No Word for Nature.

10,000 Japanese concepts of nature.

This essay took shape after a creative research residency in Japan (2024–2025), related to the idiosyncratic Japanese naturalist, ethnologist, and folklorist Kumagusu Minakata (1867–1941). The residency took place in Kii Tanabe, Wakayama, at the foot of the ancient pilgrimage route Kumano Kodo, where Minakata lived and worked, and where the Kumagusu Minakata Museum and archives are located today.

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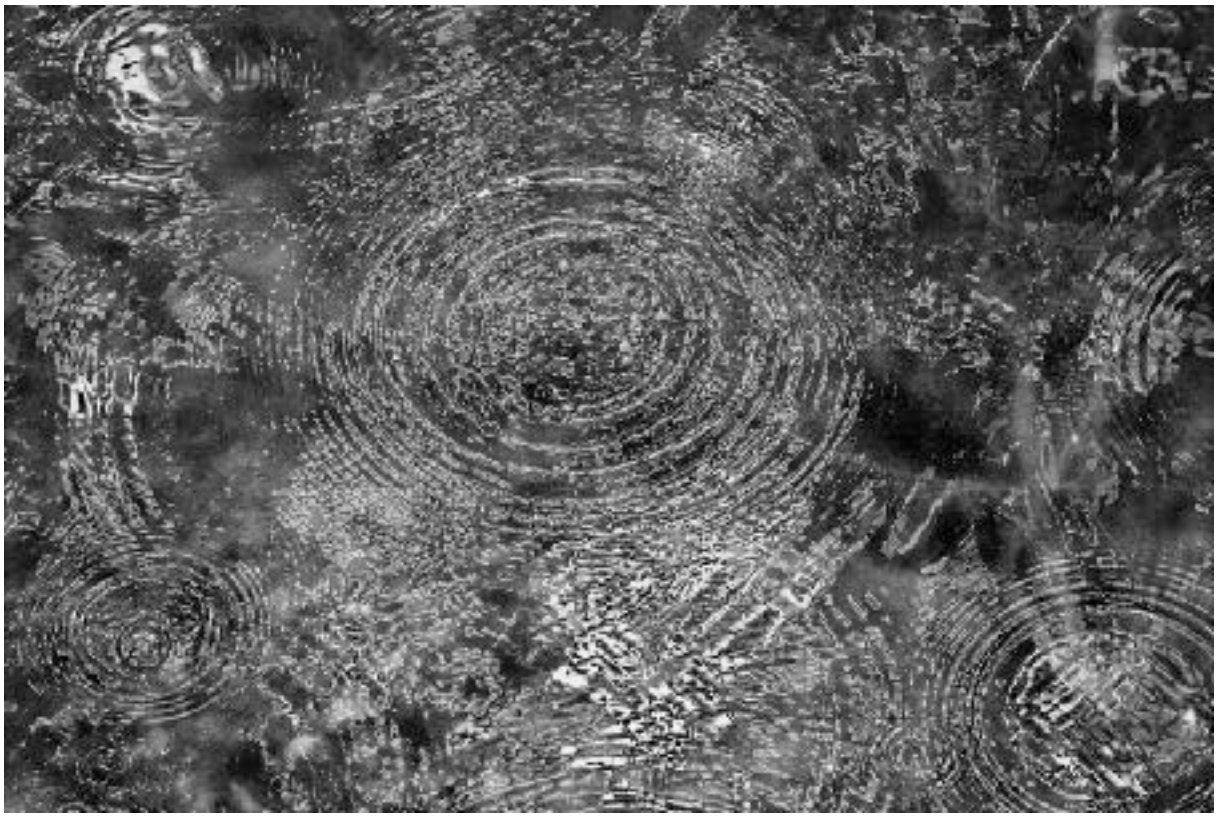

No Word for Nature

It is tempting to think that wherever there are mountains, trees, animals, air, and water, there is also “nature.” But “nature” did not exist in Japan before 1890. Japanese landscapes, mountains and plants, animals, ancient forests, oceans, and skies were part of another reality, another experience, another ontology, another relational network—in short: something other than what is conceived by the Western word “nature.” Therefore, Japan had no word for ‘nature’.

