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Tokimeku: The Poetics of Marie Kondo's KonMari Method

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Mono no aware is a poetic term developed by Motoori Norinaga to refer to the driving force behind aesthetic works, specifically poetry, and to refer to the human awareness of the qualitative nature of our experience in the world. For Norinaga, the cultivation of *mono no aware* necessarily leads to heightened sensitivity to both natural and man-made objects. As *mono no aware* is the natural response of the cultivated heart to the world around us, Norinaga takes it to be fundamental to human experience.

Norinaga's interpretation of the term *aware* as "to be stirred" bears striking similarities to the concept of "sparking joy" or *tokimeku* as used by Marie Kondo in her KonMari system. In Japanese, Kondo's phrase "spark joy" is written as *tokimeku*, a word whose literal translation means "throb," "pulsate," or "beat fast," as in the heart's response to anticipation or anxiety. The aim of the present work is to make clear the connection between *tokimeku* in the KonMari system and Norinaga's poetics of *mono no aware*. Specifically, this paper indicates the ways in which the KonMari system functions in line with a tradition of Japanese aesthetics of experience. This philosophy informs Japanese aesthetic practices and is articulated throughout Japanese poetics. This paper places Kondo in conversation with Norinaga's work on *aware* and *mono no aware* towards a conceptualization of the KonMari system as an implement for cultivating a mindful heart.

Keywords: Konmari; mono no aware; aesthetics; Japanese Philosophy; Marie Kondo; poetics

Introduction

In her books *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* and *Spark Joy: The Illustrated Guide to the Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Marie Kondo develops the KonMari system as a method of "tidying up." Kondo defines "tidying up" as "the act of restoring balance among people, their possessions, and the house they live in."¹ Crucial to this process is our recognition of affective phenomena. She makes this point in the afterword to her book *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up*:

Recently, an expression that keeps coming to mind as I work with my clients is *mono no aware*. This Japanese term, which literally means "pathos of things," describes the deep emotion that is evoked when we are touched by nature, art, or the lives of others with an awareness of their transience. It also refers to the essence of things and our ability to feel that essence. As my clients proceed through the tidying process, I sense a change in the words they say, and in their facial expressions, as if they are sharpening their ability to feel *mono no aware*.²

Mono no aware is a poetic term developed by Japanese philologist Motoori Norinaga to describe the driving force behind poetry, and to refer to the human awareness of the qualitative nature of experience. For Norinaga, the cultivation of *mono no aware* necessarily leads to heightened affective sensitivity. When Kondo refers to *mono no aware* as the "essence of things," she draws on Norinaga's aesthetic theory as developed in his book *Isonokame Sasamegato*.³ As *mono no aware* is the instinctive response of the cultivated heart to the phenomenal world, Norinaga takes it as fundamental to human experience.

Read in this way, the "magic" of the KonMari system lies in its capacity to sharpen not only our awareness of personal belongings, but all objects that exist in the world. Kondo's definition of *mono no aware* as the ability to feel essences indicates a connection with a broader aesthetics of experience and affect rooted in the Japanese Shinto religious tradition. Kondo's work therefore extends a set of Japanese religious practices and beliefs, ensuring their continuity into the future. Thus the value of Kondo's KonMari system surpasses the simple restoration of our capacity to recognize the affective potential in objects. Adherents to the system perceive fundamental principles which guide

human interactions with the world. A brief exploration of the KonMari system will clarify these principles.

The distinction between tidying and cleaning is crucial in KonMari. Tidying, specifically, is a mode of self-cultivation, where it refers to the way that things are put in order. This definition is clear in the Japanese title of her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. In *Jinsei ga Tokimeku Katazuke no Maho*, “katazuke” can be translated as “to put in order” or “to put to rights.” This concept of “tidying” is further elaborated in *Spark Joy*, where “tidying” means “confronting yourself” by confronting our role in creating clutter and disorganization.³ This is contrasted with “cleaning,” an activity which confronts nature as an intrusion on our living spaces in the form of the accumulation of dirt.⁴ Kondo further distinguishes the concept of “cleaning,” or purification, from “tidying,” or cultivation:

Cleaning the temple is part of Buddhist training, but tidying the temple is not. With cleaning, we can let our minds empty while our hands keep moving, but tidying requires us to think—about what to discard, what to keep, and where to put it. You could say that tidying orders the mind while cleaning purifies it.⁵

Here, Kondo refers to the Buddhist practice of *kinhin*, a form of meditation that allows the mind to empty while the body remains in activity. In Soto Zen Buddhism, this practice is one of the many ways in which one can engage in silent illumination, or *shikantaza*, wherein the attention does not focus on any object. In contrast, Kondo’s “tidying” orders our minds such that we can correctly perceive an affective connection, or the ways that an object prompts *tokimeku*, in order to restore the balance between ourselves and the object in our surroundings. Thus, *tokimeku* is crucial to understanding the KonMari system and its connection to Japanese aesthetic theory.

