

From the Nampō Roku "Tea Records" (Kai 會) chapter

正月元日	New Year's day
客なし	No guests
四畳半にて大フク祝	(I prepared) obukucha in a yojōhan (4.5 mat room)
牧溪壽老人	Hanging scroll: Painting of an immortal, by Mokkei ¹
釜・雲龍	Kama: Unryū (dragon among the clouds)
ツルへ・シメ引テ	Mizusashi: tsurube with shime-nawa
茶入・尻フクラ・盆ニ	Chaire: shiri-bukura on a tray
薬師堂天目・台	Chawan: Yakushi-dō tenmoku on a tenmoku-stand
花入・鶴首・梅	Hana-ire: Tsurukubi (crane's neck) with ume plum flower
手フクヘニテ炭	(I prepared) sumi using a te-fukube (dried gourd shell carved with a handle)

Commentary

As a personal account of how Rikyu marked the New Year with tea, this tea record is extremely valuable for our understanding of the spiritual side of Rikyu's chanoyu. In being a personal account, this record is actually one of the entries in the Nampō Roku that lends evidence to the theory that the Nampō Roku was fabricated – why would Rikyu give a record of his personal chanoyu to someone? But whether this chanoyu happened in actuality or not is beside the point. There's no arguing Rikyu's spiritual depth, he was certainly apt to conduct such a start to the New Year. We can easily imagine Rikyu creating this personal ritual that embodies a high spiritual ideal of chanoyu. We can glean timeless lessons from this tea record, and this is the real treasure.

In the Nampō Roku, the entry that follows this New Year's kaiki² is dated the first day of the rat (ne no hi), 5th day of New Year. The first day of the rat fell on the 5th day of the year in 1582. From this we can infer that this chanoyu was on New Year's morning of 1582 (24th January for the Gregorian calendar)

As the mizusashi is decorated with a shime-nawa³, this chanoyu was more than likely conducted at dawn using the first water of the New Year. This water is called 'waka-mizu' with 'waka' meaning

¹ Muqi Fachang (1210? - 1269?) (Chinese: 牧溪法常; Japanese: 牧谿 Mokkei) was a Chinese Chan Buddhist monk and painter who lived in the 13th century. In Japan, he is considered to be one of the greatest Chan painters in history. Appraisal of his work is mixed and he does not enjoy the same status in China.

² 会記 kaiki - tea record. A record of the utensils and themes of a particular tea gathering.

³ Shime-nawa 注連縄 or 'enclosing rope' is made from rice straw or hemp and used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion. A space bound by shime-nawa indicates a sacred or pure space.

‘egoless, awakened to one’s divine heart’⁴. ‘Mizu’ means ‘water’. The time for drawing the first water of the day for chanoyu is at or just prior to daybreak, when the water is charged with the special vitality of yin (night) shifting to yang (day).

Rikyu would have likely aimed to perform his first chanoyu of the year together with the first sunrise. He would need to prepare in advance and the earliest time for this is during the time of the tiger, between 3am and 5am. The time of the tiger is yang, the time when the qi of the land⁵ changes to the new day. Daybreak falls in the time of the rabbit, between 5am and 7am. Rikyu may have fetched water in the very tsurube he used in this chanoyu during either of these times. After decorating the hinoki water pail with shime-nawa and placing it in the chashitsu, he would have commenced his chanoyu around daybreak.

We can see he performed ‘ōbukucha’. This is a type of tea prepared with waka-mizu where auspicious foods like ume-boshi, sweet black beans, sanshō pepper and kombu are added to the tea before drinking. What Rikyu included in his ōbukucha is anyone’s guess.

We may imagine Rikyu preparing ōbukucha and dedicating the tea to the Buddha. After the dedication, Rikyu would have imbibed his elixir in the dawn of the New Year. This tea record can become a template upon which to base our own New Year’s tea ritual, pursuing the spiritual depth glowing from this simple entry.

