

# SEaweEDS IN JAPANESE CULTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIEVAL WAKA POETRY

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No civilizations exist in which seaweeds are so much integrated into gastronomy, culture and literature as in Japan, either medieval or modern. Japanese have practiced edible seaweed (Kaiso) farming since time immemorial, for at least 2000 years as evident in the ancient manuscripts and archeological artifacts. Seaweed is not just a vegetable for the Japanese; it stood as an imagery and metaphor to express meanings from “love” to “compassion”, “truth” and “sensuality”!

What follows is a curated list of waka (a form of short poetry)-translated from the original Japanese texts that deal with seaweeds. Translations were originally done by Prof. McAuley at University of Sheffield, UK, and most of the contents to be followed in this discussion is credited to the excellent works that he published at <http://www.temcauley.staff.shef.ac.uk/poems.shtml>. Contents from unrelated sections have been concatenated for the general interests of phycologists keeping in mind.

One of the earliest Japanese poetry collections, Manyōshū-compiled in 7<sup>th</sup> CE, compares the love of one’s wife to “bending seaweed.”

*“Alas, she is no more,  
whose soul was bent to mine  
like the bending seaweed”*

This kind of metaphor usage is very typical of the Japanese and it reflects the aesthetic consideration and reverence for the seaweeds in that society. A number of references to the seaweeds can be recited from classical *haiku* texts as well, such as the following

Genji Monogatari by Murasaki Shikibu, early 11<sup>th</sup> Century

*The world of fisher folk:  
Might I hear it from afar?  
On the beach at Suma,  
Seaweed-salt droplets fell,  
For who, if not you...*

(Author unknown)

*Harvested jeweled seaweed  
At Minume; passed on,  
Lush as summer grasses,  
To the point at Noshima,  
My boat draws near.*

A note on “Jeweled seaweed” expression:

As per my understanding, this expression is used to refer green Ulvophyceae seaweed *Monostroma kuroshiensis* (Yendo) Bast et al. Most probably derived from the typical iridescent sheen that the seaweed produces upon drying. To test this hypothesis, I have done sampling expeditions to almost all places where this expression had been used in waka, as part of my phylogeography studies. *M. kuroshiensis* was observed growing luxuriantly in majority of these places (Bast 2011). Alternately, as discussed in the section of “*Makura Kotoba*”, this expression could also indicate *Sanuki*, i.e., present day Kagawa Prefecture, in *wakas* by Tamamo Yosi, a Japanese court poet.

(Author unknown)

*As a mat of creepers,  
Is the sea at Iwami;  
Amongst the mangled words of  
Kara Point,  
Upon the reefs  
Grows the algae thickly;  
On the rocky shoreline,  
Grows the jeweled seaweed;  
Soft as jeweled seaweed  
Trembling, lay my girl;  
Lush as thick (miru) green algae*

Rather than the generic ‘algae’ the poem refers specifically to *miru*, or ‘thick-haired *Codium*’ as it is in English, which grows in deep pools along rocky coasts. The individual filaments, which can be as long as 30 centimetres, often grow together to form a velvety mat.

*From Nakizumi  
The river port I see  
The Isle of Awaji  
In the Bay of Matsuho:  
In the calm at dawn  
Harvesting jeweled seaweed;  
In the evening calm  
Drying seaweed salt*

A poem, with *tanka*, composed by Kanamura, Lord Kasa, on the occasion of an Imperial visit to the district of Inami in the province of Harima in the autumn, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year of Jingi



(726), Ninth Month, 15th day.

