

Rachel
Carson
Center
Perspectives

How to cite:

Kambe, Naoki. "Representing Disaster with Resignation and Nostalgia: Japanese Men's Responses to the 2011 Earthquake." In: "Men and Nature: Hegemonic Masculinities and Environmental Change," edited by Sherilyn MacGregor and Nicole Seymour, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2017, no. 4, 15–22. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7978.

RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society is an open-access publication. It is available online at www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives. Articles may be downloaded, copied, and redistributed free of charge and the text may be reprinted, provided that the author and source are attributed. Please include this cover sheet when redistributing the article.

To learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit www.rachelcarsoncenter.org.

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

© Copyright of the text is held by the Rachel Carson Center.

Image copyright is retained by the individual artists; their permission may be required in case of reproduction.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



Naoki Kambe

Representing Disaster with Resignation and Nostalgia: Japanese Men's Responses to the 2011 Earthquake

On 11 March 2011, Japan was rocked by 9.0-magnitude earthquake that caused a devastating tsunami and the subsequent accidents at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in northeast Japan. On 13 March 2011, Prime Minister Naoto Kan sent a televised message to the nation, stating, "Japan is facing its worst crisis in the 65 years since the war" (McCurry 2011). And when a country faces a crisis, masculinity can often play a key role in public discourse. For example, President George W. Bush and the United States media employed a masculine ideology of strength and dominance in the aftermath of 9/11 (Coe et al. 2007). As gender and sexuality theorist Todd Reeser (2010) writes, "A nation that has suffered . . . may use images of masculinity to revitalize or revitalize itself" (189). In this process, "masculinity and nationalism function as curative panaceas for each other," which, in turn, helps men lessen their "anxiety about being [men]" (189).

This essay explores work by Japanese male intellectuals and writers after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. It is my contention that their writings, interviews, and speeches about the impacts of the disaster on the Japanese landscape, and the nation's response both reflect their gender-specific (masculine) emotions and anxieties and employ ideals that assuage those anxieties. The first ideal is a masculine virtue called *akirame* (resignation), which is about a disengagement of the masculine self. This ideal is connected to *mujō* (impermanence), the ostensibly unique Japanese aesthetic sensibility and perception of nature. The other ideal is nostalgia: a longing for a remote past, a means of escaping from the here and now. Each ideal is different from the other, but both entail an attempt by the masculine self to escape from the crisis of the present. The following sections will discuss how Japanese male intellectuals and writers express these cultural and masculine ideals. In so doing, I make some original—albeit provisional—observations about the connections between masculinity and nation in the Japanese context.

Akirame, Mujō, and Nature

Mujō signifies that “all the phenomena and relationships we experience in our daily lives are bound to disappear with time” (LaFleur 1983, 5). Seiichi Takeuchi (2011) claims that *mujō* has become a unique ethnic worldview of the Japanese, shaped by experiences of various natural disasters as well as by observations that nature changes from season to season and hour to hour. This idea is often expressed symbolically in Japanese literature. For example, since medieval times, references to cherry blossoms, morning glories, foam on the water, and dew—all very short-lived, natural things—have been well-worn devices (Hirano 2012). Seeing nature as impermanent helps lessen anxiety because it involves both disengaging oneself from crisis (e.g., natural disasters), and idealizing nature as an aesthetic object. In other words, thinking of nature’s beauty makes it seem less violent and scary.

These processes are linked to the feeling of *akirame* (resignation). *Akirame* “is traditionally valued primarily as a masculine virtue” because it accompanies “an aesthetic quality of manly grace or being *isagiyoshi*” (Taketomo 1988, 262). Yasuhiko Taketomo writes that *akirame* “can hardly be attained through willpower or suppression alone” but “requires cogent, though unconscious, participation in the processes of denial, isolation of affect, intellectualization, and repression” (263). After the 2011 earthquake, Japanese male intellectuals and writers expressed their feelings of *akirame* toward its disastrous consequences by invoking *mujō*. For example, in an interview entitled “Oime wo wasureta Nihonjin” (The Japanese who forgot their indebtedness), from a collection of interviews entitled *Shinsaigo no kotoba* (Words after the earthquake), religious scholar Tetsuo Yamaori (2012) describes his visit to some disaster-hit areas in Tōhoku one month after the earthquake. He notes that it was like hell, with dead bodies littering the sea, but then adds:

However, at the same time, I found the beauty of nature under a cloudless sky: raging waves were gone and the sea became very calm and looked so beautiful, as if nothing had happened. I thought then that nature in the Japanese islands has an antithetical, double-faced character. One is a face with a terribly destructive force. The other is a face of beauty, as if it is holding our hearts to its bosom. While nature is a threat to us, it is eternally beautiful when it is calm and quiet. For thousands of years, our ancestors have lived in and with this double-faced character of nature. (119–120, my translation)

Here, Yamaori implies that the devastation caused by the natural disaster leads to despair at first, but then the beauty of nature brings *akirame* to him. Moreover, the transitory character of nature captured here—its ability to move from violent to beautiful—constitutes *mujō*.