In Japanese, *tokimeku* indicates a palpitation or response of the heart. It usually results from the experience of anticipation, or during an encounter with the object of one’s affection. *Tokimeku* also refers to the phenomenological response of the *kokoro*, the “heart/mind,” to affective encounters with the world. Kondo’s translator Cathy Hirano describes *tokimeku* as the way in which objects “spark joy,” and presents it as central to the “putting in order” process. As it were, the primary guideline for KonMari adherents is to “keep only those things that speak to your heart. Then take the plunge and discard all the rest.”⁶ KonMari is a method of self-cultivation that strengthens the capacity to recognize items that “speak to our heart.” This capacity enables adherents to determine which items to discard and which items to keep. Further, this development of the *kokoro* allows them to confront the ways that their disorder is grounded in their relationships with the world.

The KonMari process asks practitioners to begin by organizing items into five categories: clothes, books, papers, *komono* (miscellaneous items), and sentimental items.⁷ This

order is not arbitrary. Kondo claims that it allows adherents to cultivate their ability to distinguish what does and does not spark joy. This is because each category is determined by the level of sentimentality and personal meaning associated with its constitutive items.⁸ For example, she writes that “clothes are ideal for practicing this skill, while photos and other sentimental items are the epitome of what you should not touch until you have perfected it.” She claims that it is easier to tell which clothes spark joy, and in what way, than it is to determine which sentimental items or photographs have the same effect.⁹

Kondo adds that it is essential to physically handle each item. As she writes: “don’t just open up your closet and decide after a cursory glance that everything in it gives you a thrill. You must take each outfit in your hand. When you touch a piece of clothing, your body reacts. Its response to each item is different.”¹⁰ Because each response is different, Kondo suggests that we “try touching, hugging, and gazing closely at any items about which you are not certain. As a last resort... even try them on.”¹¹ Kondo’s suggestions regarding the handling of books are different:

As with clothing, you must begin by taking every single book you own off the shelves and piling them on the floor. Then take them in your hands and keep only those that spark joy. Whatever you do, don’t start reading them. If you have too many books to choose all at once, sort them by categories, such as general (for reading), practical (references, cookbooks), visual (coffee-table books), and magazines, and do the joy check for each category.¹²

Whereas Kondo suggests trying on clothing items to determine if they spark joy, she rejects the equivalent practice for books, which would be reading the first or second page. She is explicit about this, stating, “Make sure you don’t start reading it. Reading clouds your judgment. Instead of asking yourself what you feel, you’ll start asking whether you need that book or not.”¹³ For Kondo, the difficulty in discarding books lies in the fact that they are more moving than clothing items. Moreover, reading confuses a book’s capacity to spark joy with our inclination to retain information. Reading thereby obscures the movement of *kokoro*.¹⁴ Thus, as part of the KonMari method, how we engage with an object determines the way that the *kokoro* responds to the object through our sense perceptions.

Handling individual objects is the first step in the KonMari method, but organization and storage plays a greater role. As Kondo states, “the essence of the storage process is to appreciate the things you own and to strive to make your relationship with them as special as possible,” which is to say that how we store and care for our objects determines our relationship with them.¹⁵ To this end, Kondo’s method offers specific methods of storing. These approaches pertain to the aforementioned five categories. For example, there is an appropriate way to fold clothes. When practitioners learn this method, Kondo writes, it’s like “a sudden revelation — So

this is how you always wanted to be folded! – a historical moment in which your mind and the piece of clothing connect.” In this moment, the *kokoro* of the object connects with the *kokoro* of the individual.¹⁶

