



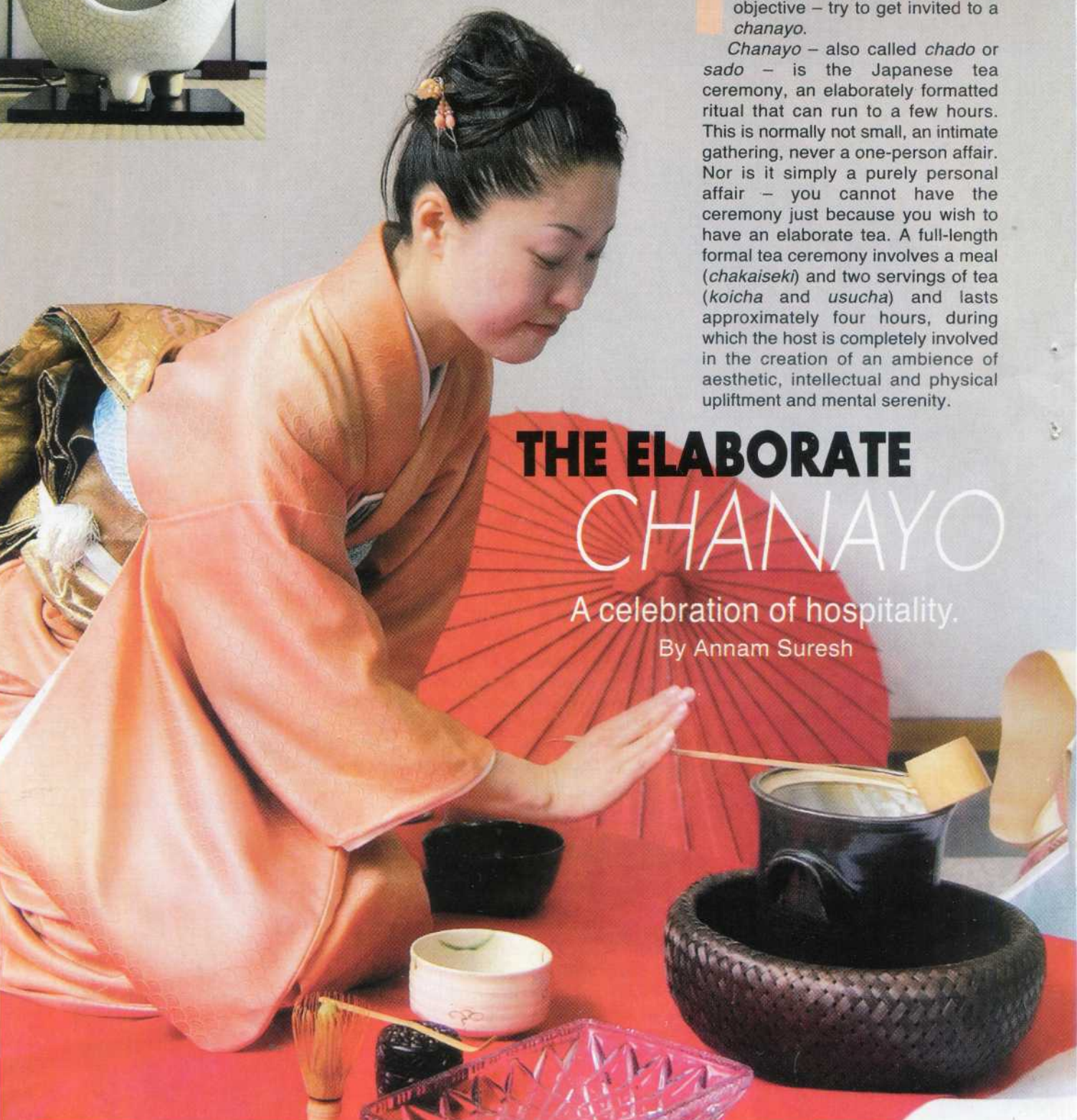
f you are sick of quickly gulping tea – more as a matter of habit than for the sheer pleasure of imbibing the goodness of the brew in an appropriate environment, in the right frame of mind, with the right company and with a spiritually elevating objective – try to get invited to a *chanayo*.

