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# Yamato Kotoba: The Language of the Flesh

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This inquiry builds on the work of such thinkers as David Abram and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; like their work, it addresses the fact that people in the Western developed world, through their acculturations, sacrifice intimacy with the natural world. The article explores one remedial measure: the Yamato Kotoba language of the Japanese. This is a language before the Chinese injection of spoken and written words, one that preserves the earlier words better suited, the authors propose, to expressing the interpenetrating experience of the person with—in this case the Japanese—natural setting. Such an intimacy appears, for instance, in Basho's Haiku. In the same vein, Japanese Koto Dama deploys the spiritual power that resides in words—as they are both spoken and unspoken. These linguistic phenomena are explored and explained insofar as they preserve, capture, and celebrate human intimacy with nature. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, they re-member humans as “flesh of the world's flesh.”

**Keywords:** *haiku, Yamato Kotoba, Furuike, Koto Dama, phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, lifeworld, lebenswelt*

In this article, the authors examine a world in which a human being is so completely embedded in her or his “life-world,” as Husserl would have it, that psyche can, in the end, sustain no life apart from its surroundings. There is a Japanese brand of language, an early language but still preserved, that produces and inheres in images in which subject and object, human and landscape, conjoin rather than separate.

Some of this conjoining would match Merleau-Ponty's description of a world in which humans are “flesh of the world's flesh”:

When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us

as well as we into the things. (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort, & Lingis, 1969, p. 123)

Merleau-Ponty et al. pictured here an interlacing of subject and object: I both see and am seen, touch and am touched, and this constitutes the subject and the outer world as “passing into each other”—in that sense, inseparable (p. 123; Abram, 1997, p. 66).

On the other hand, some work to be examined in this inquiry, such as Basho's work, expresses an intimacy greater than the one described by the Western philosopher. There is a Buddhist experiencing which would invalidate the quote from Merleau-Ponty: “This does not mean that there was a fusion.” On the contrary, when NoSelf is in full presence, when I am my Face before I was born, then there is truly no distinction between subjective and objective world.

Both versions of experiencing, the phenomenological one that is closer to the Western predilection, and the Buddhist version of complete Presence, offer people far greater intimacy with their natural setting than most get to enjoy at present, since the subject-object split in our human

conceptual system tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. We (which will here refer to the authors) will investigate the manner in which this greater intimacy is accomplished by virtue of a particular form of the Japanese language, *Yamato Kotoba*. Before doing so, we will give an example of a somewhat parallel Western version of a language of immediacy, hoping to bring the point home to English readers first in their own language.

Norman Maclean, author of *A River Runs Through It*, began his teaching of English poetry with a favorite exercise (personal communication, ca. 1971). He would quote this anonymous verse from circa 1500 CE:

O Western wind, when wilt thou blow  
That the small rain down can rain?  
Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again!  
(Anonymous)

Then he would challenge the students to find a better description of rain than “small.” The authors of this article improvise, at this point, how the class might proceed to meet the challenge: With much license, disregarding rhythmic requirements, students might try out “tropical rain” or “sudden rain”—“that the sudden rain down can rain”—and discard them immediately. These obviously fall short. How instead could students anticipate, with a single word, the tender embracing of what was most likely a small beloved? How could they improve upon “that the small rain down can rain”? Students might try out the word “petite.” The problem with such a word is that it is borrowed from the French; it puts someone reading or better yet hearing the poem at one remove from the immediacy of sensual and therefore emotional feeling. The French word is an import that cannot accomplish the immediacy, the bodily “feel,” of the Anglo-Saxon word “small.” Worse would be the use of anything Latinate: If one were to try “localized rain;” the head takes over, pushing the body out of the way. And so it must be:

O Western wind, when wilt thou blow  
That the small rain down can rain?  
Christ, that my love were in my arms  
And I in my bed again!

It is not only poets who care about grounding—poets, with their particular feeling for good old Anglo-Saxon words that keep one literally “grounded” in earth and flesh, that in some sense enact what they mean by way of a concrete “feel” or picture, words such as “small” and “fish” and “hook.” Perhaps the intense interest in Buddhism in the late ‘60s and ‘70s indicated how much need there was, not just for ideas from the East, but also the bodily feelings afforded by Eastern arts and practices. Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, had and still have nature-ensconced verbal and visual arts to offer as part of an education that likewise includes the theory and practice of meditation.

