

Title: Mottainai: A Philosophy of Waste From Japan

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Abstract: This paper presents a Japanese approach to the concept of waste through an analysis of the Japanese word mottainai (“what a waste!” and “don’t be wasteful”). The paper begins by outlining Buddhist origins of the word and religious veneration of objects in Shinto. From there, the paper then presents the popularization of the term as a culturally unique phrase that has been promulgated by the Japanese Ministry of the Environment as part of its own environmental pedagogy. The cultural applications have attracted the notice of Kenyan environmental and political activist Wangari Maathai, adding the word to the three R’s as ‘respect’. The use of mottainai as a form of ontological humility in the face of our own increasingly polluted world is the focus of the conclusion. I argue here that Tanaka Shozo’s conservationist environmental philosophy itself amicable to Leopold’s Land Ethic and Carson’s critique of anthropocentrism.

Mottainai: A Philosophy of Waste From Japan

Islands are often referred to in environmental studies as isolated places where local people have caused problems by exhausting local resources. The most famous example is Easter Island and how the builders of the famous statues “aware that they were almost completely isolated from the rest of the world, must surely have realised that their very existence depended on the limited resources of a small island” yet exhausted the local

resources anyway. This is often used as a metaphor for what we are doing to the planet; an idea made popular by Clive Ponting in his “A Green History of the World.” In an increasingly globalized world, island nations have recourse to outside resources but the island mentality has stayed with countries such as Japan and has developed a particular environmental awareness expressed concisely in the word *mottainai*.

This paper will argue that *mottainai* as cultural rhetoric has become elevated to its current level by status by what Brett Walker terms hybrid causations. Explaining that environmental problems cannot be reduced to one single reason or methodology Walker writes, “Earth has become a gargantuan hybrid environment in which we are deeply embedded, one interlaced with complex, historically constructed ecological pathways that, in inauspicious instances, eventually lead from industrial facilities to human consumers.”ⁱ Whereas Walker uses the “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) campaign of the late 1800s to highlight how women became especially susceptible to Yokkaichi asthma,ⁱⁱ this paper will trace the modern day *Mottainai* Campaign through religious, literary, and cultural references and become a rallying cry for people concerned about protecting the environment.

Mottainai as Reverence for Objects

Mottainai 勿体無い, meaning both “don’t be wasteful” and “what a waste,” expresses a feeling of regret at wasting an intrinsic value of a resource or object. One of the earliest uses of *mottainai* appears in the Genpei Jōsuiki (Record of the Genpei War). In it, a vassal admonishes Yoshitsune for risking his life during a battle by retrieving a bow he dropped in the sea saying, “no life is worth a bow.” The word is thought to be Buddhist in origin reflecting the feeling that arises from the awareness of the interdependence of all things.

Ian Reader wrote that in Japan, one is born Shinto and dies Buddhist.ⁱⁱⁱ *Mottainai* projects future concerns about the health and well being of human and nonhuman life. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that elements of Shinto and Buddhism are both

represented in the concept. Whereas Buddhism deals with death, Shinto deals with life.

Edwin O. Reischauer describes Shinto in terms of this difference:

“The religious practices of these early Japanese were later given the name of Shinto, ‘the way of the gods,’ to distinguish it from the imported religion of Buddhism. It centered around the worship of the gods, or *kami*, which were natural phenomena or mythological ancestors, the latter often nature gods as in the case of the sun goddess. The line between man and nature was not sharply drawn... There were no ethical concepts associated with these religious ideas, except for a sense of awe and reverence before nature and a concept of ritual purity...”^{iv}

Yuko Kawanishi, a sociologist at Tokyo Gakugei University, says that *mottainai* also has ties with Shinto animism, the idea that all objects have a spirit or *kami*. "The whole idea that we are part of the nature, and should be in a very harmonious relationship with nature is very much a deep part of Japanese psychology."^v The veneration of nature as closely tied with Japanese religion has been an oft-repeated concept from Shinto veneration of objects to purity, ritual and an uncountable number of local festivals (*matsuri*). Ian Reader writes:

“The omnipresence of religious motifs in the Japanese world shows the extent which, even in this day and age, basic and traditional Japanese religious views of causation and of the interrelationship of the spiritual and physical continue to be important, underlying contemporary attitudes of existence in this world. It is a view which recognizes a permeating vitality, an in-built religious content to all of life: its grounding in this world, found in streets, trains and buses, and in shops, mountain passes and homes just as much as it is in the temples, shrines and other more overtly religious places.”^{vi}

