

Sake and "Space Time" : Culture, Organization and Drinking in Japanese Firms

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***Saké* and “Space Time”: Culture, Organization and Drinking in Japanese Firms**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper represents an analysis of drinking occasions that occur in large Japanese firms. Such occasions belong, no doubt, to the “interstices” of these enterprises: to the narrow time-junctures in between “regular” periods of work activity. But they should not be viewed as unimportant aspects of these enterprises. Rather, I propose that analysing these occasions may shed light on the significance of drinking in Japanese culture and to such organizational matters as the creation of work-group solidarity, managerial control, or the resolution of conflict. I will begin by briefly justifying my analytical focus.

The social life of workers in Japan’s corporations is punctuated by a plethora of leisure-related activities. These activities include, for example, sports days and softball meets [DORE 1973: 205; ROHLEN 1974: 110-111]; folk dancing and masquerade parties [MATSUMOTO 1970: 25-26]; picnics and flower-viewing gatherings; after-hours socializing [ATSUMI 1979; Plath 1964: 39] or end-of-the-year parties (*bonenkai*) and group bathing [BEFU 1974]. Yet, as a long line of scholars have observed [for example, NAKANE 1973: 129; TAKADA 1983], the most common type of activity in which co-workers participate are drinking parties. Such ubiquitous encounters, which can be held as often as a few times a week or only once a month, may include (depending on the specific organization) white-collar workers and their section chiefs, assembly-line workers and their foremen, or more senior managers. These occasions are ostensibly held for creating integration and maintaining cooperation at the work place, yet may actually involve the expression of intense work-related grievances and the management of conflicts.

In this essay I propose to explore such drinking occasions by using an approach which has developed out of the work of Gregory Bateson [1972] and Victor Turner [1986]. Specifically, I examine these events as “cultural performances”: special social frames or situations which differ and are set apart from everyday behavior at the work place, but which allow workers participating in them to comment upon, explore and define the ties which bind them together.

Why study such cultural performances, such “public events” [HANDELMAN 1989]? These events are privileged points of entrance into the social life of Japanese business firms. This is because such opportunities constitute concentrations of symbols (and their meanings) and because they are held to be important by the managers and workers of Japanese companies. More generally, it is in public occasions that cultural codes — usually diffused and submerged in the mundane order of things — lie closest to the behavioral surface. Here they are most graspable in various sensory and cognitive modalities.

Why large firms? The “firm-as-family” analogy well captures the major peculiarities of Japanese enterprises: a strong coupling between commitment to and identification with work mates, and a high level of material dependence on the firm [FRUIN 1983: 8]. Such a depiction, however, does not imply an idyllic existence for the employees of these companies. In the past few decades these workers have increasingly come to recognize and openly question the strains, tensions, and the constraints that characterize relations within these firms. The question thus becomes that of the social forms through which the tensions and resentments generated by the work place can be voiced, expressed and sometimes resolved.

Elsewhere [BEN-ARI 1990] I have discussed one such kind of social form found in Japanese firms: the “staged” or “ritual” strike. During these short and highly structured situations, workers often don special costumes, gather in large assemblies and assert their support for class struggle. Yet these strikes, which are apparently held in order to stress the basic conflict between labor and management, actually figure as part of the process through which union-management cooperation is effected. In the context of this paper I propose to explore another kind of social form: the leisure-related activities — and more specifically, drinking parties — in which co-workers participate.

These remarks suggest three sets of issues which form the core of my analysis. The first involves the internal dynamics through which these occasions are constructed: the interplay of social interaction and individual experiences which contribute to the capacity of such situations to control or to transform groups and individuals. The second is related to the tie between these special situations and their wider social contexts: those characteristics of the gatherings which contribute to the organizations in which the participants are employed. The third entails an exploration of how such occasions allow the expression of tension and the management of conflicts.