Instead, there existed a deeply rooted diversity and richness of expressions of nature-concepts, based on cultural and spiritual knowledge systems that in large part persist to this day. In these perspectives, nature exists as a living network of reciprocal relationships between human, culture, and environment, forming an animated natural reality in which beauty, poetry, ethics, aesthetics, people, rituals, kami (gods), seasons and harvest, appearance and transience constitute one dynamic whole.

Only after 1870 did the Western concept of nature take root in Japan. The word shizen 自然 (self-so, spontaneously, self-arising) then acquired the meaning of “nature” in the Western sense. The addition of kai (界 = specific domains, boundaries, or demarcations) to shizen created the term shizen-kai 自然界 and made the new definition of nature explicit. With it, a new ontology also entered: nature as a domain, and the human as the subject set against it.

This Western version of nature developed in Japan like an invasive species; it displaced local, diversified, relational, cultural, social, spiritual, and aesthetic conceptions of nature. The adoption of this concept of nature by the Japanese Meiji regime (1868–1912), together with its attached ontology, formed a key precondition for the ideological and technological development that enabled the regime’s nationalist, colonial, and industrial megaprojects: “the construction of the Meiji nation-state” (Meiji kokka no kensetsu, 明治国家の建設), which resulted in the greatest ecological devastations of modern Japanese history.

Kumagusu Minakata (1867–1941), Japan’s first ecological activist, legendary naturalist and polymath, and one of the first great biologists of Japan, left behind thousands of writings and publications on nature, yet he consciously avoided using the modernized word shizen 自然. Instead, he employed the rich array of terms expressing concepts of nature that articulated human, culture, and nature as interwoven parts of one living network of relationships.

The immense wealth of concepts of nature in Japan, rooted in cultural, Buddhist, and Shinto knowledge systems, opens a window onto a parallel universe with its own laws of nature. It offers an alternative to the dominant, dead-ended industrial-capitalist and dualistic ecology, ready to be entered and further shaped.

10.000 Japanese nature concepts (partial)

- Cosmic Nature.
- Aesthetic and poetic nature.
- Nature as Spontaneous Order or State of Being.
- Vital Force and Inner Nature.
- Socio-Cultural Nature.
- Spiritual Nature.
- Regional & Folk Nature.
- Modern Nature (post 1890).

The point of a relational understanding of the universe is to perceive… through dynamic, interdependent relationships… without rigid classifications or fixed categories. Ordering Japanese nature concepts—rooted in a relational system of knowledge and perception—into an ontological structure imposes a static form on what is actually fluid and interconnected. One could say this goes against the point of this essay.

But I would argue that it works as an interface between Japanese cosmology and the Western perspective: a temporary form on / of / in ‘気’ (Ki / Chi – vital force); a handrail for

the (Western) reader. The ontological structure does not capture nature itself, but offers a way in, helping the reader navigate a worldview that is otherwise relational and ever-shifting.

Cosmic Nature

- 万物 (banbutsu) – Literally means “ten thousand things” and can be translated as “all things” or “all beings. A holistic term from Chinese philosophy, it emphasizes the totality of things that exist in the universe — material objects, living beings, and natural entities.

• 自然 (shizen) – “Self-So” / Spontaneous Order
From the Chinese zìrán: the natural, unforced unfolding of the world. In modern Japanese (after 1870), also used to mean the physical world as distinct from culture, and as an object of scientific study.

• 天地 (tenchi) – Heaven and Earth
A cosmic polarity representing the totality of the universe; frequently invoked in Shinto ritual language, classical literature, and poetry.

• 天地万物 (tenchi banbutsu) – Heaven, Earth, and All Beings
All things, concrete and diverse.

• 天地万象 (tenchi banshō) – Heaven, Earth, and All Phenomena All phenomena, appearances, transformations, dynamic reality. (banshō = “how things appear or manifest, banbutsu = “things themselves”)

• 森羅万象 (shinra banshō) – All Things in the Universe
The whole of creation: 森羅 (shinra) - woven forest - metaphorically representing the entire network of things, and 万象 (banshō) - all phenomena.

• 乾坤 (kenkon) – Heaven and Earth as a Cosmic Unity
A Confucian and Daoist concept of heaven and earth as a single harmonious whole; often used in philosophical texts and poetry.

• 陰陽 (in’yō) – Yin and Yang
The cosmic principle of complementary opposites, dynamic balance, and cyclical transformation.

