

The ‘Mono no Aware’ in Hanami: Re-reading its Festive, Aesthetic, and Contemporary Value

花見における「もののあわれ」
—その祭事的、美学的、今日的な価値の再読—

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Abstract: This essay presents a personal reflection on a presumed deep *mono no aware* consciousness that is within *hanami*, a very popular annual Japanese festival. This reflection began essentially during the period of *hanami* season 2011, which saw a national restraint on celebrations due to the triple disasters: earthquake, tsunami, and radiation fear. Defining *mono no aware* as a concept-metaphor for Japanese culture’s poetic and philosophical interpretation and internalization of the inherently transient quality of all life and things, the essay advances the view, while recognizing a difficulty with understanding this concept, that the 2011 *hanami* season was an occasion ripe for a true ‘mono no aware’ *hanami*. Using a re-reading mode of analysis and drawing on a number of historical and contemporary sources the essay tries both to clarify and explain the author’s perspective on the topic as well as to perhaps light a spark to invite further discourse.

Keywords: Mono no Aware, Japanese Aesthetic, Hanami, Concept-metaphor, Kizuna

要約: 本論文は、日本の毎年恒例行事であるお花見の中に潜む「もののあわれ」の意識に対する著者自身の個人的な考察である。きっかけとなったのは2011年のお花見の季節である。この年、日本は地震と津波、放射能の脅威という3重の災害に見舞われ、お祭りごとを自粛する動きがあった。「もののあわれ」は捉えにくい概念であるが、本論文では、もののあわれを、常に変化する暮らしやあらゆる物事を詩的に、そして哲学的に解釈し、内在化させるための概念的な比喩としてとらえ、2011年のお花見の季節が真に「もののあわれ」のお花見として成熟する時期であるという見解を提示する。

キーワード: もののあわれ、日本の美学、花見、比喩の概念、絆

Introduction: The Questions

On March 3, 2011 Mother Nature put a damper on the usual festivities that characterize *hanami*, Japan’s annual, time-honored blossom-viewing party. This act of Nature has come to be called the Great East Japan Earthquake; it jolted, triggering a never-before-seen tsunami and the subsequent radiation concerns following the near meltdown of the Fukushima No. 1 power plant. In typical Japanese-style, the country, still in mourning, showed respect and reverence to the dead and suffering by refraining from or toning down their traditional cherry blossoms-viewing partying and picnicking.

While giving thought to what might be the deeper and more philosophical meaning of *hanami* as opposed to its feast, fun and frolic some questions arose. This pondering

was premised on a general knowledge and surface level understanding that during *hanami* the beauty or aesthetic appeal of the cherry blossoms is appreciated and is in fact a catalyst for such celebrations even with its sometimes indiscreet and reprehensible actions of some celebrants. A further take on the philosophical dimension of *hanami* centers on *mono no aware*, a special kind of experience-cum-feeling, brought on the observer, the argument goes, by the realization of the blossoms' beauty yet frailty and short existence as within a week of their blooming they wilt and fall to the ground. Among the questions that arrested my mind included: Was the 2011 muted *hanami* season an opportunity perfect for a 'deeper' if not 'truer' *hanami* moment? In other words, did this catastrophic force of nature—the enormity of this said earthquake, the deadly tsunami it spawned, and the costly damage they left in their wake—present a substantial case for a special kind of *hanami*, one imbued with a *mono no aware* consciousness? More pointedly, was it a moment or a chance to be more appreciative of the presumed inherent *mono no aware* in *hanami* that may often be overshadowed, understandably so, by all the partying, fun and frolic? Or does the proverb "*dumplings rather than flowers*" (花より団子 *hana yori dango*) express an actual, albeit stark reality? Perhaps, however, this chance was seized. Were it seized, could 'kizuna' (絆), the declared kanji of the year 2011, be considered its evidence? *Kizuna*, a Japanese word meaning 'bond', especially among families and friends, emerged via popular sentiment as an important lesson taught by the devastation, massive losses and widespread sorrow brought about by the earthquake and tsunami. The reality of the lives of neighbors and love ones could be gone in the twinkling of an eye forced the society to think and to recognize the importance of spending quality time with each other whenever possible. But if the society missed this glorious chance, could it be that *hanami*, once a custom with deep aesthetic, poetic, and philosophic import, has been transformed into a banal image of its season? That is, *hanami* is merely for entertainment and celebrations: breaking the ice, welcoming parties, or the customary eating and drinking to the new life and experience that the spring season brings. Yet "few Japanese would miss cherry blossom viewing because no other event can take them back so completely to their historical, cultural, social, and psychological roots,"(Sosnoski,1996:12) instructively noted one author. Implicit in the quotation above are a sustaining aesthetics and philosophy about the symbolic meanings of the cherry blossoms and why they have come to be adored and worshipped. What then is the 'true' value and weight of this presumed *mono no aware* aesthetic and philosophical dimensions buried deep in *hanami*? In making sense of this admittedly fuzzy topic,