Not only does nature of find itself imbued with *kami* but also Shinto further blurs the line between man and nature with *kami* in man-made objects. A prime example of this can be found in the *tsukumogami* 付喪神^{vii} (animated household objects). A *tsukumogami* is a type of *yōkai* 妖怪, “variously translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order deity, or, more amorphously, as any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence.”^{viii} When an object becomes one hundred years old, it attains a spirit and becomes an animated object known as a *tsukumogami*. The concept that 100 year-old objects can become imbued with spirits was an outgrowth of the Shinto reverence for objects and sacred spaces. A modern day ritual known as *ningyōkuyō* 人形くよ collects unwanted but not unloved dolls and, in a kind of mock funeral, prays for and

thanks the dolls for years of fond memories. Even though the dolls are not *tsukumogami*, a ritual is performed to purify and drive out the spirits within. Both Shinto and Buddhist sects perform the ritual though funerals are typically the realm of Buddhist priests. "The general perception is that you do need rituals to be done, to help the passage of the spirit from the realm of the living to the dead and also to separate the spirit from this realm."^{ix}

The Japanese reverence for objects is commonly exemplified in katana, teapots, and calligraphy brushes, but also in more mundane items such as pencils boxes, *shōji*, and umbrellas (all of which have been represented as *yōkai* at some point). More than just a religious justification, there is also a pragmatic reasoning behind this reverence for objects. *Shōji* are delicate paper sliding doors that could easily break if treat roughly and umbrellas are more common and necessary in an island country where rainfall is plentiful. However, there is also a post-World War II memory in many of Japan's aging population that became well acquainted with scarcity of food and other resources.

Mottainai as Cultural Rhetoric

In addition to the nationwide destruction ranging from aerial firebombing, two atomic bombs, the loss of nearly seven hundred thousand civilian lives, economic devastation and foreign occupation, the day to day life of nearly all Japanese citizens had become one of survival. "Ersatz materials first replaced normal fabrics; then all consumer goods slowly disappeared, food ran short, and finally urban housing vanished in flames. Force to scrounge on the black market just to survive, city dwellers suffered a collapse of morale." ^x *Grave of the Fireflies*, a 1988 Japanese animated war tragedy, recounts the heart wrenching semi-autobiographical experiences of Akiyuki Nosaka and his younger sister in post-war Japan. The lack of access to food and starvation causes the children suffer from malnutrition and hallucination the main character's younger sister to eat mud 'rice balls and marbles. While this is a cinematic portrayal of the hardships of postwar Japan, the events are based on real experiences. "The island nation had no natural resources to fall back on. A series of volcanic islands with few natural resources, Japan has never had any

measureable amounts of petroleum, iron ore, aluminum, copper, and other minerals. The war years had used just about all coal and timber reserves.”^{xi}

Living through such a resource-starved era, many Japanese can attribute a *mottainai* attitude to their grandparents. Mariku Shinju illustrates this very attitude in her children’s book *Mottainai Grandma* because she was afraid that the concept was being forgotten.

“Our parents told us what *mottainai* is so we know what it means. But if we don't teach them to our children, they don't learn. It's a very scary thing. That's why I thought we have to make an effort to teach the idea and to change the situation.”^{xii} This older generation was forced to live through a resource poor era and the practice of frugality found resonance in Buddhism, which is often practiced mainly by the older generation.^{xiii} *Mottainai Grandma* was published in 2005, which was the same year Wangari Maathai was first introduced to the word. “She had sympathy deeply for it, and propounded to spread MOTTAINAI around the world as a common keyword for conserving environment. She has been speaking about the concept in Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States.”^{xiv} Maathai has adopted the word as part of the Greenbelt Movement as the Mottainai Campaign. In Maathai’s usage, *mottainai* has come to be thought of as a Japanese all encompassing term for the 3Rs, recycle, reduce, reuse, as well as the fourth R: respect.

Mottainai as Respect and Humility

The push to equate *mottainai* with respect is the continuing fight in the environmental movement to counteract the Human Exceptionalism Paradigm. The Human Exceptionalism Paradigm (HEP), later termed the Human Exemptionalism Paradigm, was the view of many late 20th century sociologists. “[T]hey focused on the assumption that human culture and intelligence made us so ‘exceptional’ that we could continue to ignore the limits of nature.”^{xv} HEP is outlined by the following four points.