牧溪壽老人

Hanging scroll: Painting of an immortal, by Mokkei

In Japan, Mokkei is considered one of the greatest zen ink painters in history. He paints an intimate, ‘worts and all’ view of zen thought. The image hanging in Rikyu’s alcove is of Jurōjin, one of the Seven Gods of Fortune or Shichi-fukujin, according to Daoist beliefs. Jurōjin is the God of longevity and is often depicted with a long white beard and carrying a staff. Jurōjin originated from the Daoist god, the Old Man of the South Pole, who is the deification of Canopus, the brightest star of the constellation Carina and the second brightest star in the night sky. There is also a possibility that the description of ‘jurōjin’ is being used as a general term for either ‘Arhat’, ‘Immortal’ or ‘Old Sage’. By selecting such an image to focus on for his New Year’s cha, we can see Rikyu reaffirming his ultimate goal of spiritual awakening through chanoyu. By marking the New Year with a personal affirmation, we can see a little of Rikyu in ourselves. We can relate to this very human side of Rikyu and be follow his lead towards our own spiritual awakening through chanoyu.

釜 雲龍

Kama: Unryū (dragon among the clouds)

According to the Nampō Roku, Rikyu borrowed a picture of the unryū (dragon in the clouds) motif from a celadon porcelain mizusashi from Jōō. Rikyu then copied the motif and had a blacksmith make the distinctive unryū kettle form with the dragon in the clouds motif wrapping around the body of the kettle. Another common tradition is that Rikyu simply received his unryūgama from

⁴ 若 waka is most commonly used for the adjective ‘young’. Tea people will know the term ‘waka-sōshō’ which denotes the person who will inherit the title of grandmaster. Waka-sōshō is sometimes translated as ‘junior grandmaster’. The origin of the character is a woman with her hair out, egoless, listening to her divine heart. The character is also used for the word 般若 hannya which means prajñā in sanskrit and is translated to “wisdom” in English. Hannya is insight in the true nature of reality, namely primarily anicca (impermanence), dukkha (dissatisfaction or suffering), anattā (non-self) and śūnyatā (emptiness).

⁵ The particular location on Earth where the timezone is 3am to 5am.

Takeno Jōō. An unryū kettle is suspended from the ceiling with a chain or wooden ‘jizai’ when used over a hearth. The beauty of this kettle is not just in its elegant form and motif. The kama is smaller than usual and boils water very quickly. It is therefore ideal for when one has unexpected guests and when preparing tea for oneself, as one does not have to wait long for the water to boil. There is no mention of a sweet or meal on this tea record. One is tempted to imagine Rikyu laying fresh charcoal, preparing the mizuya, putting tea in the chaire, and meditating until he started to hear whispers from kettle.

ツルヘ シメ引テ

Mizusashi: tsurube with shime-nawa

A ‘tsurube’ mizusashi is a square, plain wood bucket originally used for fetching well water. The vessel has a wooden handle running vertical across the mouth, with two slats either side used as lids. Jōō first adopted the bucket for use in the mizuya. Then Rikyu took the idea a step further by using the tsurube in the tea room as a mizusashi. As such, the tsurube became a classic example of a ‘mitate’ that embodies the wabi aesthetic. The look of the tsurube has proven timeless, as it remains a hugely popular piece among tea people today (myself included). However, nowadays they are supposedly made to ‘Rikyu’s specifications’, with the tsurube with the straightest and clearest wood grain fetching high prices. As such, the tsurube has become the ghost of wabi.

Shime-nawa or ‘enclosing rope’ is made from rice straw or hemp and used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion. Shime-nawa is often festooned with ‘shide’ paper that resembles lightning to ward off impurities. A space bound by shime-nawa indicates a sacred or pure space. Shime-nawa are fastened around things thought to be inhabited by spirits, and things capable of attracting spirits. It is not clear whether Rikyu fastened the shide to the shime-nawa, but this is indeed the case in the practice of many schools today, and simply looks cool.

The tsurube contained water drawn at the time when the qi of the land changed to the New Year. At this time, water is charged with an especially auspicious energy, linked to the creative source itself. This ‘waka-mizu’ imbued with the power (symbolic or real) to awaken one’s divine heart, is treated as sacred by Rikyu.

茶入 尻フクラ 盆ニ

Chaire: shiri-bukura on a tray

This chaire is likely the same one that Rikyu would later decide to use at the Kitano Grand Tea Event, held at Kitano Tenmangu Shrine in 1587. After Rikyu’s death the chaire found its way to the second generation Tokugawa Shogun, Tokugawa Hidetada. After the Battle of Sekigahara in 1615, Hidetada gifted this chaire to Hosokawa Sansai for his military feats during the war. The chaire has three shifuku, all made from rather simple fabrics that appear to be imported from India.