using a re-reading mode of analysis, *mono no aware* is herein viewed as a concept-metaphor for Japanese culture's poetic and philosophical interpretation and internalization of the inherently transient quality of all life and things.

Sakura's Symbolic Meanings

The cherry blossoms, called *sakura* in Japanese, is said to be the best or purest symbolic representation of *mono no aware*. The adoration for *sakura* goes back centuries in history. The beautiful yet short life of this flower which blooms and lasts only for about a week around the beginning of spring has been traditionally believed to be the quintessential symbol of evanescence. The *sakura's* evanescence quality of being 'here today and gone tomorrow', goes the argument, is the ultimate metaphor for human life and all existence. The feeling of sadness and wonderment evoked by the cherry blossoms' subliminal beauty yet brief existence is a popular emotion that captures the essence of the Japanese phrase *mono no aware*.

The *sakura's* spring-beauty has won over the autumn color-changing maple leaves and the faint-scenting plum blossoms, two other objects from nature said to have moved the hearts and minds of Japanese poets. Comparing the cherry to the plum blossoms, the former have been more favored not merely because they are considered as more beautiful, but rather because the latter stay around too long. The plum blossoms linger on their branches for too long; the cherry blossoms wilt and fall to ground only within days of their blooming. From this brief exposition on the cherry blossoms, plum blossoms, and maple leaves we may infer some symbolic meanings behind this affective orientation towards or deep interest in them: *nature, beauty, existence, frailty, change, and seasons*. This kind of nuanced cultural sensibility may be viewed as the other side of the coin of a Japanese penchant for being stoical and calm in dire circumstances. That beauty tinged with sadness can be evoked by recognizing the frail and fleeting existence of things serves as a significant rationale for the *sakura's* great adoration.

Hanami—Past and Present

The custom of hanami or cherry blossom viewing is said to have begun in the Nara period (710-794). Enjoyed only by the elites throughout successive periods, it was not until the Edo period (1600-1867) ordinary citizens could experience *hanami*. The planting of cherry blossom trees at strategic areas by Tokugawa Yoshimune, the eighth

shogun (military leader), had been important in the spreading of this custom. Drinking *sake* (alcohol made from rice) and feasting while viewing and thinking about the blossoms' beauty though ephemeral existence had been what characterized *hanami*. However, the custom of cherry blossoms viewing and the name *hanami* are said to have been first used or mentioned in *The Tale of Genji*.

Today thousands of people across Japan flock to their favorite locations, usually a park, to enjoy some presumably quality entertainment time with friends and family eating and drinking under or nearby these cherry trees. Interestingly, for a population in which many view work and being busy at it as their reason for existence, *hanami* is made more special as it is one of the few times that many have the chance to publicly over-drink and may even be excused for the indiscrete actions that may be induced by being drunk. As such, it would not be difficult to convincingly argue the point that today *hanami* is celebrated more for the opportunity for a work-intoxicated and perhaps stress-filled population to 'party'. And in this celebratory mood, how boring, more aptly, how *kuuki yomenai* or KY (a situation where one's actions do not match with or worse, spoil the atmosphere) to be reflecting upon, or being seized by the *mono no aware* consciousness that simultaneously aroused, occasioned, and represented by the blooming and beautiful yet frail and fleeting cherry blossoms. The reality is that eating, drinking, singing, socializing, and losing all one's inhibitions are what essentially constitute *hanami* especially since modern times.