*And with the ebbing of the tide,  
They go cutting jeweled seaweed:  
From the age of gods  
An awesome,  
Jeweled mountain isle.*

From *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* by Fujiwara no Teika (or Sa-daie, 1162 – 1241)

*For one who fails to come,  
I pine; within the bay of Matsuo  
In the evening calm,  
Burns seaweed salt,  
As does my breast with longing.*

From the *Shinkokinshû* Love poems By Minamoto no Toshiyori (1055-1129)

*In the bay of Naniwa  
Seaweed-covered  
Gemstone rocks  
Appear-just so  
Does my love for her*

A lament, with *tanka* (Author unknown)

*As the jeweled seaweed,  
She, trembling, laid her down;*

Old Kanto-area folk song (Author unknown)

*In Hitagata  
On the beach the wakame  
Starts up in confusion  
Is that how she waits for me,  
Tonight and the night before?*

Note: Wakame is brown seaweed *Undaria pinnatifida*.

From *Genji Monogatari* by Murasaki Shikibu, early 11<sup>th</sup> Century

*The world of fisher folk:  
Might I hear it from afar?  
On the beach at Suma,  
Seaweed-salt droplets fell,  
For who, if not you...*

From the *Shinkokinshû* Love poems By Fujiwara no Hideyoshi (1184-1240)

*Seaweed-salt burning,  
From fisher-folks' huts upon the rocky shore  
In the evening smoke*

*Rises-painful to lose my good name, yet  
I cannot bear this longing.*

Examples from *Makura kotoba*

Makura kotoba or 'pillow words' were one of the primary poetic resources for poets of the Man'yô period and earlier. Single words or phrases, usually of five syllables, associated in poems with certain other fixed words or phrases, makura kotoba formed links in terms of meaning, association or sound and provided a means by which a poet could add depth to his/her poems or heighten the tone of his rhetorical style.

While makura kotoba do appear in the early songs in the Kojiki and Nihongi, their use was primarily established by Hitomaro in the Man'yô period. It is estimated that he coined approximately half of the makura kotoba he used, handing down an important resource to future generations of poets. Over time, the true meanings of many makura kotoba became lost, and their use became mere convention, but they continued to be coined and used by Japanese poets well into the twentieth century.

References to seaweeds oftentimes comes in Makura kotoba, partly owing to the romantic image associated with seaweeds in Japanese culture and folklore. The list below is by no means exhaustive, but should give an indication of the types of expressions related to seaweeds used as makura kotoba and the words to which they were applied.

Tamamo Yosi-Japanese court poet:

*'Good jeweled seaweed'.* Used to modify the province Sanuki.  
Sanuki is modern day Kagawa prefecture

*Pukamiru nô*  
'Like long haired *Codium*. Used to modify pukamu 'be deep', miru 'see', etc.

From Man'yôshû, by Lord Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (662-710)

*Jeweled seaweed,  
Province of Sanuki:  
Is it your nature that  
The sight of you will never sate?*

(Author unknown)

*Harvested jeweled seaweed  
At Minume; passed on,  
Lush as summer grasses,  
To the point at Noshima,  
My boat draws near.*

On Seaweed (Author unknown)

*When the tide is high,  
Covering the beach,  
As sea-grass, perhaps,  
Scarcely seen and  
Greatly loved.*

Yamabe Akahito, on visit to imperial province of Ki (AD 724)

*And with the ebbing of the tide,  
They go cutting jeweled seaweed:*

Lord Mino Isomori (AD 730)

*My friend,  
I pine and from this field  
Gaze out upon  
The diver girls  
Seeing them cutting  
Jeweled seaweed.*

Manyo poem, anonymous

*Today again  
Will the jeweled seaweed offshore  
Atop the breakers'  
Eightfold layers  
Be thrown into confusion?*

Sei Shônagon (c. 966-1017)

When the governor of Michinoku, [Tachibana no] Norimitsu was a Chamberlain, and she wanted to let him know that they were finished, she retired to her home, saying, 'If people ask, don't tell them where I am.' When he sent back to her, saying, 'What am I to do if people demand to know-as your husband I should know, surely?' she bundled up some seaweed and sent it to him. Norimitsu didn't understand and came to her, asking, 'What on earth do you think you are doing?'. So she composed this poem.