2. THE DYNAMICS OF DRINKING OCCASIONS

Put briefly, my argument is as follows: drinking parties are occasions that operate on the participants and on the social order of the firms to which they belong. Thus, an examination of how they are constructed can lead to an understanding of what they are able to accomplish. In general the “logic” by which these parties are put together is related to the creation of a special reality which holds for the duration of what will be termed drinking frames. It is within this reality — with its own rules of conduct and interpersonal dynamics — that the participants can release stress and express tensions. The concept of frame derives from the work of Gregory Bateson [1972], but it has been Turner [1986] who has most fruitfully applied this concept to the analysis of social action:

To frame is to discriminate a sector of sociocultural action from the general on-going process of a community's life... To do this one must create — by rules of exclusion and inclusion — a bordered space and a privileged time within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be “relived,” scrutinized, assessed, revalued, and if need be, remodeled and rearranged [TURNER 1986: 140].

The reality of drinking parties is established through the following measures: messages about the formation of a special frame which is separated from everyday life; a heavy stress (within the frame) on certain themes of unity and identity; and establishment of in-frame behavior on rules which differ from those governing everyday activities.

The separation of the frames from external activities is effected, for example, through the use of space and time. The party usually occurs away from both work and home, in specially designated drinking places. Within these places, the restaurant staff, even if they do have other rooms to serve, always maintain an appearance of monopolized service for the party goers [BEFU 1974: 196-203]. Next, the party is held during workers' leisure time, i.e. as a period which is “opposed” to normal working hours. Finally, during more ceremonious partying, one finds formalities — for example, speeches or declarations — which open and close the event, and thereby serve to clearly differentiate it from other social activities.

Within the frame one finds messages that emphasize the basic unity and identity of the gathering. In more formal parties opening speeches focus on the collective efforts towards which the participants contribute, while a first toast and last *banzai* underline in explicit terms the participation in a common endeavor. On a non-discursive level, the tendency to seat the party goers around one table to include everyone in the occasion [BEFU 1971: 164] assists in creating a common focus of attention. Finally, the dyadic exchanges of toasts which come to encompass the whole gathering may be seen as a ritualized means for expressing a sense of solidarity between party members. According to Japanese custom, in social drinking individuals do not pour drinks for themselves. Rather, they turn to their neighbors, pour a drink for them, are poured a drink by these people in turn, and then both mutually toast each other. Thus, not only is the pouring done for each other, but it is done in public in front of the other guests [BEFU 1974; ROHLEN 1974: 109; EDWARDS 1989: 27].

These kinds of arrangements all work to make sure that no one is forgotten and that support and attention for all revolve within the group. What happens is not only the creation of a collective entity towards which attention is directed. What is formed through the pattern of mutual pouring is a dense network of dyads which embraces all of the participants and which provides a base for the creation of a collective entity.

Being a separate frame also implies, however, the switching of behavioral codes. The most important of these codes seems to be the levelling of statuses [LEBRA 1976: Ch.7; see also MOERAN 1986]. This is because, for the duration of the frame, the social distinctions of everyday life are apparently disregarded and a relative equality is temporarily established. The appearance of a sameness is achieved through the consumption of the same kind of food and the wearing of similar clothes, not unlike the wearing of uniform kimonos at hot springs [MATSUMOTO 1970: 23]. Under these circumstances, the boss and his subordinate [ROHLEN 1974: 108ff.] can relate to one another with relatively little regard to their external attributes. Indeed, Matsumoto [1970:

23] likens this situation to a “public-bath democracy” found in group bathing.

To sum up so far, it is through three elements that the special character of the drinking frame is established: marking of the party as a special frame, communications about the solidarity of the assembled gathering, and levelling of statuses. These form preconditions for a further process that unfolds within the frame. While the frame is being established, people very gradually break down the barriers that keep them apart during everyday work place-related life and evince increasingly intimate behavior. On a rather self-evident level this goes for the chit-chats and the small talk by which people pass part of the evening, as well as for the lively conversation that ensues. Nakane [1973: 130] vividly describes these parties in which

a sentence is never completed; the conversation may jump from one topic to another with no apparent linking theme; topics will be taken up at the whim of each speaker and in such rapid succession that an outsider may well be unable to catch even the general drift. The game is played in a succession of quick timely reactions, interspersed with jokes which prompt immediate boisterous laughter.