Investigating Mono no Aware

From the survey of the writings in English on *mono no aware*, it seems to be an intriguing yet elusive Japanese concept which has been the subject of many definitions and interpretations. One might be quickly led into thinking that this challenge is bound to result when seeking to make sense of a Japanese concept through Western lenses of language, thought and logic. Interestingly however, there are many Japanese people whom you might think are in the know would admit to their ignorance or partial understanding of *mono no aware*. To the frustration and/or intrigue of the eager foreign investigator, some Japanese respondents might even go as far as to dismiss *mono no aware* as an old literary expression with little use or importance to contemporary Japan. Although I used the subjunctive mode, it was in fact part my actual experience while discussing the topic (albeit in English) with Japanese friends, colleagues and acquaintances. The partial and at times indifferent responses received

from my enquiries, later upon research, found much sympathy with me. For as the readings and general research done show, *mono no aware* is a much nuanced concept: there have been numerous subtleties in its meanings, symbols, interpretations and uses since it was first introduced as a literary concept in the eighteenth century. The question then as to what ‘exactly’ is *mono no aware* could be invitingly tricky.

Motoori Norinaga and Man’yoshu

Motoori Norinaga, an eighteenth century Japanese linguistic scholar coined the phrase *mono no aware*, and considered it as the essence of understanding Japanese culture. When translated, *mono no aware* means ‘the pathos of things’. However, such a meaning may be unhelpful. Is it one classic example of expressions or concepts from one language that challenges the goal of a smooth translation into another? Language, thought and culture, we know, cannot easily be separated without resulting in some kind of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Scholar Norinaga whose main goal was to point to and assert ‘Japanese-ness’ would not hesitate to agree that *mono no aware* is deeply connected to Japanese culture and thought. *Mono no aware*, he believes, constitutes a unique characteristic of the Japanese race, and it has deeply moved and shaped Japanese culture throughout the ages. The **Man’yoshu**, literally meaning ‘the collection of ten thousand leaves’, is an eighth century classic anthology of Japanese poetry, often cited as the oldest source where ‘aware’ is captured through the ‘plaintive calling of birds and animals.’ Insects too, such as cicadas, known as *semi* in Japanese, are considered both plaintively and seasonally symbolic in Japan, for two main reasons. First, the different sounds or callings of cicadas announce the beginning and ending of the hot, humid summer. Second, the cicadas’ very life-cycle is illustrative of the evanescence and wistfulness that *mono no aware* is said to evoke. The short life-span of cicadas living long enough for the female of their kind to sing their mating songs to attract their other half to complete the fertilization process can be seen as a metaphor of this complex feeling of transience. In short, this early discourse shows scholar Norinaga to be credited for coining the term *mono no aware*, and **Man’yoshu** as its earliest recorded foreshadowing.

The Tale of Genji and The Tale of Heike

The tales of Genji and *Heike* are two other representative discourses in which the

concept *mono no aware* constitutes a central theme. Praised as one of the world's first psychological novel, **The Tale of Genji** was written by Lady Murasaki, an aristocratic woman, during the Heian period (794-1185) of Japanese history. The novel narrates the romantic life of a 'shining' prince and the troubles he encountered. If **The Tale of Genji** is about the 'romance of the lover' then **The Tale of Heike** is about 'romance of the warrior'. Considered an epic poem, **The Tale of Heike** was written in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Highlighting the Buddhist themes of the impermanence and incompleteness of human experience, the poems are about the conflicts and battles, the clans, as well as their fighting codes during the heights of the Samurai era.

