Why a constant dialogue with culture is what is missing in sustainability: JAPAN

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A sequence on cultural approaches: The JAPAN - Edition

Have you ever heard of the term “Mottainai”? Mottainai in Japanese means, “too good to waste”. For me, and all other Japanese people, this ordinary word expresses regret to waste in daily life. My Japanese father always reminded me to eat every single rice grain in the bowl, to turn off the light, or to treat my belongings with care, by using Mottainai. The origin of the term can be found in Shintō beliefs, in which every creation, natural or man-made, has its own spirit. Only later, growing up, I realised that this word and its use is not present in every language or culture.

This story carries on a previously published article by Celine Semaan: “Understanding Sustainability as a Culture”. This sequence is meant to serve as an encouragement to any culture to realise and cherish their version of sustainability, deeply rooted in heritage philosophies, values and aesthetics.

Sustainability is strongly Western-dominated but has been treated as a holy concept, in which there is one right way of approach. However, reality looks different. Sustainability is not an external concept which can be added on to any society, environment and economy, but its meaning is rather identified by culture. As culture defines the relationship between humans and nature, it determines a society’s worldview and all behaviours reflected in norms, beliefs, values and aesthetics. We have to start realising that a word or concept such as “Sustainability” is culturally determined in its origin and approaches.

Let’s take a look at Japan. It is often considered as somehow Western, but also somehow not. This sequence of articles starts by looking into a culture, which has constantly been adapting to the West, trying to keep up with its developments, but at the same time managing to sustain its unique identity. Yes, Japan has a nature, highly developed economy, therefore, belongs to the privileged countries and might be often considered as one of the Western nations. However, its cultural core is full of potential to inspire the current sustainability discourse, significantly different from the Western concept. Japan was traditionally an incredibly sustainable society, managing to develop a peaceful but high-quality culture in harmony with nature. The focus shifted to economic growth and material prosperity after the westernisation and modernisation during the Meiji Era (1868-1912). Ironically, sustainability was introduced as a relatively new concept by the West around a century later, because defects of the capitalistic system were understood. Now, Western society is full of potential to inspire the current sustainability discourse, significantly different from the Western approach on life, where the society is based on the circulation philosophy, where resources are accepted, respect, and love the uncertainty of nature. The Japanese-style view on nature is, therefore characterised by the acceptance of nature in every form and the position of humans as part of nature, not controlling it. Shintōism and Zen Buddhist beliefs resulted in an attitude full of respect, harmony as the main goal. Being an island nation with closed borders for a very long period, resource limitation was nothing new to the Japanese. This naturally led to a sustainable approach on life, where the society is based on the circulation philosophy, where resources are treated with care, and the “Self” or Ego always remains in the background.

In aesthetics, the fundamental philosophies include an appreciation of the natural form, plainness, unadorned, and the quality in simplicity, but always with a high degree of detail. These cultural values and aesthetics are still lived out by Japanese creators in contemporary fashion, design, or architecture. The Japanese aesthetics embody cultural traits which naturally set the tone on how to behave as a human towards your entire environment. For example, the cultural value of self-restraint results in the philosophy of acceptance over appetite. But rather than restricting a certain level of lifestyle, in modern Japan, it drives the innovation of intelligently thought through, durable designs. The aesthetic concept of subtraction results in seeing quality in simplicity. Japan’s tradition of limited resources and the belief that every creature has a spirit, led to a respectful attitude towards the product, as well as the appreciation of traditional techniques of repairment.

The sustainable movement in fashion has become a rat race, standardising approaches and categorising who is “leading” and who is “behind”, who is doing “good” and who is “bad”. I believe, the crucial issue here is: why is the Ego so dominant? The sustainability movement in fashion is still controlled by the Ego, reflected in the development of sustainability as a status symbol with the rise of the conscious elite, the extreme occurrence of buzzwords, and its current use even as a trendy graphic design element on the garments. What counters this Ego, is the Japanese culture itself.

Actually, the concept of sustainability was even non-existent in Japan, before it was introduced by Western society. Frankly, there were no words such as eco, ethical or recycling in the Japanese language. Nonetheless, in Pre-Modern times, Japan already developed a working system marked by reuse, repair and recycling of all possible resources and products. When you look at the traditional Kimono, its pattern is cut straight to avoid waste, and a kimono got handed from one to another, until used for children, as floorcloth, and even in the form of ashes. The Japanese wisdom of sustainability is rooted in traditional culture. The foundation of this culture was built on Japan’s climate. Being in constant confrontation with catastrophes, the Japanese learned to accept, respect, and love the uncertainty of nature. The Japanese-style view on nature is, therefore characterised by the acceptance of nature in every form and the position of humans as part of nature, not controlling it. Shintōism and Zen Buddhist beliefs resulted in an attitude full of respect, harmony as the main goal. Being an island nation with closed borders for a very long period, resource limitation was nothing new to the Japanese. This naturally led to a sustainable approach on life, where the society is based on the circulation philosophy, where resources are treated with care, and the “Self” or Ego always remains in the background.

You can see how the Japanese culture influences the origin, meaning and approaches on sustainable creation or design. Very Japanese is also that shouting out how “good” you are doing, go against their sense of beauty. Therefore, one key characteristic of the current sustainability movement in fashion does not go hand in hand with the Japanese culture. Sustainability in Japanese culture is embodied and lived out through aesthetics, and the rather philosophical approaches are difficult to express using Western logic. From Japan, one can learn that a more harmonious and egoless approach without even using the word “sustainability” is possible.

The current narrative around sustainability in fashion is a one-sided view, although culture is an endogenous variable influencing the concept. It is time to encourage critical discussions about the influence of culture on sustainability. Otherwise, sustainability will remain a Western-dominated ideology which will disappear in a temporary movement. In order to reach a mutual understanding of sustainability across the industry, a constant dialogue with culture is needed.