The above presents the affective ground of the KonMari system as implicit in its structuring of the *kokoro* through home organization techniques. Kondo’s connection to Norinaga’s *mono no aware* may nevertheless appear tenuous. For Kondo, the organization of our objects and minds develops our sensitivity to *mono no aware* because we learn to recognize the way that our objects “move our heart.” On this point, Kondo returns to *mono no aware*, stating:

I believe that when we put our things in order and strengthen our bonds with what we own, we get back in touch with that delicate sensitivity to *mono no aware*. We rediscover our innate capacity to cherish the things in our lives and regain the awareness that our relationship with the material world is one of mutual support.¹⁷

Norinaga’s *mono no aware* presents the immediacy of affective experience as the ground for our encounters with the world. Kondo’s use of *tokimeku* allows us to recognize how our relationships with objects and persons structure the affective ground of our lived experience.

Kokoro

Norinaga posits that anything with a feeling heart, or *kokoro*, knows *mono no aware*, which he considers the driving force behind aesthetic works. He is not the first Japanese scholar to treat the heart as central to experience in the world. His work is predated by that of poet Ki no Tsurayuki, who compiled the *Kokinwakashu*, the first official collection of Japanese poetry in the Heian period, which set the standard for Japanese poetics until the late nineteenth century. In the preface to the *Kokinwakashu*, Tsurayuki writes that “Japanese poetry has the human heart as seeds and words as flowers. It comes into being when men use the seen and the heard to give voice to feelings aroused by the innumerable events in their lives.”¹⁸ For him, poetry stems from encounters between human beings and the world around them, as mediated by the *kokoro*. Thomas Kasulis, professor of comparative studies at Ohio State University, clarifies this statement:

A key characteristic of *kokoro* is that it involves a propensity for engagement, a sensitivity expressed as either being in touch with something else or being touched by it. Through such an engagement meaning – whether factual or valuational – comes into being. Hence *kokoro* is what makes responsiveness possible.¹⁹

Of import here is the experiential nature of *kokoro* as a mode of relating that makes responsiveness possible. Insofar as *kokoro* involves sensitivity to touching and being touched, it emerges from encounters with the world. Through the

concept of *kokoro*, it becomes possible to speak of non-human entities as having the experience of touching or being touched by something else. This does not imply that we understand other entities’ experiences. Nonetheless, we can observe their responses as we touch and are touched by them.

Tsurayuki makes this clear in his discourse on the capacity of birdsong to move the human *kokoro*. As stated in the Kana prefix to the *Kokinwakashu*, “The song of the warbler among the blossoms, the voice of the frog dwelling in the water—these teach us that every living creature sings.”²⁰ The power of birdsong results from the movement of a bird’s *kokoro*. This is similar to the emergence of poetry from the movement of the human *kokoro*. As only songs that emerge from the *kokoro* can move another *kokoro* in response, birds and other living things must possess their own *kokoro* to move human *kokoro*.

Norinaga extends Tsurayuki’s elaboration of *kokoro* by referring to the way in which ancient Japanese texts often use the two definitions of *koto*, which can mean either “word” or “event.” For Norinaga, the dual meaning of *koto* indicates that words and events both possess *kokoro*, in addition to objects. Thus it is possible for the proper arrangement of words to call forth the *kokoro* of the events they describe.

Shinto thought clarifies the implication that non-living objects possess *kokoro*. Here, we can turn to Kondo’s work. As she writes, “The Japanese believed that gods resided not only in natural phenomena such as the sea and the land but also in the cooking stove and even in each individual grain of rice, and therefore they treated all of them with reverence.”²¹ When Kondo states that *kami* reside in an object, she does not mean that the *kami* inhabit the object as one inhabits a house. *Kami* “reside” in an object in an interdependent way.²²

Norinaga, on the other hand, articulates *kami* as fundamentally phenomenological. For him, the term “*kami*” refers to the capacity for objects to make themselves fully present in experience. As stated by Norinaga, “In principle human beings, birds, animals, trees, plants, mountains, oceans –all may be *kami*. According to ancient usage, whatever seemed strikingly impressive, possessed the quality of excellence, or inspired a feeling of awe was called a *kami*.”²³ Objects may evoke a sense of awe which allows us to perceive *kami*. Moreover, *kami* are not transcendent or supernatural. Rather, they are immanent with and fundamental to our worldly experiences. Kasulis makes this point in his discussion of Mount Fuji:

Mount Fuji itself is *kami*: the locus of mysterious power and awe. Unlike many holy sites from other religions –Jerusalem, Mecca, or the Buddha’s Bodhi tree for example – Mount Fuji was not sacralized (sic) by a historical event. It is, and always has been, a site filled with marvelous power. For Shinto, a tree or rock may be *kami* simply by virtue of its age or eerie shape. If people can feel its concentrated material energy, this is enough to associate it with *kami*.²⁴

If Mount Fuji conjures a feeling of awe, it is not because it is inhabited by *kami*, but rather because it is experienced as *kami*. In the Shinto tradition, *kami* are always already present in phenomena. Because we are normally insensitive to them, we are often awestruck by their presence.

