# MATTER, MIND AND SPIRIT(S)

Local Institution and traditional Philosophy of the Japanese agrarian Village

Structural Ergology and the Japanese Cult of the Village Deity (ujigami)

Paper to be read at the International Conference of the International Association of Philosophical Societies Jakarta, Indonesia, January 3rd - 9th 1990

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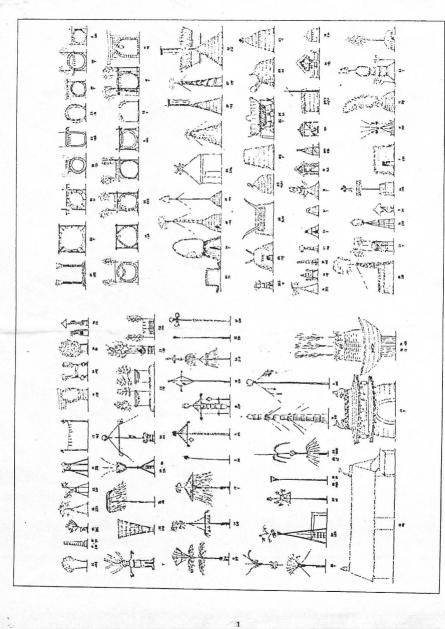
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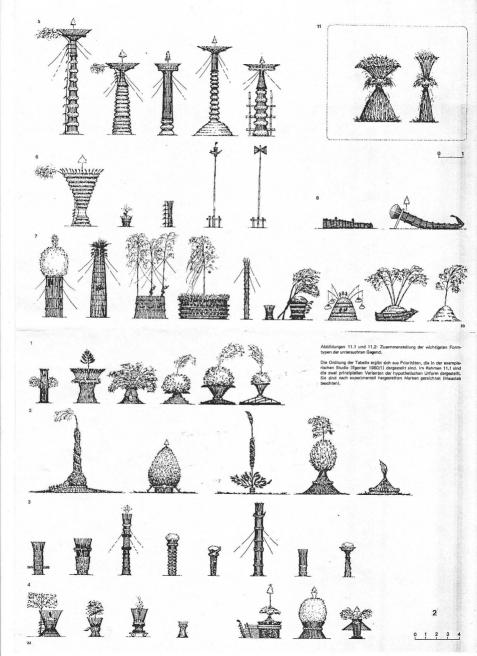
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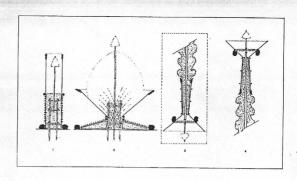
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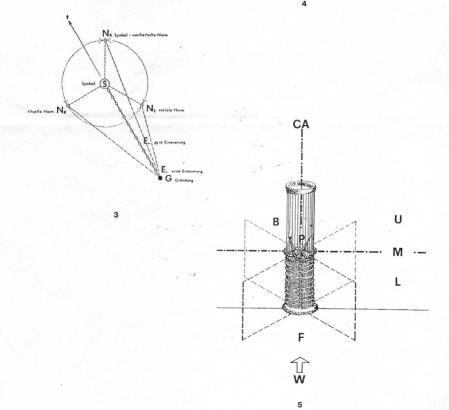
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### INTRODUCTION

"If the ethnologists are coming, the spirits are leaving the island." This witty sentence pronounced by H. P. Duerr is not just a brilliant ethno-critical point. The phrase can be taken in a wider sense as a maxim. It strikes the core of the culturally disastrous misinterpretations of the European humanities (in German 'Geisteswissenschaften', 'Aspiritual sciences(). Particularly when dealing with locally developed structures of traditional societies, the western researcher is generally not conscious of the antique historicisms, the medieval scholastic constructions and the illuminated reactions which make up his spiritual world-view. This accounts for his ideas of religion, of mesthetics, of social structure. In short, his whole cultural anthropological methodology is conditioned by the analytical concept of the division of matter, mind and spirit(s).