But these all belong to the first layers of intimacy. What happens during drinking parties is that people can reveal more about themselves than simple information. In this further process, increasing intimacy within the frame leads to what Lebra [1976: 116] has termed social nudity. Here, an individual can reveal aspects of the self as they are stripped of all social masks. Social nudity is exhibited in what are often deliberate violations of manners [KIEFER 1980: 442; KONDO 1990: 186; TAKADA 1983: 141ff.]: in bragging, infantility, stupidity, boisterousness, highly emotional expressions, sentimental weeping, lying on the floor, lewd jokes, clowning, doing magic tricks, or in male-female impersonations. Shimizu [1989: 38-9] provides a fictional account of a *bonenkai* at the provincial office of a major bank in which the violation of normative behavior is taken to an extreme: the deputy director of the office is beaten up by frustrated and “drunk” workers. Another vivid account of social nudity in the business world is an office party attended by the staff and the company president:

A young man performs a stunt called “catching fleas,” involving scratching his body, feeling about for a flea, taking off his coat, tie, shirt, and so on, in search of a flea. This performance provokes uproarious laughter adding much to the levity of the occasion, and the same man dances with the president until, their wobbly legs entangled, they tumble to the floor and fall asleep [GENJI 1961; cited in NAKANE 1976:119].

Yet social nudity entails more than a violation of norms or the expression of affection. It works towards the expression of something else. Let us get at this by way of the highly popular *karaoke* performances, although similar things can be said for the joking, playing, or dancing presentations that go on during many Japanese parties. In a word, *karaoke* provides a chance for many people to stand out: to become for a few minutes a movie or singing star, or a fantasy character. In a society which provides relatively few opportunities for adult individuals to stand in the limelight, taking the microphone turns an individual into the center of the group’s attention regardless of their singing skills [STROMAN 1983: 43-9].

But what of those for whom singing is not easy? Here we would do well to follow Rohlen’s [1974: 109] account:

It is no easy thing to stand before a group and sing. Trembling hands, shaking voices, and nervous faces reveal the stress many experience at the moment they are selected. The group responds sympathetically, however, clapping encouragement, and sometimes by actually joining in the song. When the ordeal is over, it is normal for the performer to experience a rush of relief and a feeling of gratitude to the others for their help. From that point he is deep into the group emotionally... what occurs is much like a confession-forgiveness sequence [ROHLEN 1974: 109].

The individual, in other words, has revealed his humanity and been accepted by the others. Moreover, each person also acts as part of the assembled gathering in helping the other soloists and in receiving them into the fellowship. The constant alternation between performers and audience thus guarantees that each of the participants goes through the dual experience of performing and being performed to.

In all such frames then, individual expression is to a great extent coupled with an immersion within a larger social body. Accordingly, the levelling of statuses during drinking occasions does not signal the creation of some kind of egalitarian set-up. Rather, what emerges, for the duration of the frame, is a temporary entity that is marked by clear boundaries from the outside, and which is characterized by a certain identity, intimate behavior and a sense of fellowship within it.

This is not to argue that this is a linear process by which people inevitably proceed from one stage to the next, or in which the collective entity is irresistibly created. It is rather a process that at times progresses and at others regresses, and in which individuals may vary in terms of being caught up in the collective experience. Nevertheless, in many drinking occasions there appears to be a strong force that works toward the creation of a temporary collectivity: a strong force for the construction of an experience that transcends individuals.

Herein lies what is probably the most obvious role of drinking occasions in the context of work groups: the creation of solidarity and identity. These are occasions, in other words, that allow groups of workers to emphasize — within the emotionally charged atmosphere — their essential solidarity. In this sense drinking frames are similar to rituals of solidarity found the world over: ceremonies marked by a heavy stress on certain emotionally loaded symbols of unity and familiarity. Yet these occasions work towards more than an inculcation of notions of solidarity.