For Norinaga, Japanese art aims to direct our *kokoro* towards the awe-inspiring by heightening our awareness. By cultivating our *kokoro* in such a way as to recognize *kami*, we also cultivate awareness of the *kokoro* of other organisms.²⁵ Norinaga claims that all things may be *kami*. He indicates that a person may become a *kami* if their affect intensifies and “sticks” to them. For example, royals and religious figures become associated with the power of the institution that they represent. Kasulis refers to this as “*kami* by association.”²⁶ This also occurs when individuals are associated with events.²⁷ A general that leads a nation’s army to victory becomes a *kami* through association with the dramatism of the circumstances.

This “*kami* by association” process is not unique to humans, but applies to objects, as well. Kondo evokes the idea of “*kami* by association” in her discussion of material objects. She presents three facets of *kami* inherent to objects: the *kami* of the materials, the *kami* of the creator, and the *kami* of the person who uses them. Each influences the object, as its *kami* is bound with its *kokoro*. For Kondo, the process of creating allows the creator’s *kokoro* to be transmitted through the object and perceived by the *kokoro* of the user. As Kondo writes, “this book you are reading is paper. But it is not just any old paper. It is paper that is instilled with my ardent wish that you will try tidying up and my longing to help those who want to live a life that sparks joy.”²⁸ Kondo’s wish and *kokoro* are transmitted through the text as *kami*. This is what enables the book to move readers through its words.

Without a *kokoro*, there would be nothing that responds to the “joy” sparked. However, the *kokoro* is not the only link between the KonMari system and Norinaga’s *mono no aware*. Thus, it is to *aware* and *mono no aware* that I now turn.

Mono no Aware

To understand the role of *mono no aware* in the KonMari system, we can look at its constituent parts: *mono* and *aware*. Norinaga traces the origin of *aware* to the expression “*aa hare*,” or the verbal act of sighing.^{29,30} The “*aa hare*” expression is a form of exclamation distinguished by the *aware* that occasions it. This definition contrasts with Kondo’s translation of *aware* as “pathos.” Norinaga uses the expressions “ah,” “alas,” or “oh,” as examples. These utterances externalize an *aware* that “stirs us deeply.” As he puts it,

Aware is a word meaning “to be stirred deeply.” At a later time *aware* was related only to feelings of sadness, and came to be written with the character for “sorrow” (*aware* 哀). However, this character only points at one of the many feelings that are included in the word *aware*; the meaning of *aware* is not limited to sorrow.³¹

The phrase “to be stirred” refers specifically to the movement of the *kokoro* in response to the external world such that thoughts and emotions emerge. To clarify, Norinaga provides an etymology of the word *Awaremu*, a conjugation of “*aware to omou*” as “thinking with a sense of sighing.” In his view, we do not only sigh when we are sad. He believes that the sigh is a natural consequence of the movement of the *kokoro* and not necessarily the response to a specific kind of movement. Norinaga knows that there exists a tendency to define *aware* only in the context of sorrow and love but adds that this is derivative.³² He argues that *aware* includes a variety of affects, including joy, charm, delight, sadness, and love:

aware is not restricted to deeply felt sadness. Whenever one happens to feel *aa hare* — be it in joy, fascination, pleasure, amusement — this is *aware*. Hence it is used in combinations like *aware ni okashiku*, “touchingly amusing,” and *aware ni ureshiku*, “touchingly joyous”: one is moved by something amusing or joyful to feel *aa hare*, and this is described as *aware ni*.³³

Norinaga argues that modern readers wrongly assume *aware* to only include deeply moving feelings, such as love and sorrow. However, he maintains that the tendency to treat *aware* as exclusive of lighter feelings is the result of a “general and specific distinction between the deep and shallow affects.” As he elaborates,