This prologue, then, has attempted merely to act as a reminder of how much the West can benefit from its contact with the East, from, in the case of this inquiry, the *indigenous* East; we seek not only high and abstract learnings but also Eastern grounding in the body and in nature. Westerners, in sum, might appreciate Eastern poetry in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, embracing one’s own becoming as “flesh of the world’s flesh”; or Westerners might seek the more challenging experience of NoSelf—utterly simple but not always easy. In any case, one has access, enriching one’s own poetic and visual tradition, to the wisdom of grounding in the body and in the natural setting by coming into contact with Eastern art. The particular art examined here is that of Japanese poetry; one’s experience of it is much enhanced through acquaintance with *Yamato Kotoba*.

#### **Yamato Kotoba**

Until Chinese characters were introduced by Buddhist scholars around the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Japanese maintained an oral culture to express their thoughts and emotions. Not having a written language, however, did not hinder ancient Japanese from creating and enjoying vivid and poignant poems connecting their internal world to the natural world. *Manyo-shu*, the oldest remaining anthology of over 4,500 poems was compiled in late 700 BCE (Haitani, 2005). The *Manyo* poets—ranging from emperors and aristocracy to low-ranking soldiers and court clerks—lived, understood, and created poems in a language which portrayed people as “flesh of the world’s flesh.”

The Japanese equivalent of this language

of the flesh is Yamato Kotoba (*Yamato*, old name of Japan, *Kotoba*, words and language). Dale offered Shoichi Watanabe's explanation of Yamato Kotoba as words "which have their roots set down in the well-springs of the soul of our [the Japanese] race" (Watanabe, 1974, as cited in Dale, 1986, p. 84). It is the pristine form of the language deeply rooted in the primordial Japanese psyche. Later transcribed and recorded in the borrowed Chinese characters, *Manyo* poets used Yamato Kotoba in poems that reflected and represented all the human senses as they operated in an animate landscape. These poets were also an integral part of the very landscape which they described. In this article we explore Yamato Kotoba, expressed in various forms such as *waka* and *Haiku*. Even the modern-day Japanese, after almost 1000 years since the importation of written characters from China, intuitively distinguish between sinicized words which are, therefore, loan words as they contrast with words from the native Yamato Kotoba. The authors will also examine how Yamato Kotoba is related to the indigenous concept of *Koto Dama*, or the spirit of the words.

### The Flesh of Language

Since ancient times humans have experienced and understood their existence in terms of relationship to the natural world. As an ardent advocate of Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological views of the world, David Abram (1997), in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, walked readers through the intertwined wonder-world of subjectivity and objectivity (see esp. p. 36). For these thinkers, while the exterior world looks "remarkably solid and stable" (p. 39), the "real world" is a collection of experiences by multitudes of subjective perceivers.

Languages in oral societies are inseparable from the surrounding land, and they can be said, to the best of researched knowledge, to be perceived as connected with natural phenomena such as changing weather and seasons, water, sky, plants, and animals. As Abram (1997) described it, oral cultures "preserve active participation of the objects in the subjective consciousness" (p. 162) in the form of language. The old form of the Japanese language, Yamato Kotoba, provides an excellent example of this.

When famous Haiku master Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) created his poems in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which he imbued, as he composed them,

with a rationalized discipline of Buddhist process and content, he nevertheless used Yamato Kotoba to convey the felt sense of his experiences, beyond anything reason could grasp or express (and this conveys the ultimate beyond-reason Buddhist sensibility). Expressing symbolism in nature through using the words of silence was his way of capturing connection with the world. Such connection he conveyed much more effectively through his native Yamato Kotoba than had he attempted to do so using the sinicized imports that had produced, in effect, a revised and compounded Japanese language.