Importantly, whereas *mono no aware* theme in **The Tale of Genji** may be viewed as rather implicit, in **The Tale of Heike** it is more explicit. For proof we would have to look no further for the evidence of this *mono no aware* conspicuity in **The Tale of Heike** than the very first few sentences of the very first paragraph:

“Gionshōja no kane no koe, Shogyōmujō no hibiki ari. Sarasōju no hana no iro, Jōshahissui no kotowari wo arawasu. Ogoreru mono mo hisashikarazu, tadaharu no yoru no yume no gotoshi. Takeki mono mo tsuwi ni wa horobin(u), hitoeni kaze no mae no chiri ni onaji.”

“The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.” –

(Chapter 1.1, Helen Craig McCullough's translation)

Put briefly, whereas the *mono no aware* feeling or emotion that Genji's life evokes seems to have a playful and mundane tone, the Heike quotation above gives a serious and existential warning. The contrast here might be akin to the dichotomy of 'lightness' and 'heaviness', a Nietzschean theme around which Milan Kundera's novel **The Unbearable Lightness of Being** is spun. The metaphor 'lightness' suggests a more carefree, here-and-now existence defining Genji's character; while 'heaviness' implies the burden of the enormous weight of existence evidenced by the lamentation of Heike of a swift end to the mighty and proud. In extending the metaphor, a parallel could be drawn by separating *hanami* (lightness) from cherry blossoms (heaviness). The former is the event occasioning unbridled eating, drinking and frolicking; and the latter is the beautiful flower, especially in its falling, wilted state, evoking the *mono no*

aware experience-cum-emotion.

Admittedly, this effort does not afford the time and space to give more concrete examples showing the different interpretations and nuances of *mono no aware* which are thematic in Genji and Heike tales. However, suffice to say, there are striking contrasts between these two great Japanese works: Genji is about the ‘romance of the lover’ and considered a classic psychological novel; Heike is about the ‘romance of the warrior’ and is labeled an epic poem about battles and codes of warriors with a liturgical tone. Yet they can be linked together by the *mono no aware* consciousness of the fleetingness, sadness, and loneliness of human existence.

Beauty, Mystery, Transience, Weakness, Sadness

In reviewing the meanings and interpretations of *mono no aware* up to this point the symbolic has been highlighted. Their nuances aside, cherry blossoms, cicadas, and the Tales of Genji and Heike may all be combined as, *a feeling of awe tinged with beauty and sadness brought on by the recognition of existential transience*. This working definition has been influenced by other expositions directly and indirectly related to the topic.

Indirectly linked but of stupendous import to this *mono no aware* theme is a Sigmund Freud’s essay—one of his few musings on subjects outside his signature field of psychology. Titled **On Transience**, it criticizes an often melancholic view of nature’s transient quality. In this enlightening essay, Freud espouses and affirms a more positive outlook on nature’s beauty, however ephemeral. That all that is beautiful will one day wither and die, he maintains, makes such objects of beauty even more beautiful leading to their greater enjoyment. In other words, Freud is debunking the view that there is a discount on the value and worth of a beautiful and perfect thing merely because it will soon cease to exist. He succinctly asserts that, ‘on the contrary, an increase...transience value is scarcity in time.’ This point sheds some light on the view held among the worshippers of the fallen, wilted cherry blossoms: that in its decaying stage, the zenith of its beauty is reached instantiating, arguably a quintessence, *mono no aware* moment. Freud’s aesthetic optimism that is reflected in this essay sits neatly within this Japanese experience-cum-emotion called *mono no aware*.

‘**Mono-no-aware**’ and the **Philosophy of the Weak**, is an interesting piece written by Sakurai Hiroshi, a Japanese scholar, which looks at the cultural history of *mono no aware* with a view to highlight its contemporary value. He notes the motivation