Writing after the earthquake, novelists such as Natsuki Ikezawa expressed the feeling of *akirame* specifically through references to cherry blossoms. For example, in *Haru wo urandarishinai* (I don't begrudge the spring), he writes:

We often use the term *akirameru* or “to resign.” . . . If something happens which is out of our control, we recognize it as an obvious fact, accept its fate, and abandon any further efforts. [Thus] [we] have become masters of *akirame*. That is why we love cherry blossoms; once the period of blossoming comes, the only thing they can do is to scatter. Although [cherry blossoms] know this destiny, they still show us beautiful blossoms. (2011, 60, my translation)

Ikezawa does not try to describe the beauty of cherry blossoms; rather, he uses cherry blossoms as a metaphor to show *mujō*, or the perishability of nature, as well as the aesthetic and cultural ideal of the Japanese male to be resigned. Similarly, Haruki Murakami's 2011 acceptance speech for the International Catalunya Prize directly referenced the horrors of the earthquake, then turned to a meditation on impermanence and beauty:

The *mujō* perspective that all things must pass away can be understood as a resigned worldview. From such a perspective, even if humans struggle against the natural flow, that effort will be in vain in the end. But even in the midst of such resignation, the Japanese are able to actively discover sources of true beauty. In the case of nature, for example, we take pleasure from cherry blossoms in spring, from the fireflies in summer and from the crimson foliage in autumn. . . . Before our eyes, evanescent cherry blossoms scatter, the fireflies' will-o'-the-wisp vanishes, and the bright autumn leaves are snatched away. . . . Oddly, it brings us a certain peace of mind that the height of beauty passes and fades away. Whether or not that spiritual perspective has been influenced by those natural catastrophes of Japan is beyond my understanding. Nevertheless, we have . . . overcome those catastrophes as a group and it is clear we have carried on in our lives. Perhaps those experiences have influenced our aesthetic sensibility.¹

1 The speech was delivered in Japanese and translated into English by Emanuel Pastreich.

Although people suffer from natural disasters everywhere in the world, Murakami regards the Japanese and their culture as unique in relying on the notion of *mujō*; he also invokes the masculine virtue of *akirame*, finding something positive and beautiful in something as negative and violent as natural disaster.

Nostalgia and Nuclear Energy

Another way that Japanese writers and other public figures assuage masculine anxiety is through nostalgia. Nostalgia, or longing for a remote past, can be seen as a means of escaping from the here and now: “a temporal as well as spatial sense of dislocation” (Nosco 1990, 3). Traditionally in Asian cultures, the idealized condition has been situated in the past (e.g., nostalgia) rather than in the future (e.g., utopia), as has often been characteristic of North American and European thought (Nosco 1990). Dislocating oneself from the present lessens masculine anxiety because “[w]hen one is dissatisfied with one’s immediate situation, it can be a comforting exercise to imagine and construct a more pleasing idealized environment” (Nosco 1990, 4).

While the writers mentioned above expressed their *akirame* toward the earthquake and tsunami, they never showed *akirame* toward the Fukushima nuclear power plant accidents, regarding them as “human-made” disasters as opposed to “natural” disasters. In turn, they expressed their discontent with nuclear energy, blamed relevant authorities, and/or even regarded the Fukushima crisis as a consequence of westernized civilization. In their criticism, they imagined and constructed a more pleasing environment in the past and idealized “the real Japan, uncontaminated by Western, industrial, capitalistic influences” (Moon 1997, 229). For example, Sōkyū Gen’yū (2011) writes:

I believe that one of the reasons such a terrible accident happened [in Fukushima] was that Japanese perception of nature had become westernized. With the development of science and technology, we mistakenly began to believe that nature is something that can/should be conquered. However, our/ the Japanese relationship with nature was not supposed to be like this. (68, my translation)²

2 Gen’yū follows geophysicist and natural scientist Torahiko Terada’s (1935) argument regarding the difference between the Western approach to nature (which is to conquer nature for the sake of civilization) and the unique Japanese attitude to nature (working together with/in nature).

Gen'yū then insists that we go back to working together with/in nature instead of conquering nature for the sake of civilization. Similarly, Ikezawa (2011) calls for a return to nature when he imagines a scene without nuclear power plants:

We live with nature's blessings—sunshine, wind—free of hardship. We no longer live in high buildings . . . We work in offices close to our homes. Our homes have vegetable gardens. Perhaps, there is even a windmill nearby. (97, my translation)

Although Ikezawa imagines a future, the scene above seems to be a nostalgic idealization of village life or rural Japan that is positioned as “symbolically nearer to nature and natural goodness” (Moon 1997, 229).