The general distinction is that, as I mentioned earlier, “charm” is included in *aware*. The specific distinction is that, among the many feelings operating in a person’s heart, charm and joy stir the heart in a shallow way, whereas sadness and love move it deeply. This is why a deep feeling is labeled especially “*aware*” (moving) — a fact that explains why, in common parlance, the content of *aware* is believed to be only sadness.³⁴

We feel *aware* when our hearts are touched or moved regardless of the reason. What Norinaga refers to as “depth” or “shallowness” is a qualitative difference in the duration and degree to which the heart moves. Norinaga assumes that all individuals know longing and sorrow, and can therefore be moved by works of art which evoke those sentiments. On the other hand, he believes that joy is dependent on individual tastes, and often emerges from personal aesthetic cultivation.

Norinaga does not intend for *aware* to be limited to emotions. He also has in mind human beauty and social rank. This is indicated by his comments on the art of painting in *Isonokame Sasamegoto*, where he argues that a painter must not only capture the external appearance of a subject, but also that subject’s “attitude.” In contrast to what he views as the tendency in “warrior paintings” to exaggerate ferocity, Norinaga claims that warriors “should be represented as human beings, in a very calm manner, but with the fierceness

and power of warriors.”³⁵ Accurate representations capture the attitude of the individual, or the subject’s specific *aware*. This is more important when the exact appearance of the individual is unknown to the artist:

In drawing people from the past, painters should strive to match the status and the knowledge of that person, since we do not know what those people looked like. The portrait of a nobleman should be elegant and should look like the portrait of a really noble person. A knowledgeable person should be portrayed exactly as a man of knowledge.³⁶

In the context of painting, Norinaga’s phrase “exactly as a man of knowledge” is meant to include the “attitude” as described above. Further, Norinaga’s assertion that “painters should strive to match the status and the knowledge of that person” implies a connection between the attitude, which is the *aware* of a given individual, and their social role. Norinaga takes social encounters to be as moving as natural encounters. Thus it stands to reason that the social status of an individual also has an *aware*. In *Tama no Ogushi*, Norinaga makes this point with regards to the depiction of characters of high social standing in literature:

One also finds numerous instances, in chapter after chapter, of being moved by a person’s rank or position. This is something different from calculated obsequiousness or sycophancy toward the powerful and the rich; it is a natural and ineluctable sense of awe before a person of exalted station.³⁷

In his text *Shinto: The Way Home*, Kasulis describes this experience in the context of the phrase “standing in the presence of,” as in “standing in the presence of the Queen.” While Norinaga evokes a similar sense, he treats the *aware* of rank as a combination of the social standing the rank symbolizes and the way in which the individual embodies this status. Norinaga alludes to the point in his discussion of the nature of *kami* and “*kami* by association.” It receives its full articulation in Kasulis’s work. When we perceive the *aware* of another individual through our *kokoro*, we feel that we are “in their presence.” The “awe inspiring” function that indicates *kami* is also our sense of *aware*, as the entity that moves our *kokoro*.

Mono no aware functions as a theory of perception that describes our experience in the world. However, for Norinaga, *mono no aware* also involves “knowing the essence of things and knowing the essence of events:”

When one encounters something for which he should be happy and has happy thoughts, his happiness derives from the understanding of the essence of that very thing about which he should feel happy. Likewise, when one encounters something for which he should be sad and has sad thoughts, his sadness derives from the understanding of the essence of that

very thing about which he should feel sad. Therefore, “to know *mono no aware*” is to discern the nature of happiness or sadness while experiencing the world. When we do not understand the nature of things, there is no feeling thought in our hearts, since we are neither happy nor sad.³⁸

In the above, “knowing the essence of things” refers to the ability to respond appropriately to encounters with the phenomenal world. Essence, here, does not refer to unchanging qualities but rather to qualities that move the *kokoro*. *Mono no aware* is always primary in our worldly encounters. The more phenomena we encounter in our lives, the more we come to know their essence by way of affective response.

Norinaga presents poetry as crucial to developing a deep *mono no aware*, as its ability to embody *mono no aware* in language permits a variety of experiences through contact with the *kokoro*. However, Norinaga does not define what knowledge of *mono no aware* entails for each individual. What he calls “knowledge of the essence of things” is predicated upon social and physical environments. He emphasizes that knowledge of *mono no aware* takes on different, context-dependent forms. The boundaries of our cultural and social worlds orient and develop the knowledge of *mono no aware*.