Thus, dealing with religion, he takes it for granted and self-evident that his questions should be based on the eurotheological concept of an absolute spiritual entity. He will ask his informants about their ideas, their creeds, he will write about spirits and gods, about ideas of a rice-soul etc. And it is equally self-evident that any object culture which appears in a religious context will be interpreted from spiritual aprioris. Since the European concept of 'higher religion' relies on this absolute spiritual entity, material objects figuring in the centre of cults will be termed primitive 'fetishes', 'idols' etc. Exactly the same applies to the ethnology of art. The researcher will collect what pleases his European personal taste; he will detach it from its relation to the rest of the corresponding culture and place it in the showcases of a western museum. Thus, for instance, the ritual significance of the 'beautiful godly statues', the 'marvellous exotic masks' is totally neglected. This method relies on 'autonomous aesthetics' (Schmalenbach) which are not questioned under eurocentric conditions. Similarly, endlessly differentiated kinship systems are isolated from their vital context; but the pseudo-scientific value of such academic discussions has recently been questioned in this latter regard. In traditional Japan, for example, most of the basic social terms are closely related to the dwellinghouse (ie). This is always intensely related to the continuity of settlement, territory and local power.

If nowadays we speak of a crisis in the field of tension between modern science and traditional society, this is certainly at least partly due to euro-anthropological theories of hierarchical values which leads to conflicts in the vital reality. Since most of these theories are largely derived from eurocen-

tric aprioris, they are bound to classify as primitive whatever does not fit into these categories. On the other hand, an objective science would have to reconstruct religious, aesthetic, social and also economic structures inductively and on the basis of the realities of a given tradition.

The author has lived more than 10 years in Japan and has carried out intensive field research into various complexes of traditional Shinto: village Shinto (ujigami), Shinto related to house and yard (yashikigami) and Shinto related to agriculture (talyama no kami). In his study on the ujiqami- rituals of 100 villages of Central Japan, a new ethnographical method, called >structural ergology(, was developed which avoids drawing conclusions from eurocentric aprioris (Egenter 1980b, 1982a). In its interdisciplinary approach, this method focusses on sacred signs and symbols (yorishiro) annually renewed within the local cultic complex. Social, ritual and spatial structures and their complex philosophy are reconstructed on the basis of this doubtless very ancient object tradition. Thus a kind of non-written local history is revealed. This 'history' is closely related to the foundation of the settlement. The paper will deal in detail with this method and will give hints as to how the early history of Japan can be reinterpreted from structural and territorial considerations.

Paradoxically, centuries of worldwide Christian proselytization have provided us with a wealth of ethnographical and historical sources on so-called 'primitive religion', which show very similar symbolic representations. Applied at the higher level of intercultural comparison, 'structural ergology( might thus prove to be a very efficient tool in uncovering the eurocentric historicisms of the European mind (Egenter 1984a, 1986a, 1987e, f, 1988a, c,d,e,f,q,h, 1989a,c,d,e).

# YDRISHIRO - SACRED SEATS OF GODS

There are essentially four criteria which make Japan an ideal field for cultural research. In contrast to continental (e.g. European) conditions with its dynamic overlappings the Japanese archipelago has been in a clearly perjoheral situation over a long time. Its written history of about thousand years is relatively short. The influences it received are linear, coming mainly from its immediate neighbours, Korea and China. Most impacts of advanced civilisation can be dated and discerned as secondary layers overlying the autochthonous traditions (city, temple and palace architecture, imperial concepts, script, paper, silk etc.). Also the roughly thousand years of agrarian prehistory are relatively clear. The small-scale tectonic structure of its hinterland has, until recently preserved an enormous wealth of agrarian traditions. In addition, Japan is practically free from Christianisation and remained shut off from the outside

world for nearly 200 years after the first Western attempts at proselytizing. These are probably the reasons why amay cultic traditions, which doubtless originated in prehistoric times, are still preserved in rural Japan . Further, the fact that Japan has built up an excellent body of folklore studies is extremely important for the foreign ethnologist or japanologist. It allows him quick and fruitful access to this wealth of traditions (Takeda 1949, Hagiwara 1965, Miyamoto 1963/64, Eder 1951, NHJ 1972).