behind Norinaga's 'koku-gaku' or Japan studies in which Norinaga posits *mono no aware* as a kind of counter aesthetic and an interpretive device opposite to the male, bureaucratic dominance that existed during the Edo period (1603-1868). On the one hand, this 'mono no aware world' as Hiroshi terms it captures a philosophy, an aesthetic, and a literary style which was at its pinnacle in the Heian period. It was a philosophy of the 'weak' characterized by a nuanced sensitivity to feelings and things as aesthetic; while hiragana, the Japanese-origin writing system used in *waka* poems and classical Japanese poetry featured the then literary style. On the other hand, Japanese society's institutional framework and system of logic rested on the use of Chinese Kanji characters which was a world ruled by scholars or men of letters. According to Hiroshi, this was the world of the strong: competitive, bureaucratic, militaristic yet culturally sterile. Positively and seemingly triumphal, pointing to *anime*, *manga*, and fashion which have today taken spotlight as metaphors of 'cool' Japan, Hiroshi declares Japan is returning to its roots. That 'roots', akin to Norinaga-style discourse, is the 'world of mono no aware'. More importantly, it is the world of 'cultural fertility', one in which Japan has had remarkable successes that are illustrative of some of its civilization's superior achievements. Yet not tangentially, to be sure, recent political utterances and events on foreign affairs and national defense policy in Japan may temper Hiroshi's optimism about the country's return to the womb of cultural sensitivity. Notwithstanding, the insight gained from this article is the author's insinuation that *mono no aware*, the offspring of a world of sensitivity to the intricacies of human feelings, is a time-honored aesthetics and philosophy of Japanese civilization. *Mono no aware* matters!

Yet another instructive discourse on *mono no aware* is a novel titled **Oh! A mystery of mono no aware** in which the author weaves a story around a second generation Japanese-American young man who went to Japan in search of information about his late father and the possibility of finding any distant relatives. In the process he discovers the concept *mono no aware* and simultaneously became interested in learning about the practice of suicide-pact in Japan, triggered by a newspaper article he read reporting on the latest one. The novel is fused with bits and pieces of anecdotal, factual, and historical information on *mono no aware* making it as informative as it is imaginative. As mentioned earlier, the meaning of this 'concept-metaphor' is not easy to pin down. For not only are we extracting it from a language and culture that is famous for its ambiguity, but because its origin goes back centuries and its meanings and uses have meandered along with its history. As such, the greatest value of this

novel for the purpose of this essay is its attempt to simplify while situating *mono no aware* in its historical epoch. Paradoxically, although the book has “Oh” and “Mystery” in its title, probably implying a kind of ‘awe’ and ‘fuzziness’ that can attend to any interpretative efforts of the concept, the novel offers much in the way of demystifying *mono no aware*.

Re-reading Mono no Aware as a Concept-Metaphor

With the hope that the foregoing brief historical survey and the selected literature review have raised if not removed parts of the veil that hangs over *mono no aware*, I will now try to zero in on some pointed definitions and interpretations of this ‘concept-metaphor’. But first what do I mean in designating *mono no aware* a ‘concept-metaphor’, a hyphenated term?

Viewed as a concept, [*mono no aware*]...captures an abstract thought or idea; as a metaphor, it connotes ‘...a transfer of meaning, both in intension and extension.’ Combining the definitions then, however arbitrarily, a ‘concept-metaphor’ may be any thought or idea that is expressed hypothetically; it may have relative grounding in some empirical reality; and its meaning(s) may be intended, as well as extended, implicit, as well as explicit.” (Chambers, 2012:35-36)

It follows then that *mono no aware* as a ‘concept’ is an idea or notion which forms in the mind and corresponds to some reality. While as metaphor it signifies something else, real and/or imagined. Moreover, as an essentially sensing experience, *mono no aware* involves a series of complex actions and reactions. In the case of the ‘cherry blossoms’, among them would be the processes of *observing*, *thinking*, *feeling*, *judging*, *internalizing*, and *reacting*. It having simultaneously sensing and interpretive dimensions underscores the difficulty of defining *mono no aware*.

Calling it a ‘concept-metaphor’ is itself metaphorical; despite this apparent convolution, the goal has been to highlight the complex world of fluidity, plurality, and ambiguity within which *mono no aware* dwells. To the extent that its meanings and interpretations vary between the emotion of sadness and beauty, *mono no aware* is ‘fluid’; that it has been the subject of many meanings, interpretations, and symbols, highlights its ‘plurality’; that it is nuanced, and sometimes operating incoherently at both affective and cognitive levels, underscores its ‘ambiguity’. If these points are themselves too abstract let’s consider the following selected definitions on *mono no*

aware given below.