• 天然 (tennen) – “Heaven-Given” / Innate
The spontaneous or inherent state granted by heaven or nature.

• 天地四方 (tenchi shihō) – Heaven, Earth, and the Four Directions
An expression in classical cosmology denoting the entirety of spatial existence.

• 日月 (nichigetsu) – Sun and Moon

A symbolic pairing representing light, time, and the cycles of nature.

• 六合 (rikugō) – The Six Directions
A cosmic concept encompassing north, south, east, west, above, and below — the totality of the universe.

• 天地四時 (tenchi shiji) – Heaven, Earth, and the Four Seasons
A classical association of cosmic order with the passage of time.

Aesthetic and poetic nature

• 星辰 (seishin) – Stars and Celestial Bodies
A poetic term for the night sky and its heavenly bodies.

• 山川 (sansen / sengawa) – Mountains and Rivers
An aesthetic term for landscapes, especially in waka and haiku poetry.

• 山河 (sanga) – Mountains and Rivers.
A literary variant of 山川, frequently found in Chinese poetry and classical prose.

• 山野 (sanya) – Mountains and Fields
Often appears in poetry (waka, haiku, kanshi) as a poetic compound for “the great outdoors,” “the wilderness,” or “the countryside.” It evokes an aesthetic space of grasses, blossoms, and seasonal beauty.

• 乾坤一擲 (kenkon itteki) – Heaven and Earth in a Single Throw
A metaphor for staking everything on one decisive act or moment of fate.

• 風花雪月 (fūka setsugetsu) – Wind, Flowers, Snow, and Moon
A poetic enumeration of natural elements celebrated for their beauty.

• 風物 (fūbutsu) – “Things of Wind and Season”
Refers to distinctive seasonal natural or cultural phenomena characteristic of a place or time; an important concept in haiku and seasonal calendars.

• 風月 (fugetsu) – Wind and Moon
A metaphor for transient beauty, often associated with Zen aesthetics.

• 花鳥風月 (kachō fūgetsu) – Flowers, Birds, Wind, and Moon
A poetic encapsulation of the aesthetic experience of nature, enjoying its beauty in every season.

• 山水 (sansui) – Mountains and Water

In East Asian art and poetry, refers to the harmonious interplay of landscape elements; a central theme in sansui-ga (landscape painting) and garden design.

• 山海 (sankai) – Mountains and Seas
Used in poetic, literary, and religious contexts, to describe the natural abundance or vast expanse of a region's geography.

• 四季 (shiki) – The Four Seasons
A structuring principle for experiencing and representing nature in poetry, painting, and ritual.

• 造化の妙 (zōka no myō) – The Subtle Wonders of Creation
Refers to the mysterious and sublime beauty and harmony inherent in the creative forces of nature.

• 千変万化 (senpen banka) – A Thousand Changes, Ten Thousand Transformations
An idiom expressing the infinite variety and constant transformation of nature and phenomena.

• 天地開闢 (tenchi kaibyaku) – The Opening of Heaven and Earth
The Japanese creation myth in which the cosmos emerges from primordial chaos.

• 四海 (shikai) – The Four Seas
Used in classical Chinese and Japanese literature to evoke universality, vastness, and the interconnectedness of all lands and peoples.

• 日月星辰 (jitsugatsu seishin) – Sun, Moon, and Stars
A poetic term encompassing all celestial bodies.

• 春花秋月 (shunka shūgetsu) – Spring Flowers and Autumn Moon
A juxtaposition of seasonal beauty, evoking contrast and balance.
• 山紫水明 (sanshi suimei) – Mountains in Purple Light and Clear Waters
A description of exceptionally picturesque scenery.

• 四時風光 (shiji fūkō) – Seasonal Light and Scenery
A poetic expression for the shifting qualities of light and landscape through the seasons.

• 秋風落葉 (shūfū rakuyō) – Autumn Wind and Falling Leaves
A seasonal image symbolizing impermanence and decline.

• 春霞 (harugasumi) – Spring Haze
A poetic motif for the soft, misty light of early spring.

• 朝露 (asatsuyu) – Morning Dew
A metaphor for transient beauty and the brevity of life.

• 花吹雪 (hanafubuki) – Flower Blizzard

A flurry of falling petals, likened to snowflakes.