One of Basho's most famous Haiku both expresses, and, more than expresses, enacts the world of a landscape:

The ancient pond  
A frog leaps in  
The sound of the water

(*Furuike ya Kawazu tobi  
komu Mizu no oto*)

(Ueda, 1982, p. 53)

Japanese Haiku poets often sought (and seek) vocabulary in Yamato Kotoba language expressive of the emotional realm, while minimizing or limiting usage of loan words from Chinese. Basho did precisely that in this poem. "The sound of the water" in a quiet old temple garden resonates in the perceiver as it does in Basho's bodily senses. His visual and aural perceptions, expressed in words *furu ike* ("old pond") and *tobi komu* ("jumping in"), were attuned with the new and instantaneous sound of a frog's splashing, and with the quietude of the otherwise tranquil ancient pond and desolate garden. As Basho stops being the observer of the limited scene of the exterior, instead *becoming* the sound of the water, the smell of the pond, and the tactile sense of water encompassing the jumping frog itself, Haiku readers experience with him his union with the scenery. In fact as the Haiku has brought the reader beyond the "passing into each other" of subject and object, the distinction really does disappear.

The *Shakkei* school of garden design similarly contained the Japanese poets' integration of perceiving self and perceived exterior. Characterized by its indispensable inclusion of natural scenery,

Shakkei as used by Japanese landscape designers would integrate surrounding nature with the rest of their design.

In the present day, one can relate to intertwined perception by way of the experience of looking out an airplane window to gain a bird's eye view of mountain and valley. While one experiences a surrealistic closeness to clouds, sky, and the distant ocean now seen as a whole, and all seen from above the usual human altitude, all as a new gestalt that wakes one with its differentness, one nevertheless remains sardined in the aircraft: one may be feeling into and out of a range of bodily experiences. One's body is a part of the flying airplane which is also a part of the local portion of the vast landscape of the earth. It is not unlike the perception that Abram (1997) described as "the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it"; at least one may be more awake to such interchange (p. 52).

For older *Manyo* poets, as one can see in the following poem by Prince Nakano Oe, written in approximately the 7<sup>th</sup> century, human existence in the context of natural beauty was enchanted, influenced, and expanded through this relation with a larger sense of natural context:

On the banner-shaped clouds over the sea,  
the setting sun is glowing.  
May the moonlight of this evening be serene  
and bright.

(*Watatsumi no Toyohatakumo ni Irihi sashi  
Koyoi no Tsukuyo sayakekari koso*)

(Haitani, 2005, n.p.)

Prince Oe's famous *tanka* (short poem) which followed the 31 syllable form (5-7-5-7-7 syllables) was a rhetorical form of *waka* that consisted entirely of Yamato Kotoba.

The rule of *waka* requires pillow words, traditionally-formulated figures of speech (e.g., *Watatsumi no*) that are not explicitly translated in English; through them the poem shows yearning, respect, and awe to the god or the spirit of the ocean. At first glance the poem is simply about celebrating the splendor of nature as the sun sets over the ocean and as one welcomes the moon emerging in the clear evening sky. When one follows the poet's visual sense,

however, departing from the setting sun toward the darkening sky during the magical hours of the day, one starts to sense the embodied anticipation, yearning, and anxiety regarding the uncertainties in his life. Prince Nakano Oe later became the 38<sup>th</sup> emperor after many years of political turmoil. His use of Yamato Kotoba softened the disquiet captured in the scenery; yet readers, knowing what they had come to know, could empathically recreate that moment of disquiet as they resonated, many centuries later, with the same natural landscape.

### **Koto Dama: The Spirit of the Language**

Japanese children grow up believing in the miraculous power of words, known as *Koto Dama*. When a word comes out of one's mouth or even emerges in one's thoughts, it carries at that moment the power or the spirit of the word itself. This is what children are told. Such a notion parallels, in other societies, the notion that taboo words carry dangerous powers. Examples of *Koto Dama* are these: The Japanese avoid at a wedding words relating to cut ("*kiru*") or to number four ("*shi*") or nine ("*ku*"); these words have the same sound as death ("*shi*") and pain or suffering ("*ku*" or "*kuro*"; Pei, 1965, p. 270). However, *Koto Dama* holds a still more primordial position in the Japanese psychic structure.

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, has said in his teaching that Aikido is based on the spiritual teaching of *Koto Dama* (Stevens, 1993, p. 12). According to Ueshiba, Aikido, a newer form of traditional Japanese martial arts, is rather "the study of the spirit" (p. 12). Practicing Aikido requires understanding and following the spirit of *Koto Dama* which leads to the "unification of heaven, earth, gods and humankind" (p. 12). The founder of Aikido was inspired by the spiritual tradition of the ancient Japanese teaching and very aware of *Koto Dama* as the basis of and gateway to the spiritual origin of the country.