The *Mono no Aware* of KonMari

Tokimeku indicates the ways in which an object resonates with or moves the *kokoro*. In fact, Kondo’s translator considered using the phrase “does it speak to your heart?” as a translation for *tokimeku*. Read in this way, the central question of Kondo’s KonMari method, “does it spark joy?,” can be reinterpreted as “how does it move the *kokoro*?”

Returning to Norinaga’s definition of *aware* and *mono no aware* as “being stirred,” we must recall that these terms herald a wide range of sensations which may be “stirred.” As stated previously, *aware* includes multiple affects. *Tokimeku* may be similarly treated. If we use the more figurative translations of *tokimeku* as “the fluttering of the heart in anticipation of or response to an object in the world,” we can examine *tokimeku* in this expanded mode. Just as *aware* emerges from an exclamation in the experience of *mono no aware*, *tokimeku* can be reinterpreted to describe our bodily response in the moment of being “stirred.” Much like *mono no aware* and *aware*, this interpretation of *tokimeku* does not specify *how* the *kokoro* is moved in the experience, but simply indicates its movement through the “fluttering” of the heart. Thus, while Kondo’s usage of *tokimeku* implies excitement or a state of positivity, the “flutter” can also occur in response to *aware* which do not induce positivity.

Tokimeku should be treated as another way of expressing the means by which the *kokoro* reacts to worldly encounters. It does not specify the form of the *aware* that moves the *kokoro*. Moreover, given the distinctions between *aware* as an exclamation and *tokimeku* as a sensation, we can understand *tokimeku* as a qualitatively different response to how we are moved. This is not to say that we cannot have both a

tokimeku response and an *aware* response to the same object or an experience. *Mono no aware* is grounded in a sudden, intense experience of *aware* that moves us to sigh. *Tokimeku* is the movement of the *kokoro* in a less sudden manner. We might articulate the difference between *aware* and *tokimeku* in terms of the immediacy of the response. Sudden awareness characterizes *aware* as opposed to *tokimeku*.

In the first chapter of *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up*, Kondo indicates that her earlier restriction of *tokimeku* to mere excitement was “thoughtless.”³⁹ This restriction hampered her previous attempts to discern the essence of the objects.⁴⁰ To this end, we may connect Kondo’s *tokimeku* with Norinaga’s *aware*: both indicate an affect that moves the *kokoro*, but do not specify how the *kokoro* is moved. As Kondo says in *Spark Joy*, *tokimeku* can include “feelings of fascination, excitement, or attraction are not the only indications of joy.”⁴¹ Here, Kondo describes various *aware* not connected with “joy.” These *aware* emerge from items which are “*kami* by association.”

This reinterpretation of *tokimeku* as inclusive of a variety of affects, and as pointing to the many ways in which an *aware* may be experienced, gains additional significance when considered in light of the quotation that opens this paper: “As my clients proceed through the tidying process,” Kondo claims “I sense a change in the words they say, and in their facial expressions, as if they are sharpening their ability to feel *mono no aware*.”⁴² Recall that for Norinaga, the experiences of feeling and knowing *mono no aware* are related to the depth of our understanding of the essence of things. In conjunction with the reinterpretation above, the depth of *tokimeku* becomes the extent of our ability to recognize how our *kokoro* aligns with the objects we own. A shallow *tokimeku* would indicate only that the affective nature of an object aligns with the *kokoro*, while a deep sense of *tokimeku* would indicate the ways that the object aligns with our *kokoro* in the contexts where the object is encountered. It is, to use Kondo’s words, the difference between an object’s aura of “fascination” as opposed to its sense of “functionality.”

