which itself fitted into the valley doll, and so on, into ever larger dolls comprising country town, prefecture, the island of Kyushu and, finally, Japan itself. Even though stories might set household against community, valley against town, or Kyushu against Tokyo, these shifting arcs of identity – not unlike the political allegiances of the Nuer described so famously by Evans-Pritchard (1979:142-150) – were not necessarily exclusive. A man was always a member of household *and* community *and* valley *and* town (of which Ono was an administrative unit), and so on. Different circumstances would affect *which* of these identifications would be emphasised at any given point.¹²

Ultimately, such identification focused on my drinking companions' sense of being 'Japanese' – the largest Russian doll that enclosed all others when faced with my own foreignness and their felt need to explain why they behaved in the ways that they did. Exchanging cups, for example, or singing were things that "We Japanese like to do." It is in this respect that *Drinking Country* has its *double entendre*.

Flows of Exchange

This description of drinking practices in a Japanese valley probably strikes my readers as interesting – possibly even entertaining – but may leave them wondering what it has to offer by way of theoretical analysis. So, let me look at sake from the point of view of material culture – the point, indeed, with which I began.

The first point that we should note about man's use of things is that they enable the social. Sake is a drink that is produced, talked about (as well as in its cups), and consumed. As such, it has a 'social life' and, during the course of its movement from production through circulation and representation to consumption, enters into various 'regimes of value' (to use, in the plural, a much favoured phrase from Appadurai 1986). Sake manufacturers, for example, think and talk about what makes a 'good' sake in a manner that is rather *technical* – focussing on ingredients used, the combination thereof, and what they should do to get the 'right' blend of the five flavours of sweetness, sourness, pungency, bitterness and astringency. Some of their findings might be taken up by marketers' advertising material for particular brands, but this is likely also to include other elements of appeal to consumers – like romance, nostalgia or tradition, for example – which are not of immediate concern to the manufacturing *per se* of sake.

Those consuming sake probably talk about their drink in a mixture of these two *appreciative* languages ("I like my sake like I like my women: not too sweet and not too sour"). But they also bring to such discussion a *social* dimension of the kind described here. This is found in the content of the stories they tell while drinking, and in the manner in which sake drinking is used to strengthen friendships, seal agreements, pick arguments, welcome the gods, honour the ancestors, and so on. In this way, sake as a material object takes on through exchanges a 'social density' (Weiner 1994)¹³ that is not necessarily apparent in other alcoholic drinks (like beer and whisky), but which can be found in the social use of certain foods (like whale meat [Kalland and Moeran 1992:141-157]).

Although, in the long run, sake is always consumed, it is put to all kinds of different *use* – as seasonal or one-off gifts, libation, purification, offering, and so on – and it is the particular way it is consumed, and the resulting effects that have been the focus of my account. These four different kinds of value – technical, appreciative, social and use or utility – together give sake a *symbolic exchange* value that enables drinking encounters of the kind described here to continue to take place. The fact that people are prepared to pay a certain fixed amount of money for a bottle or barrel permits sake to have a *commodity exchange* value.¹⁴

Having said this much about the different values that people bring to bear on sake at the different stages of its production, circulation, representation and consumption, we need to ask just how specific the system as a whole is *vis-à-vis* other commodities. Is there any major difference between the social lives of sake the liquid, the individually crafted *sakazuki* cup from which it is drunk, and the mass-produced glass bottle in which it is sold? In other words, is there anything particularly particular about sake and its drinking in Japan that sets it apart from other objects or commodities in general?

In many ways, the answer to these questions has to be no. Firstly, it has no ‘intrinsic’ nature, but is embedded in what Alfred Gell (1998:7) has called ‘a social-relational matrix.’ This matrix includes fellow drinkers in the Ono valley, as well as ‘Japanese’ at large. Thus, on the one hand, sake is as much a part of a (constructed) national identity as an architectural heritage, art form or music style (which, in the case of Japan, would include *shinden* and *shoin* building styles, *ukiyo*e woodblock prints and *enka* popular songs). On the other hand, just as taste has been shown to depend on class position (Bourdieu 1984), so does sake drinking in the Ono valley depend upon and reinforce men’s conviction that they are part of a (threatened) underclass rural population, which continues to practise a traditional and ‘truly Japanese’ way of life that is distinct from both urban lifestyles and Western customs and practices. No wonder, then, that the word *sake* can be used generically for all alcoholic drinks, on the one hand and that, on the other, many like to refer to what we have been talking about here as ‘Japanese alcohol’ (*nihonshū*).

Secondly, the ingredients of the drink itself may be unusual, but no more so than those of other forms of alcohol produced and consumed around the world. As a material object in a bottle, sake circulates more or less like other material objects – from *kula* to artworks.¹⁵ Like other alcoholic drinks, too, it induces inebriation. And drunkenness itself creates a shared sense of unity with others – a unity which, like art, signifies an alternative set of values to that found in everyday life, where the ‘human spirit’ or ‘family of man’ reigns supreme.¹⁶

This unity is premised on a sense of egalitarianism among men drinking in the Ono valley – an argument likely to raise the eyebrows of old ‘Japan hands’ who are accustomed to talking about Japanese society in terms of hierarchy. But it is precisely this sense of being egalitarian induced by drunkenness that permits men who do *not* have authority in everyday life to argue with their elders about different aspects of household, community and valley life. In that the latter’s authority is not questioned during men’s daytime activities, sake drinking also permits the *re*-establishment of a social hierarchy that situates elder men above younger men, and men above women. In so far as men rarely forget who has said what during the course of drinking encounters and incorporate the results of drinking exchanges into their everyday lives, the flows of sake exchange may be seen ultimately to balance social differences and similarities.