• 物の哀れ (mono no aware) – The Pathos of Things
An awareness of the impermanence of all things, tinged with gentle sadness.

• 幽玄 (yūgen) – Mysterious, Profound Beauty
An aesthetic of subtle, ineffable elegance in nature and art.

• 風流 (fūryū) – "Wind and Flow"
A refined and cultivated sensibility attuned to nature, the seasons, poetry, art, dance, and ritual.

• 侘寂 (wabi-sabi) – Simplicity and Impermanence
An aesthetic appreciation of imperfection, transience, and rustic beauty.

• 寂 (jaku) – Inner Quietude
A Zen aesthetic of tranquility, stillness, and calm presence.

• 清明 (seimei) – Clarity and Purity
A fresh, luminous state of nature; also a traditional spring festival.

• 花鳥 (kachō) – Flowers and Birds
A poetic pairing symbolizing fleeting natural beauty.

• 風姿 (fūshi) – Natural Bearing or Appearance
An unforced, harmonious form or demeanor.

• 花鳥虫魚 (kachō chūgyo) – Flowers, Birds, Insects, and Fish
A classical enumeration celebrating the diversity of living things.

• 春花秋月 (shunka shūgetsu) – Spring Flowers and Autumn Moon
A contrast of seasonal beauty, evoking balance and harmony.

• 山紫水明 (sanshi suimei) – Mountains in Purple Light and Clear Waters
A description of exquisitely picturesque scenery.

• 四時折々 (shiji oriori) – Each Season in Its Time
A classical expression of sensitivity to the changing seasons.

Nature as Spontaneous Order or State of Being

• 自在 (jizai) – Unhindered / Free and Natural
An unforced, original state of existence; the ability to act or be without constraint.

• 本性 (honshō) – True Nature

The inherent essence or fundamental character of a person or thing.

• 天工 (tenkō) – Heavenly Craftsmanship
In Confucian thought, the creative artistry of nature as aligned with cosmic order.

• 天運 (ten'un) – Heavenly Fate
The unfolding of events in accordance with celestial or cosmic will.

• 自然 (jinen) – Spontaneity / "Self-So"
A Buddhist-Daoist concept of nature as an uncontrived, spontaneous mode of being.

• 無為自然 (mui shizen) – Non-Action and Naturalness
A central Daoist principle of effortless action in harmony with the natural way.

• 天地自然 (tenchi shizen) – Heaven, Earth, and Spontaneous Order
The integration of cosmic polarity with the self-ordering principle of nature.

• 造化 (zōka) – Creative Power of Nature
A Daoist-Buddhist term for the generative, transformative forces of the natural world.

• 天真 (tenshin) – Heavenly Sincerity / Natural Purity
An innocent, unpretentious state of authenticity and purity.

• 天理 (tenri) – Heavenly / Natural Law
The universal moral or cosmic order.

• 自然法爾 (shizen hōni) – "Self-So, As It Ought to Be"
A Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist term from Shinran, denoting the natural unfolding of reality in accordance with its true nature.

Vital Force and Inner Nature

• 命 (inochi) – Life
The existential and spiritual essence of being alive.

• 精神 (seishin) – Mind / Spirit / Soul
The immaterial life force and consciousness; the mental and spiritual dimension of existence.

• 生命 (seimei) – Life / Vital Force
A concept encompassing both biological life and spiritual vitality.

• 血脈 (ketsumyaku) – Bloodline / Lifeblood
Symbol of vitality, lineage, and continuity.

• 活力 (katsuryoku) – Vitality / Life Energy

Active physical and mental energy.

• 気 (ki) – Vital Energy
The universal breath or life force permeating all living things; central in East Asian thought.

• 性 (sei) – Entity / Essence
The essential character or innate quality of a being or thing.

• 元気 (genki) – Original Energy / Vital Spirit
The vital force that sustains life; in modern Japanese also meaning health, vigor, or cheerfulness.

• 根源 (kongen) – Origin / Source
The fundamental origin from which all things arise.

Sōmoku (草木) = vegetation as a bearer of vital energy and spiritual potential.
It embodies the idea that even the most ordinary blade of grass or the simplest tree partakes in the universal life force.

