

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

Mark Frank

## 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 tatsujin kentei shiken* (Niigata *Sake* Master Test), I became one of 14 honorary *tatsujin* (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 an 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* (麴づくり (製麴) → 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 a 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 *ka-maya*, 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* (醪の当番, *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 (分析), sampled the *sake* (利き酒), and photographed the surface of the fermenting *moromi* (醪の面). 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 「わ」 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, seminar students' friends, family, staff, and graduates. We were fortunate to get newspaper coverage in *Niigata Nippou* and the *Japan Agricultural News*, which in turn led to Internet 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 its 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 otherwise 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, several 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 (総合学習) 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

- Berry, W. (1990). *What are people for?* New York, NY: North Point Press.
- Fukuoka, M. (1978). *The one-straw revolution: An introduction to natural farming*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press.
- Hachisuka, H. (2004). *Nougyou de kodomo no kokoro o tagayasu*. Tokyo: Kodomo no Miraisha.
- Nakamura, T. (1999). *Echigo touji to sakagura seikatsu*. Niigata: Niigata Nippou Jigyousha.
- Niigata Seishu Tatsujin Kentei Koushiki Tekisutobukku*.(2007). Niigata: Niigata Nippou Jigyousha.
- Shima, T. (2007). *Sake o kataru*. Niigata: Asahi Shuzou Kabushiki Gaisha.