A Google search elicited the following meanings for *mono no aware*:

1. "Fascination of things"
2. "A sensitivity to ephemera"
3. "Awareness of the transience of all things"
4. "That feeling for the poignant beauty of things"
5. "Philosophic and aesthetic category expressing the literary ideal of the Nara period (710-784)"
6. "The enveloping sensation of refinement and grace, in which the feeling and the mind come together"
7. "A Japanese aesthetic and spiritual concept relating to a desolate poignancy and an acceptance of impermanence"
8. "A sense born at a point of harmonious agreement, when the objective grasp of things and subjective emotions are unified"

A close look at the definitions point us to three possible dimensions: (1) the subjective/interpretive/spiritual; (2) the objective/empirical/material; (3) and their synthesis/harmony/fusion. From these selected definitions there are certain words namely, *fascination*, *sensitivity*, *awareness*, *feeling*, and *poignancy*, each by itself connotes the subjective, interpretive dimension of *mono no aware*. Additionally, these three phrases: 'enveloping sensation of refinement and grace', 'aesthetic and spiritual concept' and 'a sense born at a point' are examples of this same subjective, interpretive dimension. While *things* (definition #s 1, 2, 4 and 8) the word which appears most frequently, signifies the objective, empirical dimension. Furthermore, connoted by the words *ephemera*, *transience*, and *impermanence* is the Buddhist-influenced category of evanescence. A commentary on existence and the fleeting quality of life and 'things', these words can be found in definition numbers 2, 3, and 7 respectively. Among the mix of meanings, 'fascination of things' (definition #1) can be put at one end of a spectrum, and '...a desolate poignancy and an acceptance of impermanence' (definition #7) at the other end. Perched at the mid-point could be the '...harmonious agreement, when the objective grasp of things and the subjective emotions are unified' (definition #8). This brief re-reading of the definitions, albeit arbitrary, offers an idea of the fluidity or relativity that attends to the interpretation and meaning of *mono no aware*. That we find 'beauty' and 'sadness', 'fascination' and 'desolate poignancy' all referring to the same term transfers us to *mono no aware*'s world of complex plurality and

ambiguity. From the foregoing re-reading and the earlier review of selected literature, I guardedly submit *mono no aware* as a concept-metaphor for Japanese culture's poetic and philosophical interpretation and internalization of the inherently transient quality of all (Nature) life and things.

Yet from reading this effort, understanding *mono no aware*'s essence might still remain an elusive goal. For at its very core, there seems to be a more nuanced, aesthetic interplay of the subjective and the objective dimensions. In addition, seriousness and play, heaviness and lightness, pain and pleasure are integral and interwoven into the *mono no aware* experience. Moreover, there is also a sense of abandonment of the material world while at the same time appreciating the joys of life. To the Western eye this might spell contradiction as Harper notes in his interpretation Kenko Yoshida's **Essays in Idleness** opening sentence: "As there is nothing for me to do (But actually he doesn't want to do anything.) I spend all my day, writing down in haphazard fashion what comes into my mind, and I come to have a strange feeling." (1974:26-27) This for Harper indicates "the Japanese Buddhist sense of resignation, and a shrewd realism" coexisting without any contradictions. My reading, however, is that there can be little smoothness to this coexistence, which again might be an example of a difference in world-view. But why should there be 'smoothness' or clarity? Is it that the Western mind is troubled when faced with contradictions or ambiguities?

Mono no Aware vs. Lacrimae Rerum

The notion of a difference in world-view or philosophical orientation as a plausible explanation for the difficulty with understanding Japanese concepts such *mono no aware* could be a sufficiently persuasive point. Notwithstanding I thought it might be useful to search for a non-Japanese concept equivalent to *mono no aware*, and I stumbled on the Latin phrase: "sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt". This comment was a tearful reaction by Aeneas, Trojan War hero. According to Greek mythology, he expressed it after viewing murals in a temple showing the brutal battles and the tragic deaths of his friends and fellow countrymen. Wikipedia provides three translated versions of it: (1) "These ones are the tears of things, and mortal things (sufferings) touch the mind." (2) "The world is a world of tears, and the burdens of mortality touch the heart." (3) "They weep here / For how the world goes, and our life that passes / Touches their hearts." The 'tears of things' or "lacrimae rerum" is

popularly quoted part of this Latin phrase.