Thus sake can be said to be constitutive of certain social relations (Miller 1987:122). On the one hand, it acts as a fundamental platform for political organisation. On the other, it involves an enormous amount of hard work on the part of those concerned to keep it flowing, and to know when to withhold it (cf. Annette Wiener in Myers and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001:297). Moreover, through its very flow of exchanges, sake obliges a renewal of social relationships, through which various processes of social distinction take place. We see such forms of impression management at work in people's purchase of a (meno-)Porsche car, Impressionist painting or Nike athletic shoes, each of which enables different kinds of people to enhance in different ways their social and cultural capital.

But there is something else about sake that brings it in line with other objects of material culture. It contributes to and reinforces *certain kinds* of social relationship: men's domination over women in public affairs; the public authority that accompanies age; the interlocking institutions of household, hamlet, and village (or valley); reciprocity between this and other worlds – between the living and their household ancestors (in other words, relations through time); and between people and gods (*kami*), located in and around the household and community (relations in space). Identities are produced and consumed in sake exchanges (witness the naming that accompanies a cup exchange). Sake thus produces exchanges that build up and mediate relations in ways that are not dissimilar from (though clearly not identical to) other objects of material culture that have attracted anthropological attention over the years. In their exchange of drinks, people drink exchanges.

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Endnotes

¹ There are about 3,000 manufacturers of refined *sake* in Japan today. Many of these are local brands (*jizake*) and produced all over Japan, outside the main manufacturing districts of Kyōto and Hyōgo prefectures in the centre of the country.

² Takada (1980:130) classifies drinking places into six different types, according to the slightly different functions they fulfil (which include specialised drinks, food, sex, information exchange and music).

³ A remarkable description of women drinking is given by Ella Lury Wiswell in her diary of life in the Kyushu village of Suye in the mid 1930s (Smith and Wiswell 1982). Although women in the Ono valley did drink, and once or twice got unashamedly drunk in the process, they hardly ever did so on their own. Rather, they acted as a foil to the local men, providing cupped breasts or a folded cushion, for example, for the empty beer bottle used to simulate a man's penis in one of the many dances that took place during parties. In general, they were there for the important purpose of flirtation.

⁴ *Sake* is an alcoholic drink made from fermented rice, with an alcohol content of about 32 proof. It is usually served hot, at a temperature of about 50°C in a small earthenware bottle called a *tokkuri*, from which it is poured into small cups known as *sakazuki*.

⁵ In the pottery community of Sarayama, for example, the gathering held annually for the mountain god (*yama no kami*) stipulated that only one *go* (0.18 litres) of sweet sake be drunk by the fourteen household heads present. On New Year's Day, they drank just one *shō* (1.8 litres) of cold sake.

⁶ Each community consisted of somewhere between eight or nine and twenty households.

⁷ Admittedly, I never saw people taking the opportunity of a visiting vaccination clinic to start drinking, but most of the other occasions described by Wiswell might just as easily have taken place in Ono.

⁸ This section follows the outline of an argument made in an earlier paper that I wrote on sake drinking (see Moeran 1998b [1986]).

⁹ The *zashiki* often comprised two rooms, separated by sliding screens that could be removed when there were many guests.

¹⁰ It is considered extremely impolite to pour one's own drink in Japan. When drinking with others, one must ensure that their glasses are never empty. This, as we shall soon see, involves a lot of topping up.

¹¹ A slightly fictionalised account of some of the stories that follow may be found in my ethnographic diary of life in the Ono valley (Moeran 1998a).

¹² This was particularly clear in local people's support of teams during the annual high-school baseball competition, in which one team from each prefecture participates in a series of knock-out games over a two week period. Once the local Oita team had been eliminated, people's allegiance would shift to neighbouring prefectural teams in Kyushu, then to Okinawa and the western part of Honshu or to Hokkaido and prefectures in the far north (whose inhabitants were seen to live in the same state of remoteness from the capital as people in the Ono valley). Once all these teams had been eliminated, support would shift to any team left from the Osaka or Nagoya region. Tokyo teams were never supported.

¹³ As I understand her, Weiner's concept of density is a little different from that used here, since she refers to the density of an object while I am applying the idea to social relations.

¹⁴ I have elsewhere outlined more fully the different values that people bring to things (Moeran 1996:281-297).

¹⁵ As Miller (1987:89) reminds us, in spite of the large body of anthropological literature devoted to discussions of art, "art and unique objects are... only a minute proportion of the material world."

¹⁶ The similarities cited here for the most part follow Myers (2001:29-30), who uses the same categories to argue, to my mind unconvincingly, that "art is not just another example of material culture."