3. EXPRESSING TENSIONS, MANAGING CONFLICTS

Against the background of the group dynamics during drinking occasions, two more kinds of behavior take place: the rather commonplace expression of work-related complaints and more serious communication about the organizational matters. The most common explanation for these kinds of behavior centers on the process by which people break down the distance between them and tolerate intimate conduct. During such interludes, as the explanation goes,

men who are slow to speak out because of cultural or personal inhibitions can express their complaints or discuss problems which trouble them. Nakane [1973: 129] introduces such an interpretation when she links the relaxation of associates during drinking episodes to the conversations they have about intrigues at the work place. Skinner [1978] also introduces such an explanation with regard to drinking behavior in a large public corporation when he observes that the gossip allowed during such situations is often used to gain knowledge about organizational decisions.

Yet this interpretation, while elucidating the different normative conventions governing behavior during the party, fails to explicate the process by which participants either fix the common grounds for discussing problematic issues, or establish the atmosphere within which their personal grievances can be voiced. A more complete explanation involves elucidating the ways in which trust — the basis for any serious expression, or discussion of common concerns — is built and rebuilt within such situations.

Accordingly, a fuller explanation must also take into account how the exchanges that go on during drinking parties contribute to the emergence of a certain sense of trust between the participants. What one finds is a gradual progression of acts of exchange which can serve as bases for demonstrating trust: the dyadic toasts at an evening's beginning, the exchange of increasingly personal information, the mutual lowering of defenses, and finally the reciprocation of singing and social nudity through which rarely revealed aspects of the self are exposed. What is of importance here is that through these exchanges the participants demonstrate — for the duration of the frame — sufficient interpersonal trust to form the basis for discussing the issues that trouble them. Once the process of trust-building has unfolded within the frame people can turn to mutual concerns.

Scattered comments in the ethnography of drinking occasions in Japan bear these assertions out. Vogel [1963: 105], for example, relates how the drinking occasions of company men are used to openly air and correct problems within the work place. Rohlen [1974: 126] talks of the special atmosphere created between co-workers during drinking in which it becomes particularly easy for people to freely discuss difficulties, offer criticisms, and exchange opinions. Finally, following Krauss, Rohlen and Steinhoff [1984: 381] it may be hypothesized that office parties offer ideal settings for leaders and other group members to respond, and be sensitive to the behavioral cues that indicate dissatisfaction. Hayashi [cited in MIDOOKA 1990: 486] talks of two parts of a meeting (or of two meetings) where after the formal part a *nijikai* (lit. second party or second meeting) is held and in which people can express their true feeling candidly:

A follow-up party is necessary because at the first affair, official rank distinctions obtain. The second stage is informal; fewer people are present, and all barriers of position or rank are discarded. In this relaxed atmosphere real communication takes place; everyone gets a bit drunk and talks freely. Statements that would never be uttered under normal circumstances are blurted out. Japanese society allows candor in a relaxed setting.

4. DRINKING OCCASIONS AND THE SOCIAL ORDER OF THE FIRM

We can now deal with the question of how drinking occasions are related to the social

order of the firm. Two broad types of explanations have been put forward. On the one hand, these occasions are seen as mechanisms for stress release. For example, while Matsumoto [1970: 21] suggests the necessity of such parties as “a relief from the often excessive tensions and obligations of interpersonal relations,” Linhart [1986: 208] talks about opportunities provided by such gatherings for the reduction of stress from work and of their function of refreshing the male labor force for the next working day. In both accounts the accent is on the implications of individual release from stress for the smooth functioning of the organization. On the other hand, such parties are often seen as contributing to the solidarity of the groups in which the drinkers participate. Vogel [1963: 105] emphasizes how going out together serves to maintain rapport within the work group. Rohlen [1974: Ch. 4] shows how such situations are related to group identity.

