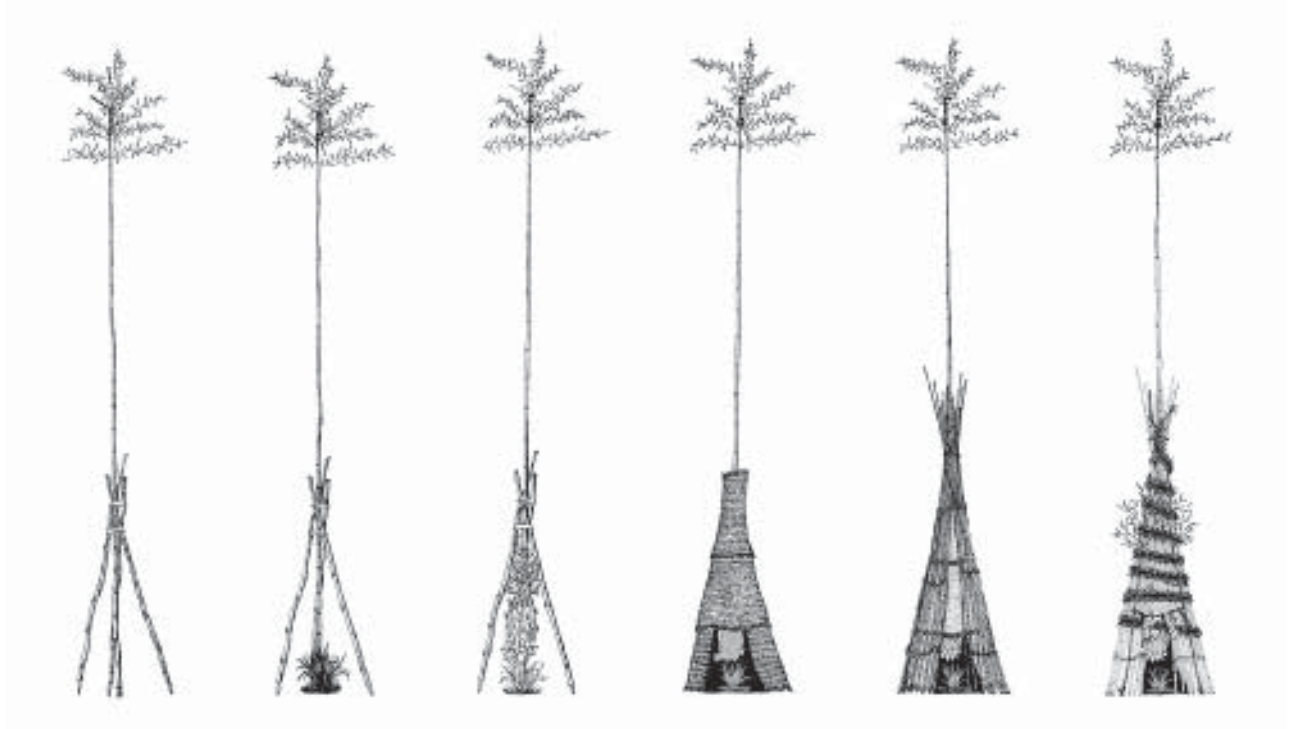


rock flower



transience and renewal in japanese form

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The construction of form, space and place in Japan, whether traditional or modern, is fundamentally and pervasively informed by a sense of transience, of the impermanent quality of life, nature, and human artifacts, known in Japanese as *mujokan*. Witness these examples of Japanese cultural values: the preference for raw and live food over cooked and dead food; the love of ambiguity and the abhorrence of clarity in literature and every-day language; the marked tendency in design and architecture toward the asymmetrical and seasonal rather than the symmetrical and permanent; and in towns and cities the display of dynamic, vital change rather than fixed, aesthetic order. Underlying all these values is a keen Japanese awareness, indeed an indulgence, of the transient.