1. Humans are unique among the earth’s creatures, for they have culture.
2. Culture can vary almost infinitely and can change much more rapidly than biological traits.
3. Thus, many human differences are socially induced rather than inborn, they can be socially altered, and inconvenient differences can be eliminated.
4. Thus, also, cultural accumulation means that progress can continue without limit,

making all social problems ultimately soluble. ^{xvi}

HEP is therefore a negative humanism in that it privileges humans over nature and animals. Not only can humans use nature and animals to their own ends but humans can defy them as well. HEP can run the gamut from humans as stewards of the environment to complete and total indifference to the environment because we are exempt from its machinations. One common tactic in correcting this view is emphasizing respect and humility.

Christopher Manes writes about the need for humility to help us solve our environmental problems. Looking at our environmental problem from the position of language, Manes sees the numerous ways we talk about ourselves in relation to non-language speaking nature as a type of parasitic language that distances humans from nature. We see again the human-nature relationship come to bear. Not only do humans elevate themselves above animals because we share language but we also speak of evolution in a linear way, building up to where we are today. Manes notes that the language of humanism gives the impression that humans are the only species on the planet. He goes on to note that, from an ecological perspective, the extinction of fungus would have a greater environmental impact than the extinction of humans. Manes, therefore, builds on Deep Ecology by talking about a language of ontological humility. “A language free from an obsession with human preeminence and reflecting the ontological humility implicit in evolutionary theory, ecological science, and postmodern thought, must leap away from the rhetoric of humanism we speak today.” ^{xvii}

In many ways *mottainai* as a form of ontological humility is the Japanese response to HEP. The greying of Japan has been counted as one of the biggest economic problems Japan will have to face. With the elderly population nearing retirement and the young population in decline the number of young people it will take to support every old person has increased dramatically. Now more than ever, the young people of Japan are seen as an incredibly important resource. With the recent disaster at Fukushima, Japan is facing

numerous potential threats to food, air, and water. The threats are ambiguous but the risk to Japan's youth caused former engineer Yasuteru Yamada to gather three hundred elderly volunteers to replace the young men currently repair the reactors. "Now Yamada's corps of elderly volunteers, dubbed a 'suicide corps,' is expected to get governmental approval for its quest to stabilize the crippled nuclear power plant."^{xviii} A *mottainai* attitude is but one of many aspects leading Yamada and his volunteers to hazard such a dangerous task but it is being done under the belief that the young people are more valuable to the future of Japan.

Mottainai as Pollution

By now it should be clear that *mottainai* encompasses a variety of usages of waste. The environmental movement is by and large a result of the destruction caused by excessive industrialization. In Japan, the environmental movement was especially involved with correcting the problems of heavy metal industrial waste. The Ashio Copper Mine, Minamata disease, and Itai-itai disease are all associated with heavy metal poisoning from industrial wastewater. Both created wide spread reaction to pollution. This waste typically worked its way up the food chain from polluted waters affecting fish later consumed by humans. Since humans suffered as a result of human created pollution, a certain degree of karmic retribution has been glibly attributed to such industrial accidents. Parallels such as these make connections between our actions and their results in a manner similar to how William LaFleur described the prevailing episteme of medieval Japan as cognitively satisfying yet distressing.^{xix} Because karma is action and the impact of our polluting/wasteful nature is ever more apparent on an island nation such as Japan, the promulgating of *mottainai* as cultural rhetoric is a good way to emphasize the need for a keen environmental consciousness.

Tanaka Shozo (1841-1913) is considered to be Japan's first conservationist not unlike Muir, Leopold or Carson for his efforts in bringing environmentalism into social commentary. From 1870 to 1874, Tanaka spent time in prison for the death of a prefectural

official. While in prison he spent his time reading Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*. Fukuzawa Yukichi had translated Smiles and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* in an effort to Westernize Japan.^{xx} Ironically Tanaka would be considered the antithesis of Fukuzawa. Once released from prison, "Tanaka decided that he wanted to live a life devoted to lofty principles, humility, and public service."^{xxi} Tanaka was elected to the National Diet in Japan's first parliamentary elections in 1890. In 1891, Tanaka led the fight against the Ashio Copper Mine's pollution of the Watarase River Basin northwest of Tokyo challenging the Meiji government's silent complicity. Poisonous effluent carried arsenic, mercury, chlorine, and copper sulphate from the copper mine down to the surrounding communities causing illness, spoiling water and destroying mulberry groves. During his fight with the government and copper mine, Tanaka developed a political ecology based on motion as inherent in nature.

