

A preliminary examination of translation strategies for  
the sake-making tanka of Kinichiro Sakaguchi

**Mark Frank**

*Abstract*

*The poetry of Kinichiro Sakaguchi, particularly his tanka, is representative of the art of sake making in Niigata prefecture, Japan, in the post-war decades of the 1960s through the 1980s. This research seeks to translate his tanka into English for the first time, with a sensitivity to the technical and traditional terms used to describe the sake making process and environment.*

Keywords: literary translation; Japanese sake; Kinichiro Sakaguchi; tanka; Niigata

Kinichiro Sakaguchi (1897-1994) was born in Joetsu City in the southern part of Niigata prefecture, Japan. An early authority in the field of applied microbiology, his research on soy sauce, miso, and wine production received international attention and he remains a significant figure in the Japanese sake brewing world. He was among the first to scientifically examine the complex traditional sake making process, and published numerous books on sake brewing techniques and culture.

Sakaguchi was also a well-regarded *waka* poet, particularly gaining attention after his *tanka* was selected for the Imperial New Year's Poetry Reading in 1975. His poetic muse was an extension of his laboratory research: the world of sake and fermentation.

Soon after he entered Takada Junior High School in Joetsu, Sakaguchi was stricken with polio and had to be transferred to Junten Junior High School in Kanda, Tokyo. Passing daily through the famous bookstore district of Shinbomachi on his way to school, he developed a deep love for reading, particularly Western literature.

After his father opposed his intention to study literature in college, Sakaguchi instead chose science and entered the Agriculture Department of Tokyo Imperial University (now University of Tokyo).

Sakaguchi was inspired by the lecture of a brewing science professor and began studying the *koji* used in Chinese liquor. *Koji* (*aspergillus oryzae*) is a mold traditionally used in East Asian cultures to “malt” rice and other grains for fermentation. He continued his research after graduation, expanding it to include the study of native Japanese *koji*. Eventually, he collected over 3000 different samples of *koji* from well-known brewing regions on the four main islands of Japan and Okinawa.

While known (and perhaps feared) as a strict and demanding teacher in the classroom, Sakaguchi was equally appreciated as a warm and generous host at home, going so far as to have a small outbuilding constructed near his home exclusively for *tanka* and sake parties. There, around the *irori* (a traditional open-pit fire), guests would grill fish, warm sake, and take turns writing and reciting poetry.

While poems about drinking sake are not uncommon in the Japanese tradition, the actual fermentation process of alcohol has rarely been treated as a subject for *waka*. This is where Sakaguchi found his inspiration.

It is interesting here to note the subtle and deft inclusion of technical brewing terms in Sakaguchi's *tanka*. As much as possible, these terms have been left untranslated in the English versions here in order to preserve the flavor and uniqueness of Japanese sake making.

It takes between three and four weeks to ferment a batch of Japanese sake. The process, known as “multiple parallel fermentation,” is one of the most complex alcohol brewing techniques in the world, requiring the simultaneous propagation of *koji* mold to malt the rice and yeast to ferment the resulting sugars into alcohol.

During this time, the aroma evolves from the nascently sweet, grassy smell of malted *koji* rice to the more sharply pronounced tones of yeast and alcohol fermentation a few weeks later. By the end of February, during the peak of *ginjo* brewing, the brewery is alive with this rich, fruity bouquet, a reassuring marker of the season.

The Japanese sake brewing culture has spawned a lexicon of finely tuned expressions for the bubbles, foam, and aromas which accompany each stage of fermentation. For example, brewers use over 70 distinct expressions to describe the smell of sake. Sakaguchi uses these much in the same manner as *kigo*, the seasonal words typically associated with *haiku*: they locate the poem at a precise moment in the brewing cycle, as familiar to the sake brewer as the solar and lunar seasons are to the traditional Japanese poet.

Likewise, the melting snow in *tanka* #5 and plum blossoms in *tanka* #6 can be read as *kigo*-like indications that the brewing season is coming to a close and the last of the year's sake will be pressed soon.

### ***Some key sake terms for reading Sakaguchi's tanka***

#### ***Moromi—the main mash***

*Moromi* is the brewing term for “main mash.” In the central event of sake making, a starter mash (*moto*) is combined with steamed rice, malted *koji* rice, and water over a carefully measured four day period to create the *moromi*. This fermenting *moromi* is the

core of sake brewing, a living thing which changes and grows during the 4 weeks until completion.

Sake making is a continuous dialogue between *moromi* and brewer. The *toji* (master brewer) visits the *moromi* first thing every morning, senses attuned to its taste, sound, sight, and smell. The color of the foam, the shape of the bubbles, the sound, the feel while stirring—all of this determines where the fermentation is and whether it is progressing healthily or not.