Transience in Myth



Festive gathering around the temporary deity's visiting place.

The predisposition toward the transient reaches back to the mythic age of Japan. We find it for example in the following little-known tale of the Age of the Gods, recorded in the year 712 in the *Kojiki*, a Japanese cosmogony. The story certainly does not prove that the sense of transience is of any divine origin or inspiration, but instead shows how even the early myths about the first deities of Japan were recorded with that value preexisting them. Here is the legend of the Flower Princess and the Rock Princess:

When the August Offspring of the Sun Goddess, from whom the Japanese emperors derive their descent, came down from the High Plain of Heaven onto Earth, he met a beautiful maiden on his way and asked her who she is. She replied "My name is *ko-no-hana-saku-ya-hime*, Princess-Blossoming-Brilliantly-Like-the-Flowers-of-the-Trees. Asked whether she had any brothers or sisters, she replied, yes, one elder sister, called *iwa-naga-hime*, Princess-Enduring-as-the-Rocks. So, he proposed to her.

Her father was delighted; but he sent both daughters to be married with him. Upon seeing the Rock Princess the August Offspring was very disturbed about her ugliness; he sent her back and kept only the Tree Princess whom he wedded. Upon this, the father, the Great-Mountain-Possessor-Deity felt very ashamed and sent a message back: "My reason for respectfully presenting both my daughters together was that, by sending the Rock-Princess, the August Offspring, though the snow fall and the wind blow, might live eternally unchanging like the enduring rocks, and again by sending the Tree-Princess, they might live flourishingly like unto the flowering of the blossoms of the trees: to insure this, I offered them. But sending back the Rock-Princess, and keeping only the Tree-Princess, the August Offspring of the Heavenly Deity shall be but as frail as the flowers of the trees." So it is for this reason that down to the present day the earthly lives of the Heavenly Sovereigns are not long. (1)

Above and below: Six drawings of the construction of the temporary sacred huts for the 1974 harvest festival in the village of Yoshikawa, Okayama. Erected each year on October 22 in front of the farmhouses of the men who will act as priests for the coming year, the two huts (called *hakke*) are disassembled on October 27 and carried across the fields to a mountain behind the farmhouses, where they are left to decay naturally. A clump of grass at the foot of the central pole of each hut is regarded as the body of the deity (*go-shintai*).

The message – still relevant despite our most recent scientific hopes of discovering and mastering the genes for aging – is that the human being at some remote prehistoric time chose to or was condemned by the gods to be transient, subject to birth and death, rather than to be permanent and live forever.

Transience in Culture

How the love for or the curse of the transient expressed itself in Japanese culture through the centuries is rather complex, but still worth tracing in rough stages.

In *The Tale of Genji* Murasaki Shikibu sums up the basic sentiment of Heian culture, at least for the privileged aristocracy, in the very title of the last volume: *yume no ukidashi*, Floating Bridges of Dreams. With this metaphor, still known and very much alive in the collective awareness of the Japanese, Shikibu compares human life (far more poetically than Buddha before her) to a journey over bridges, passing from one form to the next, from one existence to the next; and these bridges are made of the stuff of dreams.

A few centuries later *The Tale of the Heike*, recounting a tumultuous period of war, similarly captures the prevalent mood of the medieval period. It proclaims: “The Gion Temple bell echoes the evanescence of all. The color of the flowers of the Saraso Tree discloses the law of the fall of the prosperous. The proud last not long, but are like a spring night’s dream. The mighty soon pass just like dust before the wind.”

In the early sixteenth century – the Golden Age of Japan – a new permutation of the sense of transience appears in the cult of tea that was sponsored and developed by wealthy members of the rising merchant class. They flirted with ideas and precepts promulgated by the Zen sect of Buddhism, and focused them on the *so’an*, a grass-



thatched hut, and the *roji* or dewy path leading to it. The tea garden, imitating to an extent the natural setting of a simple mountain retreat, became the new fountainhead and ongoing primary inspiration for every genre of Japanese high culture. In intent and imagery the tea cult and its setting do not allude to an escape to something permanent or a yearning for a static Pure Land, but emphatically speak the language of the natural, the seasonal and the transient.