Comparing these translations to the definitions of *mono no aware* given above, feelings of sadness, sense of loss, finality, and loneliness seem to be common to both. Matching *mono no aware* against *lacrimae rerum* we get quite a similarity: ‘the pathos of things’ versus ‘the tears of things’. What then distinguishes *mono no aware* from its Latin/non-Japanese equivalent? For *mono no aware* it would be: the notion of beauty in perishability; a seamless, quiet resignation to Nature’s unfolding; and an acceptance of impermanence. However, for the Trojan War hero’s “*lacrimae rerum*”, his ‘tears’ for the war dead would include a deep sadness, tragedy, loss, and loneliness. In short then, one seems to be concerned with the ‘totality of Nature and its existence’, and the other is about a reflection on ‘Humanity and mortality’ respectively.

Conclusion: Connecting Hanami, Mono no Aware, and Kizuna

In the process of bringing this laborious challenge of questioning and re-reading this unique Japanese feeling of awe tinged with beauty and sadness brought on by the recognition of existential transience, an editorial of the Daily Mainichi newspaper caught my attention. Titled ‘There is no magic stick in politics’, this online English edition of a Japanese newspaper was editorializing an impending national election in which the country would be having its seventh prime minister within just six years. With numerous issues besetting the country such as the anemic economy, burgeoning debt, dependence on nuclear energy, a social welfare and pension system impatient of reform, and territorial fights with neighbors, to name a few, the editorial sought to temper politicians emotions and arouse seemingly disinterested voters from their civic slumber. Wondering where this seemingly unrelated point is heading? Well, this is it. The editorial began its admonition invoking the memory of March 3, 2011:

“The triple disasters reminded members of the public of the importance of a spirit of mutual cooperation in local communities, as well as Japan's bonds with people from all over the world who extended assistance to disaster victims and the significance of Japan's future direction.”

This speaks squarely to the notion of *kizuna*, the word whose kanji was selected as the representative sentiment of the society for the year 2011. That disaster came in triple-fold serves as a reminder of the importance of domestic and international cooperation as the country seeks to shape a new future seems to be the substantive point

of the quotation. Disasters whether natural or man-made are simultaneously causes, occasions, and results of the transience of life and things. Within this perspective dwells the Buddhist-influenced interpretation of *mono no aware*.

I began by mentioning that it was the occasion of a tempered *hanami* festival 2011 that got me thinking of its presumed deeper meaning and the emotions evoked by *sakura*. The toning down of the celebrations was culturally quite in tune with a general disposition of Japanese to act as a group, show solidarity, and have considerations for the feelings of others. It can therefore be said that 2011 *hanami* was more an ‘observance’ rather than a ‘celebration’. In other words it was a moment for a nuanced, textured reverence for nature, things, and existence; it was also time for reflection, agreed on by popular sentiment, of the lived experiences and the bond among people both at home and abroad. Concomitantly, it was more a time for an introspective blossom-viewing during the *hanami* season than the usual fanfare and conspicuous over-indulgence. The occasion I submit was a *mono no aware-esque* one! For it seems the *mono no aware* consciousness evoked by the aesthetic and philosophical qualities of *sakura* requires a measured silence and reverence to be truly felt. But as has been pointed out, being a ‘concept-metaphor’, *mono no aware* conjures up a world that is interpretively fluid, plural, and ambiguous. Yet this effort bows out on reiterating the view that *mono no aware* is a prime candidate for Japanese culture’s poetic and philosophical interpretation and internalization of the inherently transient quality of all life and things which is symbolized by *sakura*, the cherry-blossom; and hence, it is buried deeply in the time-honored *hanami* festival.

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