Within this extraordinarily rich fund of sourcematerials on Japanese agrarian traditions, there is a particular and still widespread type of cult in which so-called 'sacred seats of gods' (prishiro, kami no za) are of central importance (Egenter 1980b, 1981a,b, 1982b,d, 1984b, 1988c,f).

see Fig. 1: Sacred seats of gods (yorishiro) compiled from Japanese folklore studies, partially acc. to surveys of the author.

Made of plant materials, such as reed, bamboo, twigs etc., these cultic structures, built by primitive construction methods (staking, binding), show a considerable variety of forms. Dominant are geometric types (pillars, huts), which clearly owe their form to technical conditions (e.g. tying stalks); but natural forms are also frequent, such as artificial trees, fish-like types, forms alluding to the human figure or to technomorphical forms like boats.

Such sacred seats of gods are usually erected in front of Shinto shrines, within the shrine precinct (keidai). They are built by certain cult-groups (zenin, wakasono) for the period of the festival. In many places they are handled in dynamic ways, like the well-known movable shrines or palanquins (o-mikoshi); that is to say, they are carried around in the shrine precinct or through the village. Often they are the most important element in processions to secondary sanctuaries. At the end of the festival, when they have served their purpose, they are carried into the woods and left to decay or are thrown into a nearby stretch of water. In most cases they are burnt in the course of often very spectacular fire festivals (hi matsuri).

Official Shinto-theology has integrated such traditions of temporary representations of local deitjes into the developed cult system. The sacred seats are interpreted as temporary cult objects into which the godly spirit descends through consecration rites (kasi oroshi) performed by the Shinto priest. The spirit thus remains with the participants during the festival. Banquets and ancient traditions (theater, dances) are then performed in honor of the deity (kasi asobi). At the end of the festival the sacred object is deservated or destroyed and the spirit of the

deity reascends into heaven.

The author has studied such cult festivals in rural areas all over Japan for many years. Sacred seats of gods were researched with regard to constructive, formal and spatial criteria and to their social context. Finally, in the region around the town of Omihachiman (at the Eastern shore of lake Biwa) a relatively homogeneous tradition was found, which was suitable for a representative study (Egenter 1980b, 1982a).

see Fig. 2: Wain forms of the 'sacred seats of gods' found in the region of 100 villages around Omihachiman-city in central Japan

Japanese folklore (and Shinto) studies recorded this tradition in two monographs (Kitagawa 1961, Tsukitake 1966, Suganuma 1975). The rituals are described as 'fire festivals' (hi matsuri) and the cult objects are interpreted as 'torches' (taimatsu). Thus prior attention is paid to the aspect of fire. From this standpoint two monographs on representative cases (Ueda and Ohmihachiman) are sufficient because, as an element, fire is always the same. Objective and spatial considerations were of secondary importance in these studies.

In contrast to this, the author proceeded from the hypothesis that these sacred seats of gods were original types of semantic and symbolic structures. Surveys in the villages gradually showed that festivals of this type were performed annually in about 100 settlements. An enormous range of formal and structural differentiation and symbolic meaning (cosmic symbolism) could be demonstrated. Clear territorial implications of different forms and types of signs were characteristic. The hypothesis that these 'sacred seats of gods' were basically structures in the constructive sense. with semantic and symbolic functions - not just fire-heaps or 'torches' - was clearly borne out in the course of the study. But it is not the object of this paper to present the results here. Two publications deal with them in great detail (Egenter 1980b, 1982a) and further, briefly, in in brevity three book reviews (Knecht 1982, Ludwig 1983, Blümmel 1984). Here we will discuss the method used and the scientific re-evaluations implied by the results of the study.