In the Edo Period the cultural dynamism shifts to literature, the visual arts, and theatre, which take their themes from the *ukiyo*, the Floating World of the mainly decadent, frivolous pleasure districts in the flourishing cities. At this time also starts a shift of interest away from the individual painting, the unique work of art, towards the mass medium of the reproducible woodcut print, a first type of consumer art and throwaway culture. The woodcut *ukiyo-e*, Pictures of the Floating World, mainly portray celebrities, actors and courtesans, and sightseeing spots, both plainly subject to the changing whims of fashion and taste.

This love of the transient is not restricted to some religious sentiment or cultural pastimes; it pervades the utilitarian and materialistic aspects of Japan, too, notably architecture and the building of urban environments. Up to the adoption of European materials and building styles in the mid-nineteenth century there was not a single brick or stone structure worth mentioning (excepting the walls of castle. To allege incompetence at stone-masonry or brick making, or to point to the constant threat of earthquakes is no longer acceptable given current historical knowledge. It has clearly been a cultural choice of the Japanese to make dwellings from living rather than dead materials, from trees rather than stones, and to rely on structures which because of their impermanent materials will have to be replaced every 50 to 100 years. Even the massive fires that often engulfed the urban areas were not sufficient to alter the uniform preference for wooden townhouses. Meanwhile, stone was expertly used and appreciated through the centuries in formal gardens (2).



The awareness of impermanence, both as slow natural decay and sudden disaster, remains deeply impressed in the collective mind of the Japanese, for today the true value of a piece of urban property lies in the ground only. Virtually any building has a value of zero after about three years, even if it is made of reinforced concrete. This sense of value has clearly shaped the structure and economy of the Japanese city, as well as the aesthetics.

The Flower or the Rock

The history of human constructions in general, especially constructions symbolizing the sacred for a particular society, shows just two fundamental patterns for representing the sacred through an act of building. The two alternatives are prefigured by the above anecdote from the *Kojiki*.

The Way of the Rock: The tradition of the pyramid, the Greco-Roman temple, the cathedral. Here the community cuts and forces the most permanent materials the earth has to offer at a given time and place, into an ideal and often colossal form. It serves as an idol, an image of the eternal, relatively timeless and constant as opposed to human vulnerability and impermanence. Time, the root of transience, is defeated by the seeming timelessness of the material, such as the stone, iron, or concrete and the idealistic geometry and symmetry of the sacred artifact.

The Way of the Flower: The tradition of the bundle of grass or bunch of flowers. Here time doesn't even get a chance to leave its imprint on the sacred image, because the constructors destroy it shortly after its completion and ritual use. The materials are grass, flowers, straw or reeds, the most impermanent materials available at each time and place. By nature they are obtainable only at certain times of the year, which makes the appearance of the artifact a part of the seasonal



rhythm. A sacred and often secret oral tradition watches over the correctness of form and manipulation. Through the trick of ritual renewal at fixed intervals, the sacred is momentarily revealed to the human eye. (3)

Without insisting on a confrontational interpretation of East and West, there is a rough correspondence between those two cultural spheres and the two types of sacred form. The philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro, saw the two approaches as integral cultural responses to the climates of desert and monsoon. (4). Modern scientific thinking may reduce them to a relative unity, for even the “permanent” is ultimately transient; the flower and the rock simply have different life cycles. Ultimately there is a bit of flower in the rock, and a bit of rock in the flower. Yet the difference is clear enough, as is the enduring Japanese preference for the Way of the Flower.