The success of the KonMari method depends on knowing how the *kokoro* is moved. Kondo advises the reader to believe in their “sense of joy,” or their cultivated sense of *tokimeku*, which she claims will have changed since they began the KonMari process. The germ of the KonMari method is the cultivation of *mono no aware*. The following quotation indicates as much:

The best way to identify what does or doesn’t bring you joy is to compare. In the beginning, unless your feelings are very black-and-white, it’s hard to decide if something brings joy when you look at it by itself. When you compare it with a bunch of other things, however, your feelings become clear. This is why it’s so important to sort only one category at a time, starting with clothing.⁴³

Read through the lens of Norinaga, Kondo’s advice to compare the items within a category to one another appears to entail comparing different kinds of *aware*. The item that moves us most deeply, for Kondo, should be the item that we retain. For Kondo, the depth of *mono no aware* may be compared to the speed at which an individual can determine how an object “sparks joy.” As Kondo states, “differences in speed simply reflect differences in length of experience. If you take sufficient time to explore your own sense of joy at the beginning, the speed with which you make decisions will accelerate rapidly.”⁴⁴ In other words, differences among individuals in the speed that they determine how an item “sparks joy” are ultimately grounded in the degree of sensitivity of the individual to the *aware* of the item itself, and the affective relation of that *aware* within the individual’s life. As an individual gains more experience with objects, the depth of their knowledge of *mono no aware* increases, and so too does the speed with which they can determine if an object “sparks joy.”

In the above, Kondo posits that the difficulty in determining what moves the *kokoro* lies in the degree to which we have cultivated our affective sensitivities. Unless we are clear and decisive in our tastes, or have a cultivated sense of *mono no aware*, it is difficult to understand how our *kokoro* is moved and how we should respond to this movement. For Norinaga, if we do not understand the essence of the thing, we cannot appropriately consider whether we should keep or discard the item. This difficulty becomes more nuanced as practitioners proceed through the KonMari method towards more sentimental items. While sorting items like household goods is relatively easy due to our limited connections with them, sorting through more personal items requires a refined sense of *mono no aware*. If we are to interpret Kondo through Norinaga, the difficulty of sorting sentimental belongings arises from the ways that the items themselves bear the *aware* of the circumstances of their purchase, the events they were involved in, and the relationships they helped to form.

Kondo’s KonMari concept extends a long history of Japanese affective theories of experience. These theories are concerned with how we enter relationships with the world and the persons around it. Kondo shares with Norinaga the intention to cultivate and deepen our connection with the material world such that we can live fuller lives. Moreover, while Kondo does not make any commitments to an affective theory of experience in the same way that Norinaga does, the structure of her KonMari method, and the fact that she uses Norinaga’s *mono no aware* throughout her writings, situates her work alongside Norinaga. It is possible to characterize Kondo’s system as contributing to Norinaga’s self-cultivation project. As Kondo writes, “when we put our things in order and strengthen our bonds with what we own, we get back in touch with that delicate sensitivity to *mono no aware*. We rediscover our innate capacity to cherish the things in our lives and regain the awareness that

our relationship with the material world is one of mutual support."⁴⁵

To this end, as with Norinaga's theoretical work, we may take Kondo's KonMari system as more than a system of home organization. It is a project of self-cultivation aimed at rediscovering our capacity to affect and be affected by the relationships we establish with the objects, or *mono*, in the world. As such, the value of Kondo's KonMari system extends beyond the simple restoration of our capacity to recognize the affective potential in objects. The KonMari system enables us to recognize the fundamental ways in which we engage in constant interaction with the world around us. Where *mono no aware* presents the immediacy of affective experience as the ground of our ongoing experience in the world, *tokimeku* allows us to take up that immediacy and recognize the ways in which our affective relationships with the objects and persons around us serve to structure the affective ground of our lived experience.

Conclusion: The Life Changing *Mono no Aware* of KonMari

In the afterword to *Spark Joy*, Kondo extends the effects of this self-cultivation to our interpersonal relationships, stating "The process of tidying seems to deepen the relationships not only between our things and our home but also between our things and ourselves and between ourselves and our family."⁴⁶ Drawing on her earlier definition of "tidying," we could argue that "tidying" forces us to confront ourselves through organizing our *kokoro* such that we become more sensitive to the affective qualities of our relationships with others. Put in terms of Norinaga's *mono no aware*, the KonMari method cultivates *mono no aware*, increasing our sensitivity to the moving power of things, including the moving power of our interpersonal relationships. Thus we learn to respond appropriately to them.