• 精気 (seiki) – Vital Spirit / Life Essence
The animating spiritual energy of living beings.

• 呼吸 (kokyū) – Breath / Breathing
The source of life and energy; in Zen and martial arts, a practice of focus and balance.

• 栄養 (eiyō) – Nourishment / Nutrition
The sustenance and source of growth for life.

• 循環 (junkan) – Circulation / Cycle
The cyclical movement of energy, matter, or seasons.

• 脈動 (myakudō) – Pulse / Pulsation
The rhythmic beating of life and nature.

Socio-Cultural Nature

• 入会林 / 入会地 (iriai-rin / iriai-chi) – Common-Use Forest / Land
Traditional village-managed forests and lands for harvesting timber, thatch, game, and other shared resources.

• 里山 (satoyama) – Village–Mountain Zone
A semi-natural cultural landscape between settlement and mountain, where farmland, forest, and nature are managed in balance.

• 月見 (tsukimi) – Moon Viewing
A seasonal community gathering for admiring the full moon in autumn.

• 花見 (hanami) – Blossom Viewing
A spring festival where communities gather beneath blooming cherry trees.

• 雪見 (yukimi) – Snow Viewing
A winter custom of appreciating snow-covered gardens and landscapes.

• 里海 (satoumi) – “Village Sea”
A coastal zone under community management by fishers, with sustainable use of marine and shoreline resources.

• 裏山 (urayama) – “Back Mountain” of a Village
Villagers maintain a reciprocal relationship with the urayama: taking resources, but also conserving it for sustainable use. In folklore and religion, the urayama could be inhabited by spirits, foxes, or kami, acting as a threshold between human society and the otherworld. It contrasts with okuyama (奥山, “deep mountain”), which signified remote, untouched, often sacred wilderness.

• 入浜権 (irihama-ken) – Intertidal Harvesting Rights
Traditional collective rights to gather seaweed, shellfish, and other marine resources in tidal zones.

• 山野 (sanno) – Common Mountain and Grassland
Areas for gathering thatch, firewood, and wild plants, often shared among villagers.

• 野良 (nora) – Uncultivated Field
Open grassland or farmland held in common use.

• 村山 (murayama) – Village Mountain
A forest or mountain area collectively managed for timber, hunting, and other resources.

• 漁場 (gyoba) – Fishing Grounds
Sea or river areas in collective use by fishing communities.

• 御林 (ohayashi) – Protected Forest
A forest owned or managed by a local authority, temple, or shrine, with a designated protective status.

• 保安林 (hoanrin) – Legally Protected Forest
A forest designated for protection against erosion, flooding, or other environmental hazards.

Spiritual Nature

• 神山 (kamiyama) – Sacred Mountain
A mountain regarded as the dwelling place of deities.

• 奥山 (okuyama) - literally “deep/remote mountain,”
The wilderness far from human settlement. In poetry, religion, and folklore it symbolizes solitude, mystery, and the sacred realm of untouched nature.

奥 (oku) = inner, deep, remote, interior. 山 (yama) = mountain.
A symbolic and sacred realm of depth, retreat, and otherworldly presence.

• 神海 (kamikai) – Sacred Sea
A body of water imbued with mythic or religious significance.

• 神泉 (shinsen) – Sacred Spring
A natural water source with a sacred character.

• 龍神 (ryūjin) – Dragon God
Mythical guardian deity of water, seas, and rain.

• 神風 (kamikaze) – Divine Wind
A historical and spiritual symbol of divine protection.

• 鎮守の森 (chinju no mori) – Sacred Shrine Forest
A grove surrounding a Shinto shrine, serving both ritual and ecological functions.

• 御神木 (goshinboku) – Sacred Tree
A tree believed to house the spirit of a deity (kami).

• 神域 (shin’iki) – Sacred Natural Area
The protected precinct around a shrine or temple, often with preserved ecology.

• 八百万の神 (yaoyorozu no kami) – The Eight Million Kami
A term signifying the countless deities that inhabit and animate the natural world.

• 山の神 (yama no kami) – Mountain Deity
A protective spirit of mountains, agriculture, hunting, and seasonal cycles.

• 田の神 (ta no kami) – Rice Field Deity
A guardian of harvests and fertility.

• 磐座 (iwakura) – Sacred Rock
A natural stone formation serving as the seat of a kami.