The idealized past that Murakami imagines in his acceptance speech is different from that of Gen'yū and Ikezawa. He asks why the country would rely on nuclear energy given that “the Japanese people are the only people in history to experience the blast of an atomic bomb” (2011). He poses the following questions:

How could something like this [nuclear crisis] happen? That strong rejection of nuclear technology that we embraced for so many years after the war . . . where did it go? What was it that so completely undermined and distorted the peaceful and prosperous society that previously we had sought for so consistently?

Then he answers: “The cause is simple: ‘efficiency.’ The nuclear reactor is a highly efficient system for generating electricity according to the arguments of the electric power company.” He reminds us: “[A]s we rushed down the path of economic development, we were swayed by that simple standard of ‘efficiency.’ We lost sight of that important alternative course that lay before us.” The idealized pasts that Gen'yū, Ikezawa, and Murakami imagine may not be the same, but they share some important characteristics: the pre-Western, pre-industrialized, pre-capitalist Japanese civilization without nuclear power plants. Longing for this remote past, and in so doing reflecting their critique of nuclear energy, helps lessen masculine anxiety.

It is important to note that none of the intellectuals and writers above expresses their anxiety explicitly. Rather, we can recognize their attempts to escape from the crisis of the present and to assuage masculine anxiety through their reliance on culturally

unique ideals such as *akirame*, *mujō*, and *isagiyoshi* (manly grace), as well as nostalgia. In his discussion of masculinity and the nation, Reeser (2010) admits that “placing the constructs of the nation and masculinity together is . . . a risky proposition since they do not always buttress each other or operate smoothly in parallel” (188–89). More than five years have passed since the 2011 earthquake and, as far as I know, no other Japanese scholars have discussed the connection between nation and masculinity, as I have attempted to do here. However, Reeser adds, if we can find the “analogies and connections” between these two constructs, we will be able to identify “an underlying anxiety about the nation, about masculinity, or both” (189). Indeed, this essay might make for a risky proposal but it also shows the importance of taking that risk.

Further Reading

- Bruun, Ole, and Arne Kalland, eds. 1995. *Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Callicott, J. Baird, and Roger T. Ames, eds. 1989. *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Delhi: Indian Books Centre.
- Coe, Kevin, David Domke, Meridith M. Bagley, Sheryl Cunningham, and Nancy Van Leuven. 2007. "Masculinity as Political Strategy: George W. Bush, the 'War on Terrorism,' and an Echoing Press." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 29 (1): 31–55.
- Dasgupta, Romit. 2013. *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Gen'yū, Sōkyū . 2011. *Mujō to iu chikara* [The power of *mujō*]. Tokyo: Shinchōsha.
- Hirano, Tae. 2012. "Mujōkan no keisei" [The formation of a perspective of *mujō*]. In *Nihon Shisōshi Kōza 2: chūsei* [The Perikan history of Japanese thought 2: The medieval period], edited by Tadashi Karube, Makoto Kurosumi, Hiroo Sato, Fumihiko Sueki, and Yuichiro Tajiri, 183–223. Tokyo: Perikansha.
- Ikezawa, Natsuki. 2011. *Haru wo urandarishinai* [I don't begrudge the spring]. Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.
- Kelly, William W. 1986. "Rationalization and Nostalgia: Cultural Dynamics of New Middle-Class Japan." *American Ethnologist* 13 (4): 603–18.
- LaFleur, William R. 1983. *The Karma of Words*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- McCurry, Justin. 2011. "Japanese Prime Minister Calls for Unity in Country's 'Worst Crisis since the War.'" *The Guardian*, 13 December 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/14/naoto-kan-japan-earthquake-tsunami>.
- Moon, Okpyo. 1997. "Marketing Nature in Rural Japan." In *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Pamela J. Asquith and Arne Kalland, 221–35. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Murakami, Haruki. 2011. "Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer." Translated by Emanuel Pastreich. *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9 (29). <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Murakami-Haruki/3571>.
- Nosco, Peter. 1990. *Remembering Paradise: Nativism and Nostalgia in Eighteenth-Century Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies.

- Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. West Sussex: Wiley–Blackwell.
- Roberson, James E., and Nobue Suzuki, eds. 2003. *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Starrs, Roy, ed. 2014. *When the Tsunami Came to Shore: Culture and Disaster in Japan*. Leiden: Global Oriental.
- Taketomo, Yasuhiko. 1988. “Hiroshima and Denial.” In *Psychoanalysis and the Nuclear Threat: Clinical and Theoretical Studies*, edited by Howard B. Levine, Daniel Jacobs, and Lowell J. Rubin, 259–72. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Takeuchi, Seiichi. 2011. “Shinsai to Nihonjin” [Earthquake and the Japanese], *J-Cast*, 26 March 2011. <http://www.j-cast.com/2011/03/26091260.html>.
- Terada, Torahiko. 1935. *Nihonjin no shizenkan* [Japanese perception of nature]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Yamaori, Tetsuo. 2012. “Oime wo wasureta Nihonjin” [The Japanese who forgot their indebtedness]. In *Shinsaigo no kotoba* [Words after the earthquake], edited by Tadashi Miyagawa, 114–44. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbun Shuppansha.