

EXCHANGING BUSINESS CARDS IN JAPAN

Oh! So you are an ...



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Fig. 1. Kagami-biraki is a ceremony that marks celebratory events through the opening of a saké barrel.

Fig. 2. The saké cask has been opened and the rice wine is being shared.

The event is a gathering of fellows of the Japan Foundation celebrating the forthcoming holidays and the number of cups of saké that have gone through my hands are too many to remember.

Kagami-biraki, a ceremony that marks celebratory events with the opening of a saké barrel, has ended more than an hour ago. Having already consumed their fair share of rice wine, few of the attendees seem to have noticed the small wooden residues that float in their drinks, an unfortunate remnant of the oak lid that has been shattered to pieces by small mallets.

Lubricated by the saké, the once shy and timid fellows are now thrown into the heat of debate, challenging one another's views. While pondering over this ardent display of rhetoric, I notice hands slipping into pockets, coats and jackets. In taking out and exchanging their business cards – a crucial tool of the Japanese professional world – these celebrants are engaging in a time-honoured tradition.

The importance of this small object in modern Japanese society is such that I cannot help but compare it to the *katana* – the sword

of ancient feudal warriors, once considered the soul of the samurai. However, instead of a manta ray skin scabbard, it is the cowhide leather of a wallet which today holds parts of the essence of the modern-day Japanese – the business card. In this world, the family emblems of the combatants have disappeared in favour of university emblems and company logos. Although the business card clearly does not empower its holder to behead those without one for a lack of respect – nor could it be used for this purpose – not possessing this little piece of paper is regarded as a *faux pas* in the Japanese professional world.

Accepting the business card with both hands and taking the time to read what is engraved on it is a ritualized practice that is taken seriously in Japan. A business card is, in many ways, accepted as a gift, and implies reciprocity such that it is never simply received, but always exchanged. Not adhering to this pattern is also perceived as a major blunder in Japanese etiquette.

While the business card does not reveal anything of the private life of the holder, it does highlight an interesting fraction of the total self. In that regard, it remains an important piece of ethnographic information, especially in relation to how identity is constructed and understood in different cultures. Anthropologically speaking, the information inscribed on this 3.5 x 2 inch piece of white paper provides an interesting glimpse into important aspects of the Japanese scholar/professional's public persona.

The business card that I have just received is from a Japanese scholar, who for the sake of discretion, I will name Dr Tanaka. As the latter often travels abroad, the front of his card is in Japanese and the back is in English. After carefully reading the information on both sides, I hand him mine. I can see, for a brief moment, a look of confusion within my interlocutor, as he struggles to decipher what it is that I do. I am neither a philosopher nor a historian. I do share some ties and roots with a sociologist, but then again, that is not my profession. I belong to a discipline which is sometimes misunderstood by lay people, drawn under a veil of clichés and stereotypes.

'Oh! So you are an anthropologist', exclaims my interlocutor 'That's ... interesting'.

Dr Tanaka is a truly intelligent man and a scholar versed in what is referred to as a *pure science* – an appellation that social scientists might find a bit discriminatory. Yet his eyes indicate that he has absolutely no idea what my discipline stands for. Most students of anthropology have experienced this response at least once during their studies – either from other scholars, friends or even members of their own family – and Dr Tanaka is by no means a unique case.

As a discipline that is rarely taught outside university rooms, at least in North America,

it is not particularly surprising that many people have a somewhat obscure notion of what anthropologists do – perhaps informed by a documentary on the Discovery Channel, a B-movie or a weekly television episode of *Bones*. Many assume that I either study primates or mimic Indiana Jones, travelling to exotic places collecting shrunken heads. As a sociocultural anthropologist, that is far from what I actually do.

After being certain that all other guests are out of earshot, Dr Tanaka asks me a question that he has been burning to ask for quite a while.

'I'm a bit ashamed to ask you that and please do not be offended, but what is it that you *do...* exactly?'

Here it comes: *the* famous question, dreaded by so many students of anthropology. I once used to fear this question, as I was unable to explain anthropology in a coherent way. I used to recite a memorized definition from the introduction of a general anthropological textbook. It went somewhat like this: 'Well, anthropology is the study of human beings from their past to their very present. My sub-field focuses on the diversity of human socio-cultural behaviours, while trying to highlight the ways in which people make sense of the world around them'. In the midst of all that, I used to throw in a couple of words such as 'participant-observation' or 'ethnographic fieldwork'. Those were the nails that closed the coffin and I can still picture my former interlocutors struggling not to yawn.

I no longer simply *describe* my discipline like this, as I have found much more meaningful ways to *demonstrate* what it is that I do. The bilingual card of Dr Tanaka serves after such a purpose.

'Might we take another look at your business card Dr Tanaka?'

Perplexed, my interlocutor reaches into his jacket pocket and hands me a card with the Japanese side facing upwards.

'Would you read it to me, please?'

As our discussion has been, up until now, conducted in his own mother tongue, Dr Tanaka knows that I am well versed in Japanese and that the numerous ideograms embedded on his business card are no strangers to me. Yet, with the politeness that often characterizes Japanese culture, he humbly carries out this task. Beginning with the English side, he reads aloud:

'Hideyuki Tanaka, Scholar, University of X'.

'Well now, would you mind flipping the card and read to me what's on the other side?'