Chanayo – also called *chado* or *sado* – is the Japanese tea ceremony, an elaborately formatted ritual that can run to a few hours. This is normally not small, an intimate gathering, never a one-person affair. Nor is it simply a purely personal affair – you cannot have the ceremony just because you wish to have an elaborate tea. A full-length formal tea ceremony involves a meal (*chakaiseki*) and two servings of tea (*koicha* and *usucha*) and lasts approximately four hours, during which the host is completely involved in the creation of an ambience of aesthetic, intellectual and physical upliftment and mental serenity.

THE ELABORATE CHANAYO

A celebration of hospitality.

By Annam Suresh





The purpose of this elaborate repast is partly Zen Buddhist – to completely savour and immortalise the moment – and the entire ritual is designed to gently nudge the senses so that one is totally involved in the ceremony and not distracted by negative or pedestrian thoughts. Like soft smoke, a sense of peace and harmony pervades the ambience and slowly enters one's mind and psyche, leaving one feeling fulfilled, elevated and tranquil at the end.

It is a celebration of hospitality in a very special and spiritual way. Hospitality among the Japanese, as with the Indians, is considered almost a religious duty. And the chanayo is a ritual that immortalises the occasion and the pleasure that the host and guests enjoy from one another's company. They believe that, since every moment is unique and never ever returns, not even if the same people were to come again together at the same place, it is a moment to be frozen for as long as possible, and the tea ceremony is an attempt to do this.

Haru Hana, a retired school teacher who frequently hosts tea ceremonies, describes the entire ceremony as an unforgettable experience of freezing an ethereal moment that can stretch to a few hours. "It is like dipping your hand in the refreshing waters of a cool river – you can never dip your hand in the same water twice. Similarly, each tea ceremony freezes a different moment. That is why it is important to prepare the ambience and the guest list with utmost care to ensure that everyone goes back feeling better, lighter and calmer."

Tea was introduced into Japan as an influence of the Chinese culture

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which came in along with Buddhism during the Nara period in the eighth century. But it was several centuries later, in the 12th century during the Kamakura period, that Eisai, a Japanese priest who had travelled to China for studies in Buddhism, brought back the tea ritual practised in China's Buddhist temples during the Song dynasty. Eisai also brought tea seeds from the plant that remains the major source of Japan's tea even today.

In Sakai, south of Osaka, a group of wealthy merchants called the *mayasha* ("warehouse school") espoused a modest manner of tea drinking. Out of this tradition came *Takeno Joo* in the early 16th century who taught the use of the *daisu* (the stand for the tea utensils) as it had been handed down through generations. His influence was widely felt, especially through his student Sen no Rikyu who transformed the tea ceremony by substituting Japanese-made materials, especially utensils and serving objects, for the rare Chinese ones.

There are strict rules of etiquette for the hosts and guests since the whole elaborate ceremony aims at spreading a warm bond of gentle

affection, evaporation of negative and stressful emotions and an overall sense of spiritual and emotional upliftment and tranquility.

The manner of preparing the tea is influenced by many techniques depending on practices and innovations at the various schools. An extensively practised one is the *Ura Senke* way of preparation – a complete ceremony with a meal is called a *chaji* while the actual preparation of the tea is called *temae*. A simple gathering for the service is called a *chakai*. The utensils are determined by the season and weather, time of day, the guest list, or whether it is a special occasion as a wedding or homecoming, a birth of a child or a formal one in honour of a special dignitary.

The tea is prepared in a specially decorated room called the *chashitsu* or tearoom. It has traditional *shoji* (rice paper and wood) panelling and *tatami* (rice straw). It is almost completely bare except for a scroll called *kakemono* usually hung in an alcove above the fireplace or placed among the flowers in a vase, *hanaire*. The scroll provides the appropriate spiritual atmosphere since it helps the guests break the ice and begin conversation. Flowers for the tea ceremony – *chabana* – are simple, seasonal and not very formally arranged. In winter, a *kama* (iron pot/kettle) in a sunken fireplace is used to boil the water, while a portable charcoal stove is used in summer.