I do not wish to deny that for some workers “going out for a drink” may be perceived as part of the obligations of work. Nor would I deny that some employees view drinking parties with a mixture of criticism and enjoyment [see KONDO 1990: 158]. What I do want to highlight is the strength of the dynamics within drinking encounters: it is precisely the different quality of interpersonal dynamics which unfolds during drinking occasions which allows personal catharsis and contributes to the integration of work groups. Stress release and creation of solidarity are encouraged by the special reality created during the parties: this reality allows the open manifestation of tensions and interpersonal frictions. These temporary frames permit participants to “re-experience” — remember often in a highly emotional manner — the difficulties of everyday work life, but to re-experience them within the limits of the frames themselves: i.e. those limits of space, time, and the groups’ overall social control which does not allow totally uncontrolled behavior.

This point suggests the need to view the use of such occasions as part of people’s strategies. Given the very predictability of such events, one may well realize how the “practical” use to which they may be put — for instance, solidifying group morale, building coalitions, or passing information — may be the outcome of intentional action. As Yoshino and Lifson [1988: 177] note, “ties among members of a section are deliberately fostered in many ways. After-hours socializing is particularly important. These nocturnal sojourns are seldom purely for fun....[T]hese occasions also provide a setting in which the superior can provide informal, but important, advice or counsel to subordinates, softened or mediated by the effects of alcohol.” This is an important point in the context of Japanese enterprises which have often been portrayed in the literature as somehow “inherently” harmonious and cooperative, as somehow free of the purposeful manipulation that characterizes organizations in other societies. To reiterate, because the drinking occasions are predictable — both in terms of being scheduled ahead of time, and in terms of their internal structure — they can be used in a planned way.

Let me provide two examples of how drinking is used strategically. The first excerpt, from Morita Akio’s ruminations about Sony, exemplifies management’s perspective.

In order to foster our working relationship as colleagues and to keep in touch, I used to have dinner with many young lower management employees almost every night and talk until late. One night I could tell one of these young men had something bothering him. He was not enjoying himself, and I encouraged him to say what was on his mind. After

a few drinks he loosened up. "Before I joined this company," he said earnestly, "I thought it was a fantastic company. It is the only place I wanted to work. But I work for this section chief, Mr. So-and-So, and in my lowly capacity I work for this man, not Sony. He represents the company. But he is stupid, and everything I do or suggest must go through this guy. I am very disappointed" [MORITA, REINGOLD and SHIMOMURA 1986: 144].

The second example, provided by Jared Taylor [1983: 245], involves a subordinate's use of a year-end party (*bonenkai*) at a large academic institution:

In the fall one of the junior faculty told me he was already looking forward to the *bonenkai* because he had a bone to pick with the dean... It was something he couldn't bring himself to discuss without fortifying himself with booze, and the *bonenkai* was his only chance to get smashed with the dean. I don't even remember what the problem was, but he had to keep it to himself until he finally got it off his chest at the end of the year.

These two examples suggest two points which are of significance for the relation between drinking occasions and the social organization of business firms.

The first involves the type of explanation given by people for the effect of such occasions. Morita talks of "loosening up" while Taylor emphasizes the "fortifying" strength of alcohol. These, however, are explanations given by participants themselves and refer to the psychological influence of drink on individuals. What my analysis shows is that the license to express anger or to comment about work-related difficulties is a socially constructed matter. Thus it is not just a matter of discussing difficult matters once one has loosened up or, at the appropriate stage of the party. It is no less a matter of the way in which this appropriateness is constructed: by the way in which each stage in the party establishes conditions for the next.

The second point is related to the similarity between drinking occasions and other social forms outlined earlier: *tsukiai*, contests, excursions, or communal bathing. All of these are social devices for the creation of temporary frames and may be used in order to further people's strategic ends. They should be seen as techniques that are often created purposely by management for interpersonal communication which is "warm," "empathic," and which allows the exploration of problematic issues [SMITH 1983: 66]. Indeed, the strategic organizational importance of these techniques carries over even to the salary scales of *kacho* (section chiefs) as Yoshino and Lifson [1988: 178] underline:

Social life for members of a section usually revolves around the work group. Rather than visiting each others' houses and being hosted by husband and wife, such occasions are usually held at an eating or drinking establishment, and spouses are not invited. By his very position the *kacho* is expected to play the role of host more often than not. At the level of *kacho* and above there is usually an increment added to salary scales to pay for such outings as well as other expenses involved in playing a role in the external life of subordinates.