### ***Kanzukuri*--cold season brewing**

As its nickname “Snow Country” suggests, Niigata is known for its dark, snowy winters. Niigata sake is distinguished for the practice of *kanzukuri*, or “cold season brewing.” The clear frigid air and heavy snow creates a stable, supportive environment for slow fermentation, resulting in sake with a pure, unobtrusive flavor and clean aftertaste. After the peak of the fermentation cycle is passed, *kanzukuri* sake mash is noted for its quiet sound and placid appearance.

Although Sakaguchi does not use the term *kanzukuri* in the *tanka* here, it is referred to indirectly in *tanka* # 1.

### ***Kura*—the main brewery**

In the sake world, the word *kura* refers to the building where the main brewing occurs within the traditional brewery as well as the brewing business as a whole.

Sake is particularly susceptible to contamination from airborne bacteria; to reduce this risk, the *kura* has traditionally been a cloistered and protected place, a sacred space protected by the Shinto god of brewing Matsuo-sama.

Once inside, it is an intricate factory of life, animated by the songs and calls of workers, the hiss of steaming rice and hot fire, the rough scrape and clatter of wooden tubs, and the constant sound of water in motion. Much quieter and hidden within these, the hushed sound of fermentation can be heard: bubbles rising to the surface, the hidden life of microorganisms as their populations rise and fall.

The smell of the *kura* is a nearly tangible mix of fresh steamed rice, sweet *koji*, and sharply fruity yeasts combined with the woody smell of the structure itself. These smells drift out outside into the surrounding neighborhood during the peak brewing season. The aroma of the *kura* appears in *tanka* #2, 5, and 7.

Every *kura* has a unique history, and the structure itself provides subtle character to the finished brew beyond the skill of the brewers and the quality of the ingredients used.

## ***Ginjo*—high class sake**

*Ginjo* is the most labor-intensive class of sake, and the fullest expression of the brewer's art. *Ginjo* brewing season is in February, in the late winter when the speed of fermentation is slowest. The brewery is at its busiest then and the pressure on the brewers at a peak.

Because of the brewing techniques and the varieties of yeast used, *ginjo* sake produces a clear and powerful aroma reminiscent of tangy apples and ripened bananas. These aromas tie the *ginjo* to a specific time and also act as a *kigo* in *tanka* #7.

## **Foam and bubbles**

There are at least fifteen distinct terms used by sake brewers to describe the foam that appears on the top a vat of fermenting sake, each connected to a specific point in the fermentation process. Besides the *taka awa* (“high foam”) in *tanka* #5, there are such expressions as *mizu awa* (“water foam”), *kani awa* (“crab foam”), *iwa awa* (“pebble foam”), and *ochi awa* (“falling foam”).

“High foam” appears between the fifth and seventh day after the main mash has been assembled. The amylase from the malted rice is most active and the *moromi* has a pleasantly grainy sweetness. The yeast population is also peaking, adding an ebullient fruitiness and a sharp bouquet of esters and carbon dioxide. The carbon dioxide produces a thick layer of bubbles as it escapes, hence “high foam.”

## ***Sakazuki*--the sake cup in *tanka* #10**

There are three main styles of sake cups: *sakazuki* (a flat, saucer-like cup), *ochoko* (a small cylindrical cup), and *masu* (a wooden box cup).

As in traditional tea ceremony, the sake cup itself is integral to the aesthetic experience of drinking. A handcrafted cup, perfectly fitted to the drinker's hands, drinking style, and personality, deepens the enjoyment and satisfaction of the alcohol. Finely made *ochoko* and *sakazuki* are objects of contemplation while drinking; the artist's skill and tradition, the type of clay used, the region, and the firing technique are all considered.

## **Conclusion**

I have had the opportunity to work in several sake breweries in Japan as part of my study of East Asian fermentation, and what I found in the experience was a rough hewn, masculine poetry, reminiscent of Gary Snyder: poetry that does not call attention to itself, content to do what needs to be done quietly and well. I saw a lived rather than written aesthetic in the wordless communication between brewers, where a quickly

exchanged glance could convey an entire conversation, and where the *toji* could determine the condition of a vat of sake simply from the sound of the bubbling mash.

The same spare tempo can be felt in Sakaguchi's *tanka*. His work conveys the experience of being in a brewery, of drinking sake with friends, of living a life patterned on the rhythms and mysteries of sake.

Both as a poet and as a scientist, Sakaguchi worked in the conviction that great civilizations naturally possess superb cultures of brewing, and that alcohol itself is one of the highest expressions of culture. He saw the brewing and drinking of sake as profound cultural acts and getting drunk as poetic participation in the divine. Drinking good sake with friends has the inherent ring of poetry to it, and there is even an apt Japanese word, *suigin*, meaning "to get drunk and recite poetry."