*When beneath the waves,  
The fisher-folk may be found  
At the bottom there!  
Tell no one at all-  
Eat the seaweed-will you see the signs, I wonder!  
(ku-wa-seken)*

One could, perhaps, forgive Norimitsu for not immediately understanding what Sei Shônagon meant with her gift of me 'seaweed'. Of course, she is making a complicated play-on-words: me kuFasu 'eat seaweed' at the time would have been written identically to mekubasu 'wink at someone to give them a sign'. So, with the seaweed and the poem she was saying, "I'm giving you a sign (that we're through)!"

Apparently, Norimitsu's response was to say, "Has my lady composed a poem? Well, I won't read it now!", give Sei Shônagon back her fan and depart in high dudgeon; after which, he gained the reputation as a hater of poetry.

Lord Kasa Kanamura on the occasion of an Imperial visit to the district of Inami in the province of Harima in the autumn, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year of Jingi (726), Ninth Month, 15th day.

From Nakizumi  
 The river port I see  
 The Isle of Awaji  
 In the Bay of Matsuho:  
 In the calm at dawn  
 Harvesting jeweled seaweed;  
 In the evening calm  
 Drying seaweed salt  
 (mo sipo yakitsutsu 藻塩焼き)  
 The diver maids  
 Are there, I hear, yet,  
 To go and see them  
 I've no reason, so  
 A strong man's  
 Heart I do not have,  
 As a tender maid  
 I feel daunted  
 Circling around  
 Fondly feeling  
 Lacking boat and oars.

Poems by Lord Kakinomoto Hitomaro, when he had parted from his wife and come up to the capital from the province of Iwami

By the sea in Iwami,  
 On the shore at Tsuno,  
 There is no beach,  
 For folk to see;  
 No shallow water,  
 For folk to see;  
 Yet even so,  
 Though there be no beach;  
 Yet even so,  
 Though there be no shallow water:  
 On the whale hunting  
 Seashore  
 At Nikitazu,  
 On the rocky shoreline,  
 The blue, blue  
 Jeweled seaweed, just offshore, (tamamo)  
 With the wings of morning,  
 Will the wind bring closer;  
 With the wings of dusk,  
 Will the waves draw closer;  
 And with the waves,  
 Moving forth and back,  
 As the jeweled seaweed, (tamamo)  
 My darling, once cuddled close,

As a mat of creepers,  
 Is the sea at Iwami;  
 Amongst the mangled words of  
 Kara Point,  
 Upon the reefs  
 Grows the algae thickly; (pukamiru)  
 On the rocky shoreline,  
 Grows the jeweled seaweed; (tamamo)

Soft as jeweled seaweed (tamamo)  
 Trembling, lay my girl;  
 Lush as thick green algae, (pukamiru)  
 The love within my heart, but  
 The nights when we slept thus  
 Were not so very many;

Codium in Mirume naki

Medieval poet Komachi played with "miru me" and "miru", with each other being frequently interchanged in his *waka*. Miru is Codium (with its characteristic "thick hair"). "Miru me" could also mean "seeing through eyes", in addition to the seaweed, and by implication a meeting between lovers, as one had to be very close to someone to see their eyes in the darkness of an old Japanese dwelling. So the poem asks 'Why does the fisherman keep coming this beach? Doesn't he know there's no mirume growing here?' and also 'Why does my lover keep coming when there's no chance of a meeting?'

Gosenshu Waka

Ariwara no Narihira (825-880)

In the sea at Ise  
 A frolicking fisherman is what  
 I would become, for then  
 I'd plunge between the waves  
 To harvest algae-and a glimpse of you.

Ise (939)

Could such a mediocre  
 Fisherman harvest? I think not!  
 The sea at Ise  
 Sends waves high upon the shore  
 Where the algae grows!

Author unknown

Harvesting jeweled seaweed  
 The diver maids  
 To go and see  
 I long for a boat,  
 Though higher rise the waves.

From Man'yōshū (759 AD)

In Katsushika,  
 At Mama inlet  
 The drifting  
 Jeweled seaweed cutting:  
 Maid Tegona, I remember you.

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