• 御神水 (goshinsui) – Sacred Water

Spring or river water with ritual and spiritual significance.

• 神木林 (shinboku-bayashi) – Sacred Grove
A stand of trees surrounding a shrine, revered as sacred.

• 八百万神境 (yaoyorozu shinkyō) – Realm of the Myriad Kami
The mythic dimension of nature inhabited by countless deities.

• 霊界 (reikai) – Spirit World
The unseen realm of spirits, ancestors, and deities.

• 神楽 (kagura) – Sacred Dance and Music
A Shinto ritual performance honoring the kami, often tied to seasonal festivals.

• 雨乞い (amagoi) – Rain Prayer
A ritual to invoke rain during times of drought.

• 火祭り (hi matsuri) – Fire Festival
A purification rite using fire.

• 水祭り (mizu matsuri) – Water Festival
A ritual honoring water deities.

• 湯垢離 (yu-gori) – Purification in Hot Springs
Ritual bathing for purification before visiting a shrine or temple.

• 護摩焚き (goma taki) – Fire Offering Ritual
A Shugendō and esoteric Buddhist ceremony for protection, wishes, and purification.

• 甑岩 (Koshikiiwa) – “Steaming-Basket Rock”
A natural rock sanctuary used in local kami worship.

• 熊野権現 (Kumano Gongen) – Kumano Gongen
A syncretic manifestation of Shinto deities and Buddhas in sacred natural sites.

• 御神体 (goshintai) – Sacred Body of a Deity
A natural object (rock, tree, mountain, waterfall) inhabited by a kami.

• 社叢 (shasō) – Shrine Forest
An old-growth grove surrounding a shrine, serving as both ecological reserve and ritual space.

• 結界 (kekkai) – Sacred Boundary
A ritually demarcated area protecting a holy place.

• 遥拝所 (yōhaisho) – Distant Worship Site
A vantage point for worshipping a sacred mountain or rock from afar.

• 水神 (suijin) – Water Deity
Local water spirits of springs, rivers, and irrigation systems.

• 木霊 (kodama) – Tree Spirit / Echo
Belief in trees as animate beings; echoes in forests as signs of spirit presence.

• 天狗 (tengu) – Mountain and Wind Spirit
A folkloric guardian and trickster of mountain peaks and primeval forests.

• 河童 (kappa) – Water Spirit
An ambivalent river or pond creature in folklore, linked to irrigation and water safety.

• 岩屋 / 岩窟 (iwaya / gankutsu) – Sacred Cave
A cave serving as a dwelling place of kami or Buddhas; a liminal gateway in the landscape.

• 霊峰 (reihō) – Sacred Peak
A mountain with religious significance and pilgrimage tradition.

• 磐境 (iwazakai) – Sacred Rock Enclosure
A defined stone area of ritual and spiritual importance.

• 霊水 (reisui) – Sacred Water
Spiritually charged spring or stream water.

• 神籬 (himorogi) – Temporary Sacred Altar
A space marked with evergreen branches for the descent of a deity.

• 依代 (yorishiro) – Spirit Receptacle / Deity Attractor
An object or place that invites or houses a divine presence.

• 神饌 (shinsen) – Offerings to the Kami
Food and drink presented in Shinto rituals and festivals.

• 祭礼 (sairei) – Seasonal Rite or Festival
A celebration fostering harmony between humans and nature.

• 盆踊り (bon odori) – Bon Dance
A summer ritual dance honoring ancestral spirits.

• 花祭り (hana matsuri) – Flower Festival
A spring celebration of the Buddha's birth.

• 豊年祭 (hōnen-sai) – Harvest Festival
Prayers and festivities for an abundant harvest.

• 星祭り (hoshi matsuri) – Star Festival

A ritual honoring celestial bodies.

• 風祭り (kaze matsuri) – Wind Festival
Prayers for favorable and protective winds.

• 御田植祭 (otaue matsuri) – Ritual Rice Planting
A ceremonial linking of agricultural work with seasonal and divine cycles.

• 山開き (yama biraki) – Mountain Opening
The ceremonial start of the climbing or pilgrimage season.

• 海開き (umi biraki) – Sea Opening
The ritual start of the fishing or swimming season, with offerings to sea deities.