WHAT THE GUESTS DO

The guests first assemble in a waiting room where they sample the hot water to be used in the making of the tea. Once the host has received them the guests enter the tea garden where they may relax briefly. The host then replenishes the water kept in a stone basin for the guests to wash their hands and mouth. Once they are refreshed, he invites them indoors, greeting them with a bow. They wash their hands and mouth and enter the tea room through a low doorway, *nijriguchi*.

The guests have to enter bowing deeply – this is to express respect to the host, his family and the occasion. Each guest then reads and ruminates on the scroll hung in the alcove above the kettle, admire the kettle and which will be used for tea and the hearth, before taking their seats on the *tatami*. They take turns admiring the flowers and the decor.

The guests kneel on the *tatami* mats and lower themselves to sit on their ankles, in the formal *seiza* position, with knees folded and feet tucked under the thighs.

For most people used to dining tables and an urban lifestyle, staying in this posture can be painful unless one has been diligently practising one's yoga, or like most Japanese, used to sitting in this position. Pointing one's toes towards the hosts or other guests is considered extremely disrespectful. For the elderly, a pair of low stools is sometimes provided – one to sit on and one to place one's tea bowls on.

No tea other than the special powdered green tea called *matcha* will do. In addition to the actual

preparation of tea, the ceremony incorporates appropriate architecture, decor, atmosphere, conversation and attitude, gardening, ceramics, calligraphy, history and religion, their philosophy of harmony and respect for nature, people, aesthetics, purity of action and serenity of mind as well as. The objects and surroundings used for the preparation of tea as well as those present in the room, the subjects of conversation, body language, music etc are regulated by laid down norms and rarely breached.

Once the guests are seated, the host enters. For every step – wiping the equipment, scooping out the tea, pouring the boiling water to whisking the matcha and finally, preparing tea individually for each guest – there are clearly laid-out methods and utensils.

The tea is prepared after first symbolically purifying all the utensils.

After greeting the guests, the host serves them the meal which usually consists of seasonal preparations and ends with a sweet. Each guest carries a packet of ornate folded napkins on which sweets should be placed before eating. A special cake pick is used to cut and eat moist sweets like *wagashi*, but dry sweets are eaten with the fingers.

The guests then retire to the garden while the host removes the scroll, replaces it with flowers, and sets out the utensils for preparing the thick tea called *koicha*. The tea is prepared by adding a very small amount of boiling water to the powdered green tea in a single bowl,

something like a large soup bowl. All the guests drink from this, wiping the rim of the bowl before passing it to the next guest.

The bowl is then rinsed and passed around along with the tea powder and the scoop for the guests to examine and admire. The fire is then rebuilt for preparing the thin tea, *usucha*, which is served in individual bowls or cups. The bowls may not all be identical – often, the host will select different bowls for each guest. These bowls or *chawans*, as they are called, are marked with a motif or symbol on one side. These are significant and convey specific symbolic messages depending on the occasion. The messages could be related to the theme or the occasion or could be specific to each individual guest.

THE RITUAL

As the host hands around the *chawan*, each guest places it between himself and the next guest, thanks the host and bows to excuse himself for sipping before all are served. He then places the bowl in front, thanks the host again, places the bowl in the palm of the left hand, motif facing away.

The guests swirl the tea thrice in a clockwise direction and consider it auspicious to finish it in three sips. After drinking, the rim is wiped with a napkin. The bowl is then placed on the *tatami*, motif facing oneself, and the guests admire the bowls and then put them back on the mat, motif away from oneself. The guests then thank the host and the long ceremony concludes.

The entire ritual is an elegant exercise in freezing a moment of calm and hospitality rather than just a break for refreshment. The actual tea tastes nothing like what one is used to here, and one has to perhaps acquire a liking for it to be able to get the most out of the elaborate ritual.

While it might take a while to get used to and enjoy the taste, the aftertaste of the whole experience is certainly worth cherishing for a long, long time.



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