Norinaga, on this point, would agree: "In people's everyday dealings with one another as well, those who do not know *mono no aware* show no considerateness in anything and are often hard-hearted and cruel...But when people deeply understand the hearts of others, they naturally act so as not to harm society or other people. This is another benefit of making people know *mono no aware*."⁴⁷ For Norinaga, cultivation of *mono no aware* — be it through contemplation and production of aesthetic forms or through putting the *kokoro* in order through the KonMari method — has the effect of cultivating a sensitivity to the *aware* of individuals and the situations that they find themselves in. Kondo echoes Norinaga's sentiment, stating: "we can't change others. And we should never force someone else to tidy. Only when we accept unconditionally people whose values differ from our own can we really say that we have finished tidying."⁴⁸

While brief, the above provides additional meaning to Kondo's statement, quoted in the introduction, "when we put our things in order and strengthen our bonds with what we own, we get back in touch with that delicate sensitivity

to *mono no aware*. We rediscover our innate capacity to cherish the things in our lives." This is to say that the cultivation of the sensitivity to *mono no aware* through the KonMari method is more than a means to reconnect to the objects in our lives. It is also a means to rediscover and to deepen the connections between ourselves and the people around us.⁴⁹ By engaging in the organization of the *kokoro* through the organization of our physical space, the KonMari system also reorganizes our way of engaging with the world such that we rediscover the moving power, the *aware*, of the relationships we have established in our lives.

Notes

- ¹ Marie Kondo. *The life-changing magic of tidying up: the Japanese art of decluttering and organizing*. (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2014). Kindle Edition, Location 2014.
- ² Marie Kondo. *Spark Joy: an illustrated master class on the art of organizing and tidying up*. (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2016), 208.
- ³ Selections from this work in translation can be found in Michael F. Marra ed. *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).
- ⁴ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 21.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Kondo, *Life-changing Magic*, Kindle locations 500–501.
- ⁸ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 15.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 21.
- ¹¹ Kondo, *Life-changing Magic*, Kindle locations 495–6.
- ¹² Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 23.
- ¹³ Ibid., 105.
- ¹⁴ Kondo, *Life-changing Magic*, Kindle locations 986–987.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle locations 983–984.
- ¹⁶ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 95.
- ¹⁷ Kondo, *Life-changing Magic*, Kindle Locations 861–862.
- ¹⁸ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 208.
- ¹⁹ McCullough, Helen Craig, and Tsurayuki Ki. 1985. *Kokin wakashū: the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry: with Tosa nikki and Shinsen waka*, 3.
- ²⁰ Kasulis, *Cultivating the Mindful Heart*, 7.
- ²¹ Ibid., 3.
- ²² Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 277.
- ²³ Kasulis, Thomas, *Shinto: The Way Home*, Dimension of Asian Spirituality Series (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 11.
- ²⁴ Motoori Norinaga as quoted by Ueda Kenji "Shinto" in Hori Ichiro, et al. ed. *Japanese Religion: A Survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs*. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1972), 38.
- ²⁵ Kasulis, *The Way Home*, 7.
- ²⁶ Motoori Norinaga, *Genji Monogatari Tama no Ogushi* in Thomas Harper and Haruno Shirane ed. *Reading The Tale of Genji: Sources from the First Millennium*. (New York: Columbia University Press. Kindle Edition).

- ²⁷ Kasulis, *The Way Home*, 20.
²⁸ Ibid.
²⁹ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 207.
³⁰ Selections from this work in translation can be found in Thomas Harper and Haruno Shirane ed. *Reading The Tale of Genji: Sources from the First Millennium*. (New York: Columbia University Press. 2015. Kindle Edition.)
³¹ Selections from this work in translation can be found in Michael F. Marra ed. *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).
³² Marra, *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga*, 174.
³³ Ibid., 189.
³⁴ Harper and Shirane, Kindle Locations 12749–12752.
³⁵ Marra, *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga*, 184.
³⁶ Ibid., 139.
³⁷ Ibid.
³⁸ Harper and Shirane, Kindle Locations 12821–12823.
³⁹ Marra, *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga*, 172–173.
⁴⁰ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 25.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid.
⁴³ Ibid., 208.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 208.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 207.
⁴⁸ Motoori Norinaga, "Isonokami sasamegoto." In Motoori Norinaga shū, *Shinchō Nihon koten shūsei*, no. 60, edited by Hino Tatsuo, 444–46. Shinchōsha, 1983, quoted in Peter Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony – Poetry, Empathy, and Community in Mid-Tokugawa*

Confucianism and Nativism. (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press 2011), 178–9.

- ⁴⁹ Kondo, *Spark Joy*, 194.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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