• 節分 (setsubun) – Seasonal Division Ritual
A festival to drive away evil spirits, often by scattering beans.

• 注連縄 / 七五三縄 (shimenawa) – Sacred Rice-Straw Rope
Marks a sacred presence and separates the sacred from the profane.

• 紙垂 / 四手 (shide) – Zigzag Paper Strips
Attached to shimenawa or branches as signs of purification and divine presence.

Regional & Folk Nature

• 熊野古道 (Kumano Kodō) – Kumano Pilgrimage Routes
An ancient network of mountain paths linking sacred forests, rivers, and waterfalls in the Kumano region of Wakayama.

• 那智滝 (Nachi no Taki) – Nachi Waterfall
A sacred waterfall and site of worship; water revered as a living, purifying force. Located in Kumano, Wakayama.

Ryūkyū Nature – Concepts from the Indigenous People of Okinawa and Surrounding Islands.

• 御嶽 (utaki) – Sacred Grove or Rock Site
Natural sanctuaries functioning as religious centers, traditionally managed by priestesses.

• カミアサギ (kami asagi) – Gods' Pavilion
An open ritual hall, often within or adjacent to an utaki, for ceremonies and community gatherings.

• 浜下り (hamagui) – Beach Purification Rite

A seasonal cleansing in seawater, traditionally performed by women and children.

• シヌグ (shinugu) – Mountain Summer Rite
A festival with dance, song, and offerings to protect the community and ensure a good harvest.

• ノロ (noro) – Priestess
A female ritual specialist mediating between the community and the animated natural world.

• ニライカナイ (Nirai Kanai) – Distant Sea Horizon / Ancestral Land
A mythical source of life and abundance located beyond the horizon.

• 竜宮 (Ryūgū) – Dragon Palace Beneath the Sea
A marine otherworld, symbolically tied to tides and cycles of life.

Ainu Nature – Concepts from the Indigenous People of Northern Japan.

• カムイ (kamuy) – Spiritual Beings / Deities
Animistic spirits inhabiting animals, plants, landscapes, and natural forces, in a reciprocal relationship with humans.

• アイヌモシリ (Ainu Mosir) – “Land of the People”
The inhabited world shared by humans and nature.

• カムイモシリ (Kamuy Mosir) – “Land of the Gods”
The invisible spiritual realm linked to the visible natural world.

• イナウ (inau) – Ritual Offering Wands
Carved willow sticks placed at rivers, forest edges, or hunting grounds as offerings to kamuy.

• ヌサ (nusa) – Outdoor Prayer Site
A sacred place in nature, often marked with wooden prayer sticks and offerings to kamuy.

• カムイチェプ (kamuy chep) – “Divine Fish” (Salmon)
Central to seasonal ceremonies and a key source of sustenance.

• シントコ (shintoko) – Sacred Spring or Water Source
Used for ritual purification and prayer.

• イオマンテ (iomante) – Bear Sending Ceremony
A rite returning the spirit of the bear deity to the divine realm, honoring the moral code of the forest.

• カムイ (kamuy) – Spiritual Powers in Nature
Sacred forces embodied in natural phenomena, animals, and landscapes.

Modern Nature (post 1890)

• 自然 (shizen) – Nature

Before 1870: From Chinese–Buddhist zìrán, meaning “to be so of itself” — a cosmic principle of spontaneous order, not a physical object apart from humans.
After 1870: Redefined as a translation of the Western, objectifying concept of nature — a physical domain opposed to culture, and an object of science.

• 大自然 (daishizen) – The Great Nature

Before 1870: Rare as a fixed term in premodern texts.
After 1870: An amplified, cosmological version of the modern concept of nature, often in scientific or nationalist-romantic contexts.

• 自然界 (shizen-kai) – The Natural World

New usage: Scientific neologism; kai (界, “domain”) applied systematically in biology, geology, and ecology from the Meiji period onward.

• 生物界 (seibutsu-kai) – Realm of Living Things

New usage: Created as a translation of Western terms like “organic world” or “realm of organisms.” Seibutsu itself is a Meiji-era coinage for “organism,” with no pre-1870 equivalent.

• 動植物 (dōshokubutsu) – Animals and Plants

Before 1870: Animals and plants were referred to separately (e.g., 鳥獣 “birds and beasts” and 草木 “grasses and trees”) without a single binary scientific category.
After 1870: Scientific classification term uniting the animal and plant kingdoms.