薬師堂天目 台

Chawan: Yakushi-dō tenmoku on a tenmoku-stand

In Rikyu’s tea records, we see him using this Yakushi-dō tenmoku in 13 of his recorded gatherings, making it one of his most often used chawans.

Yakushi Nyorai (Bhaiṣajyaguru) or formally Bhaiṣajya-guru-vaīḍūrya-prabhā-rāja (King of Medicine Master and Lapis Lazuli Light), is the Buddha of healing and medicine in Mahāyāna

Buddhism. Commonly referred to as the "Medicine Buddha", Yakushi Nyorai cures dukkha (suffering) using the medicine of his teachings. In this chanoyu, Rikyu is preparing tea in a chawan linked to Yakushi-dō, a temple dedicated to the Medicine Buddha. The type of tea he is preparing is ōbukucha, a tea to protect one from sickness for the following year. Here is the description of ōbukucha as published by the Ueda Sōko Ryū:

‘Emperor Murakami (926–967) was a devout worshipper of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy (Rokuhara Kanzeon). At the time of serious illness, the Goddess appeared to the sick Emperor in a dream and directed him to drink a special tea to heal his illness. Emperor Murakami followed the Goddess’ message and he soon made a complete recovery. After this happening, shrines and temples began conducting a ceremony at New Year’s time of drinking ōbukucha tea for a year’s perfect health. This tradition continues today.

Ōbukucha was originally written 王服茶, meaning ‘the tea the Emperor drinks’, representing the fact that it was originally the Emperor’s tonic. Over time, the original characters were exchanged with more auspicious characters with the same pronunciation 大福茶 (tea of great fortune).

The ingredients of ōbukucha vary between different traditions. In the Ueda Sōko Tradition, ōbukucha is made with an usucha base with an umeboshi pickled plum, kuromame black bean, and sanshō pepper added.’

Another variation of the origin of ōbukucha says that there was a plague epidemic during the time of Emperor Murakami. In response to this, itinerant Pure Land Buddhist priest Kūya Shōnin⁶ (903–972) is said to have dedicated tea to the Buddha before distributing the tea to common folk. This tea was called ōbukucha (御仏供茶) where Buddha = ‘bu’, dedicate = ‘ku’, tea = ‘cha’, and ‘o’ is an honorific prefix. By drinking this tea first offered to the Buddha, many people made a full recovery from their illness. Since this time, it became a New Year’s tradition to prepare and drink ōbukucha to ward off sickness.

We may imagine Rikyu preparing ōbukucha and dedicating the tea to the Buddha. After the dedication, Rikyu would have imbibed his elixir in the dawn of the New Year.

花入 鶴首 梅

Hana-ire: Tsurukubi (crane’s neck) with ume plum flower

A tsurukubi ‘crane’s neck’ flower vase is a classic shape, but nothing too original. Perhaps Rikyu selected the vase for its auspicious associations. The crane has been a symbol of longevity since ancient times. It is said to be a bird that dwells in the pure land of the immortals and the appearance of a crane is considered a good omen. The ume flower is the first flower to blossom after the peak of winter. Enduring the still frigid cold, the ume blooms with a strong, mesmerising perfume, as if announcing the oncoming of spring to the world. For these reasons, the ume is a symbol of joy and new awakening.

⁶ Kūya Shōnin 空也上人 (903-972) was an itinerant Japanese priest who was an early promoter of the practice of the nembutsu amongst the common people, in order for all people to attain salvation and entry into the Pure land of Amida Buddha. The movement gained in strength during the Heian period as a reaction against the worldly and military character of the established temples. A widely known sculpture of Kūya is the one carved in the early 13th century, now located at Rokuharamitsu-ji temple in Kyoto. The six syllables of the nembutsu, na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu, are represented by six small figures of Amida Buddha streaming from Kūya's mouth.

手フクヘニテ炭

Charcoal carried in a te-fukube (dried gourd shell carved with a handle)

Kamiya Sōtan (1553–1635) notes in his diary⁷ that Rikyu first started using a hollowed-out gourd as a sumi-tori (charcoal basket). The sumi-tori being used on this occasion is a ‘te-fukube’ which means it had a handle (te). The handle would have been a strip of the shell left joined to the body, running across the top of the mouth of the sumi-tori.

- Adam Sōmu Wojciński, 2019

⁷宗湛日記 Sōtan Nikki