

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kristin Surak. *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. Illustrations. xv + 252 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7866-4; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-7867-1.

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Published on H-Nationalism (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Paul Quigley



In *Making Tea, Making Japan*, Kristin Surak provides an in-depth case study of the Japanese tea ceremony and makes an important contribution to the literature on nations and nationalism. Placing her study between macro-historical analyses and micro-sociological or anthropological case studies, Surak demonstrates how the tea ceremony is an example of what she terms “nation-work,” or the methods through which nations are maintained over time. In developing this praxeology of nations, Surak convincingly conveys the importance of practices of differentiation at both the international and domestic levels. On this account, not only is the age-old distinction between “us” and “them” important for the maintenance of national identities, but so too are hierarchies within the nation: in this case, levels of Japanese-ness as measured against the strictures of tea. The book uses historical analysis to show how tea became an important measure of national competence, and ethnographic analysis to show how the processes of differentiation occur. All this is achieved in elegant prose that is a joy to read.

The book is divided into an introduction and five chapters. The introduction serves as a whistle-stop tour of theories of nationalism, situating the argument within nationalism as cognition literature and setting out the central premise of the book: that the national is constituted through a threefold process of distinction (the international distinction of “us” versus “them”); specification (the mediation of national identity via other identity categories); and differentiation (the establishment of a hierarchy within the national identity category). This framework is illuminating, and Surak uses it adeptly throughout the book, demonstrating how the aesthetics and practice of tea came to differentiate Japan from the

West, how it became specifically gendered, and how tea achieved a position of authority regarding the proper cultivation of Japanese-ness.

The first and second chapters work well together. Chapter 1 offers a painstaking description of a contemporary tea room: its spaces, tools, processes, flows, and assumptions, while chapter 2 begins the process of demystifying the tea space through a discussion of the history of tea up to the Meiji period. Surak shows that tea developed in tandem with shifting contours of power politics, moving from a practice associated with powerful men in the Tokugawa period, to one championed by the Meiji state as a method of cultivating traditional Japanese sensibilities in Japanese women. It was also in the Meiji period that tea became fully articulated with Japanese-ness, as intellectuals such as Okakura Kakuzō posed this Japanese art form as quintessentially Japanese, and as such everything the West was not.

Rather than taking up the story where chapter 2 leaves off, chapter 3 backtracks to discuss the development of the *iemoto* system, the network of hierarchically structured families that act as the gatekeepers of the Japanese tea world and bestow legitimacy on tools and practices. Here Surak details another important aspect of the ceremony: tea as industry. She relates how key players in the tea world successfully monopolized the teachings of famous tea masters and set up elaborate systems of certification of both people and things in order to secure their revenue stream. After the war, tea was in a prime position to take over from *bushidō*, the way of the warrior, as the quintessential symbol of the new peaceful and cultured Japan. Building on Okakura’s

argument that tea was a cultural synthesis of all Japanese traditions, and as such a perfect vehicle for transmission of Japanese-ness, the *iemoto* also advertised tea as a key tool in Japan's internationalization. However, although it is interesting to learn about the *iemoto*'s take on tea, I would have liked more discussion of how the ceremony fit into Nakasone Yasuhiro's, Japan's prime minister, internationalization agenda in the 1980s, and more on the relationship between tea and the postwar Japanese state in general. Chapter 4, which analyzes the enactment of the tea ceremony itself, however, does offer some insight. Just as Chris Burgess has drawn attention to how Japan's internationalization has promoted a firming up of national boundaries, Surak notes that tea's purported universal values smuggle in and enact an asymmetrical power relationship between the Japanese and the foreigner, while restricting communication to the controllable, and ultimately dialogue free, aesthetics of tea.[1]

The final chapter is perhaps the weakest, mainly because it tries to do too much. In quick succession, Surak offers an account of current representations of tea in the media, discusses non-initiates' opinions regarding the ceremony, and then makes some comparisons with European examples of the praxeology of nations. This last topic struck me as odd, not because international comparison is unwarranted, but because both tea and Japan drop away from the discussion almost completely for most of the section. It would have been better for Surak to use her findings to examine other methods of enacting the nation in contemporary Japan, especially given that tea is steadily becoming less popular. One example that

springs to mind is the Japanese state's insistence on the flag and national anthem at school ceremonies, which is an overt attempt at instigating and codifying bodily practices for doing Japanese-ness.

There is no doubt that this could have been a longer book. For one, the relationship between Surak's praxeology of nations and sociological theories of taste and distinction could have been explored more thoroughly: as it stands the potential for synthesis remains underdeveloped. Nevertheless, this is an excellent book that deserves a place on undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists, as well as on the shelves of academics interested in nationalism and the politics of belonging. It is also an interesting case study on the establishment and maintenance of networks of power and legitimacy. Indeed, one of the strengths of Surak's analysis is that it draws attention to the power of bodily injunctions and the production of wordless aesthetics of practice. She examines how common sense orders of worth are set up and maintained through complex social, political, and economic processes, and how bodies of knowledge constitute both national and international hierarchies. And all this comes from a bowl of frothy green tea.

#### Note

[1]. Chris Burgess, "Maintaining Identities: Discourses of Homogeneity in a Rapidly Globalizing Japan," *Electronic Journal of Japanese Studies*, Article 1, <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/Burgess.html>.

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**Citation:** Chris Perkins. Review of Surak, Kristin, *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

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