• 元気 (genki) – Vital Energy / Vigor

Before 1870: Philosophical and medical term (qi/ki) for vital energy in Chinese medicine and cosmology.
After 1870: Also used in physics and biology to mean “energy” or “physical force,” following Western models.

• 天然 (tennen) – Natural

Before 1870: “Given by heaven” or “innate.”
After 1870: Extended to mean “not man-made” (e.g., 天然資源 tennen shigen, “natural resources”), influenced by the Western nature/culture dualism.

• 無為自然 (mui shizen) – Non-Interference and Naturalness

Before 1870: Taoist principle of non-action and spontaneous order.
After 1870: Sometimes reinterpreted as “natural balance” in ecological or social-philosophical contexts under Western influence.

• 本然 (honzen) – Original Nature

Before 1870: Confucian philosophical term for “original state” or “inherent nature.”
After 1870: Also used in psychology, biology, and law as the opposite of “acquired.”

• 生命力 (seimeiryoku) – Vital Force / Life Energy
New usage: Scientific/biological term influenced by the Western concept of “vital force.”

• 科学的自然観 (kagakuteki shizenkan) – Scientific View of Nature
New usage: Compound of 科学的 (kagakuteki, “scientific”) — introduced as the translation of “scientific” — and 自然観 (shizenkan, “view of nature”).

• 環境 (kankyō) – Environment / Surroundings
Before 1870: Rare, with the meaning “surrounding conditions” in literary-philosophical contexts.
After 1870: Established as the translation of “environment” in natural and environmental sciences.

• 自然環境 (shizen kankyō) – Natural Environment
New usage: Scientific term for ecosystems and landscapes, common in geography, ecology, and environmental protection.

• 自然科学 (shizen kagaku) – Natural Sciences
New usage: General term for empirical sciences such as physics, chemistry, and biology.

• 生態学 (seitaigaku) – Ecology
New usage: Borrowed from German Ökologie in the early 20th century; composed of 生態 (“living state/form”) + 学 (“study, science”).

• 生態系 (seitaikei) – Ecosystem
New usage: Introduced after World War II as a translation of “ecosystem.”

• 自然保護 (shizen hogo) – Nature Conservation
New usage: Political and legal term from the early 20th century, especially in the context of national parks.

• 国立公園 (kokuritsu kōen) – National Park
New usage: Introduced in the 1930s, modeled on Western examples.

• 天然記念物 (tennen kinenbutsu) – Natural Monument
New usage: Legal category for protected species and landscapes (since 1919).

• 地球 (chikyū) – Earth (Planet)
Before 1870: In cosmography and Buddhist texts, “ground” or “earth disc” within the world system.
After 1870: Standardized as the translation of “Earth” in modern astronomy and geoscience.

• 地球環境 (chikyū kankyō) – Global Environment
New usage: Common since the late 20th century, in the context of climate change and international environmental policy.

• 自然災害 (shizen saigai) – Natural Disaster
New usage: Term in modern administration, disaster management, and meteorology.

• 自然選択 (shizen sentaku) – Natural Selection
New usage: Direct translation of “natural selection” in Darwinian evolutionary theory.

• 進化論 (shinkaron) – Theory of Evolution
New usage: Term for Darwinian and later evolutionary theories.

• 生物多様性 (seibutsu tayōsei) – Biodiversity
New usage: Modern translation of “biodiversity,” widely used since the 1990s.

• 環境倫理 (kankyō rinri) – Environmental Ethics
New usage: Philosophical and policy term from the late 20th century, strongly influenced by Western environmental thought.

Geert Mul
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During an artist-in-residence in Japan in 2024 and 2025, I researched the life and work of Kumagusu Minakata (1867–1941): a visionary thinker, environmental activist, and one of Japan’s first great biologists. He wove a rich tradition of Buddhist and Shinto concepts of nature together with multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary scientific research. In doing so, he developed an inspiring worldview of nature and civilization, in which diversity, deviation, metamorphosis, and plurality take center stage—a vision that is only growing in relevance today. *Sponsored by the* ***Creative Industries Fund NL****, the* ***Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Japan****, and* ***Kinan Art Week, Japan****.*

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