Etymologically, *Koto* in *Koto Dama* came from the word *kotoba*, *koto* meaning word, speech, or language, and *ba* being one of the words for leaf. Like a single leaf falling out of its mother tree, when a word comes out of thoughts, each leaf of thought brings out the power of the spirit that originated in the deep roots of the tree. The tree breathing the spirit of the forest as well as regenerating itself

from the power of the soil lets go its integral power through each flare of a seemingly innocent leaf. In short, glancing at a word, or, more so, uttering it, inspires in the Japanese a memory of the “life-world” (Abram, 1997, p. 40; Husserl, 1938/1970, p. 111). The tree also holds a spirit called *Ko Dama* (echo) that relates to the spirit of the mountains.

Abram (1997) reminded readers that language in indigenous oral cultures such as Japanese Yamato Kotoba is experienced “not as the exclusive property of humankind,” but “as a property of the sensuous life-world” (p. 154). *Koto Dama* is closely related to the name, the person, and the intention as they all participate in the formulating of the words. It also relates humans to the space and the particular landscape of the earth where the word came to be. Because of the connection of the word to the wider world, it is important for a person to be extremely careful about provoking such miraculous power. Thus, even after the written form of language had been introduced through Chinese influence, the Japanese people preserved the opinion that in native words a silent spiritual power resided, and that by preserving both the belief and the knowledge of those words, the people could preserve the actual power itself.

Modern children’s *manga* or *anime*, which are animations or graphic novels (English versions are also very popular among American children), use *Koto Dama* as a powerful theme. Some heroes in these *manga* (e.g., *Kotodama User*, not translated in English) discover and/or tap a secret power by citing the name of the place, person, or object. In other anime, a person loses spiritual power by being told repeatedly that s/he lacks such power.

Onomatopoeia directly and sensually conveys certain sounds, movement, and actions in a language. Onomatopoeic language grounds image in the sensual qualities of the language itself. Examples of onomatopoeia that convey aural qualities enhancing the image’s aural and pictorial qualities would be these: “batter” for beat up or “splutter” or “shh!” as a silencing word. The frequency of onomatopoeic usage in the Japanese language, as well as the richness of such usage, is an example of “synaesthetic participation from the animate surroundings” (Abram, 1997, p. 162; Fukuda, 2003; Shibatani, 1990) stated that the

role onomatopoeic phrases play in the Japanese language is too often overlooked and greater than imagined. Japanese people have an abundance of descriptive sound words for water, rain, snow, and ocean (Shogaku Kan, 2009). Some claim there are more than 270 words to describe clouds (Yasuno & Fujiwara, 2009). The many sounds of water in ocean, rain, and mountain streams evince a deep yearning for connection with nature.

### Conclusion

The Japanese language has kept an embedded connectivity with its land, preserving the spiritual legacy of the land, the people, and the culture. Yamato Kotoba, deeply intertwined with the spiritual power in words as recognized in *Koto Dama*, offers fruits from the earthy *Koto Dama* root, ripe for the crafting of *Haiku* and *waka*. Authors like Abram (1997) may be correct to lament the way in which civilized humans have sacrificed their deep interconnectedness with the natural world; and Merleau-Ponty may do a service, especially in the West, by perceiving afresh a world in which subject and object, rather than fatally split apart, meet inextricably in the world as embodied flesh. Likewise, the West and the East can also benefit by what remains to testify of an earlier intimacy amongst all that composes the interconnected texture of creatures and natural context. The Japanese still possess—have artfully preserved—a treasure to enjoy and to share in their Yamato Kotoba. In it, subject and object, word and reality, conjoin; the poetry that grows from it embodies and exudes a living and a sacred power. To this very day, Yamato Kotoba, both ancient and yet new in this very instant, both sustains an embedded sensibility and rebirths it with each utterance of *Furuike ya Kawazu tobi komu Mizu no oto*:

The ancient pond  
A frog leaps in  
The sound of the water  
(Ueda, 1982, p. 53)

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