Rites of Renewal

The sacred artifacts of Shinto can be related to two different systems of belief existing in Japan since prehistoric times side-by-side:

One belief holds the myriad Shinto deities or *kami* live in the mountains, the heavens, or beyond the sea, and can be called down by man to be celebrated at a place and time of his choosing. A sacred artifact, a *yorishiro*, is constructed as the temporary visiting place; then after an offering is presented and a ritual address is recited, the artifact is destroyed, usually by immersion into the sea or by burning, and thus the deity is sent back. In essence this is the structure of any Shinto ritual, from a five-minute private rite to the month-long Gion Matsuri of Kyoto. The latter involves huge decorated floats that are believed to be temporary dwelling places of *kami*.

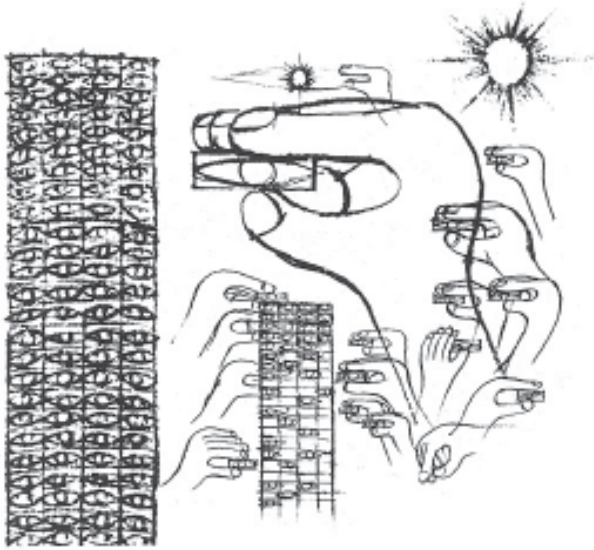


The highest rite of the Shinto canon, the *daijosai* ceremony for the enthronement of the Emperor, is the finest extant example of this type of rite of renewal. It involves the construction of two ancient palaces in the form of two primeval huts with dozens of smaller ancillary structures, all for the ritual use on a single night before being destroyed the next day.

The other belief holds that the *kami* live in manmade artifacts, which originally were built of impermanent materials such as straw, reeds or bamboo and thus had to be renewed at fixed intervals. The renewal was usually performed in the autumn, when the new materials were harvested. A new artifact was constructed just beside the old one, which served as a model, and after the deity was magically transferred the old artifact was discarded. The practice is still widespread in the countryside, where house or estate deities (*yashiki-gami*) are often housed in very simple forms representing huts, mountains or pillars, and are renewed at harvest time. It should not be overlooked, however, that originally no building, no deity hall was necessary for Shinto rites; relatively permanent deity halls started to be built in the sixth century, no doubt as a result of competition with the newly imported, temple-centered religion of Buddhism.

The *shikinen-sengu*, the periodic replacement of the main building of the Inner Shrine at Ise, is the grandest example of this type of renewal in terms of size, importance and expense. Alternating between two adjacent sites every 20 years (originally 21), the shrine to the imperial ancestors is always present to the eye of the worshipper. The period of construction, that is the length of the festival of renewal at Ise, is eight years. (5)

It is because of their short lifespan that most of the sacred artifacts of Shinto – ranging in scale from a bunch of flowers to a palace complex – have tended to escape the attention of archaeologists or architectural historians, although there is no doubt that most of the forms of Shinto's sacred artifacts are older than the



Graphic design from the early 1960s by K. Awazu presenting the Metabolist concept of change in housing. High-rise mega-structures support myriad apartment capsules which are modified and replaced according to their own life cycles and the social cycles of demand and fashion.

recorded history of Japan. The lack of anthropomorphic deity images in Shinto (in contrast to Buddhism) also delayed the study objects sacred to Shinto. Shinto research also suffered from a widespread misconception among Western scholars that Shinto is a form of animism, that is, a belief that any object is endowed with consciousness, or simply nature worship, that is, unusual natural phenomena by themselves, such as a rock or waterfall or mountain, are believed by Shinto to be imbued with a numinous quality. To me now, Shinto's rites of renewal show a fossilized form of Shamanism, or in modern terms, a therapy to revitalize and heal the depleted energy of human individuals, groups or needed objects.