While the state saw nature as a passive object to be manipulated by humans, Tanaka's [Fundamental River] Law argued for an active nature in motion. Here his thought was grounded in a tradition of Japanese agronomy, scientific farming, a monistic tradition that conceived nature as the constant motion of an infinite material energy. But Tanaka's encounter with industrial-scale pollution taught him to doubt whether or not nature was indeed infinite. To the more optimistic eighteenth-century belief in the eternal motion of material energy, which Tanaka called "flow" (*nagare*), he added another category: "poison" (*doku*). In Tanaka's thought *doku* represents the flow of nature's energy in harmful, destructive ways. As Tanaka theorized *nagare* and *doku* they came to take many forms, moving easily from the material and ecological to the social and political.^{xxii}

Tanaka's development of *doku* set a horizon for the limit of human intervention in nature. He believed that nature could be repaired up to a point until pollution created a "second nature" that would have no hope of being healed. Furthermore, he argued that *doku* was created in a systematic way when the human desire selfishly trumped nature's interests. Tanaka believed, like Leopold, that a land ethic should entice biotic communities, not just humans. Like Carson, Tanaka points out the anthropocentrism based on the misguided beliefs that humans can control nature.^{xxiii}

Walker reminds us that we "understand our inseparable connection with nature best through our bodies, most especially through our bodies when we suffer physical

pain.”^{xxiv} The waste runoff from the Ashio Copper Mine did so for Tanaka Shozo.

Similarly Minamata disease, Yokkaichi asthma and Itai-itai disease reminded innocent Japanese citizens of the interconnectedness of their environment. In creating waste, whether it is trash, industrial effluent or wasted lives, that same waste does not go away but rather it returns to remind us of the various ways our bodies can be insulted by pollution through the semi-permeable transfer up the food web towards our bodies. The karma of waste remains behind to remind us of how we treat the non-human world as well as reminding us that we are fundamentally connected in an interdependent web of causality. *Mottainai*, as it has been resurrected in cultural rhetoric, aims to reconnect people with the environment and foster an environmental consciousness grounded on ontological humility and respect.

- ⁱ Brett Walker, *Toxic Archipelago: A History of Industrial Disease in Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 16.
- ⁱⁱ Walker, 128-9.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 55 and 77.
- ^{iv} Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1988), 42.
- ^v Yuko Kawanishi. "Mottainai Grandma Reminds Japan, 'Don't Waste'." <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14054262>
- ^{vi} Reader, 54.
- ^{vii} "The word is thought to be a play on *tsukumo-gami*, with *tsukumo* indicating ninety-nine and *gami* (*kami*) denoting hair; the phrase can refer to the white hair of an old woman and, by extension, old age." Michael Dylan Foster. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 7.
- ^{viii} Foster, 2.
- ^{ix} Barbara Bradley Hagerty, "After Tsunami, Japanese Turn To Ancient Rituals," NPR News, March 17, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/17/134597421/after-tsunami-japanese-turn-to-ancient-rituals>, accessed September 26, 2011.
- ^x Reischauer, 103.
- ^{xi} T. R. Reid, *Confucius Lives Next Door: What Living in the East Teaches us about Living in the West* (New York: Random House, 1999), 43.
- ^{xii} David Kestenbaum, "Mottainai Grandma Reminds Japan, 'Don't Waste' ," NPR News, October 8, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14054262>, accessed September 26, 2011.
- ^{xiii} Reader, 78.
- ^{xiv} Mottainai Campaign, "MOTTAINAI Campaign-----who we are and how we came about," Mottainai Campaign website, <http://mottainai.info/english/who.html>, accessed September 26, 2011.
- ^{xv} William R. Freudenburg, "Thirty Years of Scholarship and Science on Environment Society Relationships," in *Organization & Environment* (Sage Publications, 2008; 21), 453-4.
- ^{xvi} William R. Catton and Riley E. Dunlap, "Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm," in *The American Sociologist* (1978; 13 February), 42-43.
- ^{xvii} Christopher Manes, "Nature and Silence." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, 15-29, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 25.
- ^{xviii} Hideharu Tamura, "Elderly 'suicide corps' may get nod for Fukushima mission," Asahi Japan Watch, The Asahi Shimbun News, June 14, 2011, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/life_and_death/AJ201106141167, accessed September 26, 2011.
- ^{xix} William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the literary arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 27.
- ^{xx} Reischauer, 128.
- ^{xxi} Walker, 98.
- ^{xxii} Robert Stolz, "Remake Politics, Not Nature: Tanaka Shozo's Philosophies of "Poison" and "Flow" and Japan's Environment" in *Japan Focus* website, January 23, 2007, <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Robert-Stolz/2331>, accessed September 26, 2011.
- ^{xxiii} David R. Keller and Frank B. Golley, eds., *The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 5.
- ^{xxiv} Walker, 6.