In Sakaguchi's world, sake connects mundane human activities back to nature through its reliance on fundamental yeasts and mold, and yet upwards to the sacred through poetry and art.

Poems in celebration of alcohol abound in Chinese and Japanese verse, but these closely observed snapshots of the actual brewing process are rare, particularly when as in Sakaguchi's case the author also happens to be a world recognized authority on brewing science. Because both drinking and brewing tend to be private, closed affairs, Sakaguchi's verse can be read as a rare invitation to a world rarely accessed by the outsider.

### **The *tanka***

(1)

冷え冷えと寒さに身にしむ庫のうち泡のつぶやく音かすかなり

*hiebie to*  
*samusa ni mi ni shimu*  
*kura no uchi*  
*awa no tsubuyaku*  
*oto kasukanari*

A deep chill  
 When the cold really sets in:  
 In the *kura*  
 The murmuring of bubbles

Is hushed

(2)

かぐはしき香り流るる庫のうち静かに湧けりこれのもろみは

*kaguhashiki*  
*kaori nagaruru*  
*kura no uchi*  
*shizuka ni yukeri*  
*kore no moromi*

A fragrant aroma  
Winding its way out  
From the *kura*:  
This *moromi*,  
Brewing quietly

(3)

泡分けてすくひ取りたる猪口のうちふくめばあまし若きもろみに

*awa wakete*  
*sukuhi tori taru*  
*choko no uchi*  
*fukumeba amashi*  
*wakaki moromi ni*

Split the foam  
And scoop out from the cask  
A sake cup  
Full of sweetness:  
The young *moromi*

(4)

うたかたの消えては浮ぶフラスコはほのくもりて命こもれり

*utakatano*  
*kiete ha ukabu*  
*furasuko ha*  
*honokumorite*  
*inochikomoreri*

In the lab flask,  
The settled foam  
Leaves suspended  
A delicate assembly  
Of vibrant life

(5)

湧きやみて桶にあふれし高泡もはだれの雪と消え落ちにけむ

*wakiyamite*  
*oke ni afureshi*  
*taka-awa mo*  
*hadare no yuki to*  
*kieochinikemu*

Bubbling up  
And over the edge  
Of the cask,  
This high foam will fade  
With the lingering snow

(6)

庫のうちもろみの香りけざやかに梅さく庭にあふれ出でつも

*kura no uchi*  
*yu moromi no kaori*  
*kezayaka ni*  
*ume saku niwa ni*  
*afure dedetsumo*

From the *kura*  
The aroma of fermenting mash  
Wafts boldly out  
To the garden  
Where a plum tree is in bloom

(7)

待ちえたる奇しき香りたちそめて吟醸の酒いま成らむとす

*machietaru  
kichishiki kaori  
tachisomete  
ginjou no sake  
ima naramutosu*

After the wait,  
An unmistakable aroma  
Begins to arise:  
The *ginjo* sake  
Must be ready

(8)

たのしみは何かと問はばうまさけをあるにまかせて飲みくらすこと

*tanoshimi ha  
nanikato toihaba  
umasake o  
aru ni makasete  
nomikurasu koto*

If asked  
“What is happiness?”  
I reply, “To live a life  
Freely drinking  
Good sake.”

(9)

うまさけはうましともなく飲むうちに酔ひての後も口のさやけき

*umasake ha  
umashi tomo naku  
nomu uchi ni  
yohite no ato mo  
kuchi no sayakeki*

The best sake  
Need not call attention to itself  
While drinking,  
And even after getting drunk  
Leaves a clear and graceful aftertaste



(10)

うま酒をもればほのかに濡れわたるこの盃の赤埴の膚さかずきのあかしょくのはだ

*umasake o  
moreba honoka ni  
nurewataru  
kono sakazuki no  
akashoku no hada*

Pouring good sake,  
Some spills and runs down:  
Dark and damp,  
The fired red clay exterior  
Of the *sakazuki*

(11)

ひとたびは世もすてにし身なれども酒の力によみがへりぬる

*hitotabi ha  
yo mo sutenishi mi  
naredomo  
sake no chikara ni  
yomigaherinuru*

I was ready  
To abandon the world  
Just now--  
But through the power of good sake  
Find myself reborn

(12)

酒によりて得がたきを得しいのちなれば酒にささげむと思ひ切りぬ

*sake ni yorite  
egataki o  
tokushii nochi nareba  
sake ni sasagemu  
to omoikirinu*

Since sake

Can bring the elusive  
Within reach,  
It deserves my  
Wholehearted devotion

(13)

うつりゆく世相横目にこの余生いかに生きなむと盃に対する

*utsuriyuku*  
*sesouyokome ni*  
*kono yosei*  
*ika ni ikinamu to*  
*sakazuki ni tai suru*

Cast a sidelong glance  
At the changing world  
And spend what years  
I have left face to face  
With a cup of sake