The Transient City

As Japan rebuilt her devastated cities after 1945 and launched the high-growth economy, the sense of transience resurfaced on a gigantic scale and in a completely secular mode. The Japanese city of today is largely a haphazard, interchangeable mosaic of postage-stamp land parcels that seem rather messy from the viewpoint of classical aesthetics. Yet it is hygienic, efficient and very adaptable to rapid change, and hence an important underpinning of the world's second-largest economy. The Western concept of the City Beautiful or even an Urbs Eterna, centered on the civic square with splendid and hardly changing public institutions, has as its counterpart in Japan the City Vital, flexible and energetic with constant easy access to entertainment and information. While the masses indeed sleep in "rabbit hutches" they work and play in cities that have no equal anywhere for liveliness, visual complexity and social dynamics.

The new Japanese urbanism found its purest theoretical expression in the daring ideas of the Metabolists, a group of young architects, designers and urban planners working in Tokyo in the 1960s. Applying the principles of metabolism and

metamorphosis as discovered in the organic world, they reconceived the city as a huge kit of infrastructures and element-structures passing through interrelated cycles of growth, decay, renewal and change. (6) Though internationally celebrated, they realized very little of their dreams because of – as we can see now – the super-scaled and autocratic character of their proposals. Ironically, most of their ideas eventually came about in the succeeding vernacular urban architecture of Japan, without the Metabolists' direct influence and despite the mostly monumental structures they themselves later designed and built.

The Wheel of Life

In religious and intellectual life, the indigenous Shinto appreciation of the transience and renewal in nature was quite sympathetic to the imported Buddhist doctrine of the transience of the human body and mind. The ideas of natural and psychosomatic transience complemented and reinforced each other. By the Heian period, which produced the Buddhistic metaphor of the Floating Bridges of Dreams, the Japanese outlook was steeped in *mujokan*, a deep feeling for the transience and evanescence of all sentient life and thus the vanity of all earthly desires. Interestingly, no religion has produced a greater quantity of "permanent" religious idols, in the form of paintings and sculptures, than Buddhism. Shinto has produced none.

The best graphic expression of the awareness of transience is the Wheel of Life, a Buddhist image from the Hindu tradition. The wheel portrays what is known in Japan as the six paths (*roku-do*) through which all lives reincarnate for repeated temporary transits on the long journey to the ultimate release from form. Originally, neither Shinto with its system of cyclical renewal in nature, nor Buddhism with its system of reincarnation and the ultimate release of all complex form, speaks of

The Buddhist Wheel of Life or Wheel of Time divides all conceivable sentient life into six realms: hell, animals, hungry ghosts, demons, humans, and heavenly beings. The wheel is held in the claws and mouth of a monster representing death, that is, impermanence. It illustrates the belief that all possible forms of animate existence, even heavenly deities, are only temporary in character. The motor for this ride, which carries all beings through many incarnations at various levels, is portrayed around the hub as a cock, hog and snake, symbolizing greed, anger and lust respectively. Significantly in this Buddhist model the six stages are not represented by a ladder, but by a wheel with six subdivisions indicating that salvation is found not in the transport to a relatively more fortunate form of existence, - climbing the ladder up to heaven as it were -, but in release from the entire cycle of embodiment since all stages are always temporary.





any entity such as a soul or God that is above this law and would survive. Yet the priests of Japan, as in religions everywhere, sell the belief that it is only the body that is subject to decay while the soul is eternal.

Over the past few decades I have asked many groups of students in the United States, What is the opposite of death? Life, they answer. Only once did someone raise his hand and say, Birth. I asked him to stand up. He was a native of an East Asian country. Although he happened to have received a different cultural hypnosis, his mechanical answer was proof that he was just as deeply asleep as all the others.

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