Disbelief seems to have firmly grasped my guest, but he still performs my request. The same information is again recited, but in the *opposite* order. He first cites his affiliation, followed by his rank, then comes the family



name, Tanaka, quickly followed by his given name, Hideyuki.

‘So tell me Dr Tanaka: to *whom* am I speaking?’

Lost, the latter does not seem to be grasping my point. ‘To whom?’ he queries abruptly.

‘Am I facing Hideyuki Tanaka or Tanaka Hideyuki?’

A spark of interest is now discernible in his eyes. I pursue:

‘If I am speaking to the *same* person, why does your business card present two very different individuals: one for your Japanese counterpart and one for your foreign audience?’

‘Presenting myself in totally different ways?’ responded Dr Tanaka. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t you see any difference?’

‘Well, not really’, replied Dr Tanaka while staring at his business card.

‘The purpose of a business card is to present yourself, to tell the world who you are, so that they can have a glance at your identity, right? According to the English counterpart of your card, the thing that first and foremost defines you is your name – even the lettering is far bolder. Right below, one can peek at your title – that is, the profession of Hideyuki Tanaka. Lastly, we find the organization for which you work. On the other side – that is, the Japanese one – what we first learn is the organization to which the yet unnamed individual *belongs*. Subsequently, one can find the rank maintained in the given organization. To conclude, we finally stumble upon your name. Yet, the thing that comes first is your family name, your kin or what could be regarded as an extension of your given name, Hideyuki. From a North American viewpoint, all the things that could be said to compose a so-called Japanese identity do not seem to prioritize much “personal” information.’

Dr Tanaka seems to be lost amidst the Janus face that is now his business card, as well as the numerous cultural frames that embody it. In a corner of his mind, he perhaps begins to realize that the *standard* ways of presenting oneself, are definitively not so standard, not so fundamental and that a concept that we usually take for granted, such as identity or the self, can be expressed in very different ways. Dr Tanaka high flips his business card over to the

English side; it’s not a simple translation – far from it. It’s a whole other world, a whole other way of being, thinking and expressing who he is. He keeps staring at his business card, apparently fascinated by the many world views that shimmer across the glossy surface of its watermark.

I ask him the same question, again: ‘So tell me Dr Tanaka: to *whom* am I speaking? Am I facing Hideyuki Tanaka or Tanaka Hideyuki?’ I can see him looking at the wine that has been mixed with the saké, while listening to the other fellows who are now arguing in a mixture of bad English and Japanese. Pondering at his identity, different notions of the self are jostling in his head – no easy way out.

After a moment of reflection, Dr Tanaka gives me the most meaningful answer that one could wish for – especially as an anthropologist:

‘Well, I guess that you are speaking to none of them exactly ...’.

Indeed, Dr Tanaka cannot be reduced to either identity, nor be framed by mere cultural stereotypes where Japanese are described as collectivists and Westerners (another word that is far too homogeneous) simply individualists. As Dr Tanaka now realizes, the markers and boundaries that define one’s identity are perhaps not so determinate; reality is far more porous.

These dichotomous distinctions, these essentialist features of the egocentric (Westerner) and sociocentric (Japanese) self, seem to hold pretty well on this seemingly insignificant piece of paper, but on closer inspection lived experiences offer a far more complex picture. There is perhaps no good way of being Hideyuki Tanaka or Tanaka Hideyuki, and one cannot summarize it by simple, homogeneous behavioural traits. Outside the boundaries of basic idioms, the monocultural model that too often stereotypically defines Japanese culture crumbles with the weight of modern life.

As the anthropologist Yoshio Sugimoto (2009: 5) has argued, Japanese culture – and identity for that matter – is a problematical construct; it cannot be regarded as a concrete entity. In Japan, the transmission of idealized forms of identity have been explained through numerous large-scale processes, be they national discourses or education. The sharp, analytical eyes of an anthropologist, which

Fig. 3. A business card is always accepted with both hands.

Fig. 4. A business card implies reciprocity such that it is never simply received, but always exchanged.

Fig. 5. The information inscribed on a business card highlights an interesting fraction of the total self.

Fig. 6. The business card is a crucial tool of the Japanese professional world.

are keen to detect the unusual in the taken for granted, can push this task even further, especially by looking at how stereotypical ways of being are reproduced and embedded in insignificant things, like the worlds that collide on the two faces of a business card.

The piece of paper that Dr Tanaka holds in his hands treats identities as essentialist entities that are mutually exclusive (Western/Japanese). Anthropology has much to gain by focusing on how everyday objects simplify, encapsulate or sanitize identities in ways that disregard the lived experiences of many, while promoting one’s otherness.

The benefits of demonstrating our discipline, rather than simply describing it, can help the anthropologist reach – and perhaps more importantly, engage – a broader audience, while highlighting the analytical contributions that anthropology offers to contemporary problems across cultures. Anthropologists communicate a series of contextualized and ethnographically based insights on a given problem, and bringing part of this process to life also provides a meaningful way to unveil romantic or biased notions attached to the discipline. Showing what anthropologists do, observe and question, via the daily experiences shared by different people, is a small but important contribution which broadens anthropological engagement and the discipline’s potential toward accessible, in-depth analysis.

That small chat has left my interlocutor somewhat haggard, but Dr Tanaka ends up bursting into laughter: ‘That was a very interesting conversation. I’ve never thought of that!’ I reply, with a smile: ‘As an anthropologist, that’s what I do!’ ●

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