Hamada [1991: 79] provides another example of the strategic use of drinking when she shows how the personnel officers of a large company she researched invite potential recruits to company headquarters, put them in the best hotels in town, and organize elaborate dinners and drinking sessions in order to try and persuade them to join the company.

5. CONCLUSION

I began this paper with the contention that the organizational life of Japan's large firms is marked by hierarchical groups, benevolent leadership, and consensus that exist alongside conflict, friction, personal stress, and a growing search for individual fulfillment. Thus as Smith [1985: 34] very correctly warns, the concept of "firm-as-family" is not to be taken as a statement about behavior, but rather is to be understood as metaphor or ideology. The challenge, from a theoretical point of view, is thus not of contrasting the "ideal" with the "real," but of developing analytical tools for delineating just how these ideals influence the ways in which conflicts are played out within the reality of Japanese business enterprises.

I would suggest that the harmony which one can find in many sectors of Japanese society — like firms — may best be understood as the outcome of constant efforts to manage very real conflicts within and between groups [KRAUSS et al. 1984: 378]. Indeed, it may well be that cultural values which emphasize harmony and the avoidance of conflict may actually intensify conflicts and thereby "require" special means or mechanisms for handling them [LEBRA 1984]. My proposition is that some of these means or mechanisms may be fruitfully analyzed as special social frames which are set apart from, yet which are related in a unique way to, the social order of these firms. In the context of this paper I have focused on drinking occasions which allow the release of individual and interpersonal tensions and some conflict management.

Drinking parties belong, as noted earlier, to the "interstices" of these organizations [BEN-ARI 1989], i.e. to the narrow time junctures in between "regular" periods of work activity. But they should not be viewed as unimportant aspects of these firms. As I have attempted to show, these occasions are "cultural performances": special social constructs which allow the people participating in them to comment upon and explore the ties which bind them together. In terms of our analysis, this means that drinking parties are collective experiences that can be understood by many of the participants who are tied by relations marked by tension or friction. To amplify Moeran's [1986] remark, despite people's proclamations to the contrary, it is precisely because people *do not* forget what is expressed during such episodes that upon a return to the everyday relations of the work place they may make use of what they have learned.

In this sense leisure-related activities in companies show an affinity to a host of similar situations found throughout Japanese society: for example, local community drinking parties, trips of women's associations, or softball and sports meetings in public corporations. In this respect, drinking parties are not "simply" rituals in which the social order of the firm (status hierarchy or authority relations) is presented and celebrated. These occasions do not "merely" mirror everyday relationships in a ceremonial manner. Rather, this mirroring is done in complex ways — through license and levelling, inversion and humor — that uncover the underside of social relationships and group life [HANDELMAN 1989].

Yet a stress on the "subversive potential" of such situations should not be taken too far.

This is because drinking occasions tend to curtail serious reflection about the work place and its problems. In these frames the heaviest emphasis is on solidarity and identity. This is evident in the mutual toasting and group activities and in the social nudity which unfolds during these frames. The overall message is: "we are basically alike." As a consequence, when reflection does arise it is usually limited to the concrete complaints of the participants. This quality of drinking occasions is reinforced, moreover, by their role as validating mechanisms for the social order of the work place. Such events validate this order because acceptance of their form implies an acceptance of someone's right to arrange a party, to specify time and location, or for starting and regulating the serving of alcohol. While "opposed" to normal working experience, these situations are always subordinated to the everyday relations of the work place.

One must be wary, however, of an assumption about the functional links between drinking episodes and their social context [BEN-ARI 1986]. This is because the unity or identity of the created group, the strengthening of ties between the participants, or the management of tensions between them, are all *potential* states that are created within these frames. Whether in fact unity or divisiveness, intimacy or isolation, cooperation or conflict will emerge is dependent on other things such as the power relations between the participants. In other words, the relationship between participation in drinking occasions and the larger social backdrop is neither direct nor certain. As Sutton-Smith [1981: 474] puts it, "play potentiates; it does not itself actualize."

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