The most important points: The confirmation of the hypothesis 'semantic and symbolic architecture' 1 led to the refutation of the theological interpretation. Basically, these primitively built signs and symbols are:

1) territorial signs which were initially institutionalised by

the term architecture is used here not in the usual sense but, in terms of architectural anthropology, as a generic term like 'zoon' in zoology.

the founder of a village at the foundation of a settlement and from them on periodically reproduced because of their perishable character. They have, consequently, to be considered as a kind of traditional archive of local settlement history.

2) structural symbols, that is to say objective prototypes or nuclei of an esthetically transmitted philosophy, which more or less corresponds to the Chinese Yin-Yang concept.

But let us first have a look at the method which we called >structural ergology(.

# STRUCTURAL ERGOLOGY

The term first. Ergology is an established subfield of ethnology. It originated in ethnological suseums and deals with material culture of a particular ethnos or in general (Hirschfeld/Janata/Feest 1982/89). The meaning of 'structural' in its wider sense corresponds to its use within French structuralism (Claude Levy-Strauss) but, leaning to Bastide 1962, is genetically related to the Latin word 'structura' (from 'struere', construct, to build). This implies that there is an intrinsic connection between the ideological concept of structure and 'structure' in the objective sense of a construction (Egenter 1985b).

This points to the central aspect of >structural ergology(: its inductive approach. In this it differs basically from established ethnographical methods, which from the very beginning conceive and select their fieldwork materials according to eurocentric disciplines and consequently deal with the selected phenomena from this deductive standpoint. In our case, for instance, an ethnologist would study these cultic traditions in terms of primitive religion. He would use the participants as informants. Would ask them about their beliefs and interpret the object culture from theological or spiritual a prioris. That this object culture might bear its own esthetic or symbolic expression through the ages would only occur to him in a marginal sense and of course he would relate such symbolic meanings to the historically established system of deities. He would not realise that the concepts of this system developed under Chinese influence and were diffused into the villages by centrally educated priests.

<sup>\*</sup>In philosophical terms this can be compared to the medieval concept of `Dcoincidentia oppositorum(\* or Heraclitus' `Struggle is the beginning of all things(. It should be noted that similar polar systems of thought seem to have their origins in various cultures on the threshold between prehistory and history. This is valuable too in the case of Taoism, the teachings on the correlations between the moving and the fixed.

Also, he would not relate the social hierarchy of the village to the cult or to the religious symbols, but would leave this work to the social anthropologist. The aesthetic quality of the sacred signs would be ignored because the religious approach classifies them as 'fetishes', 'idols' etc., and their primitive mode of construction would be considered unworthy of esthetic consideration. Possibly, if they alluded to the human figure', they would be described as 'Figurative representations of Japanese folk religion' (Eder 1951). In any case, their detailed objective survey is determined by the surocentric perspective.

The approach is quite different in the case of >structural ergology(. Suided by the technologically primitive character of the objects, this method places the cyclically reproduced signs into the centre of the cultic complex, interprets them as prebuddhistic markers of sarred places and consequently studies them inductively, that is to say without eurocentric prejudices and, in particular, on the basis of technical, aesthetic and spatial criteria. In its strong focus on material culture and with its aim of social or spiritual insights from these objective source materials, structural ergology is similar to archaeology in its methods. It works with plans, notes the locations of buildings, paths and objects in great detail. The main difference: it 'digs' in the uppermost stratum where human behaviour is still accessible and can be integrated into its surveys.

The term 'accumulation' is essential (Ogburn 1923, Ogburn/Nimkoff 1950, Mühlmann 1954, 1962). Culture is not to be regarded as a homogeneous condition but as conglomeration of various phases. Thus historical data or technological criteria can be used to reconstruct coherent functional complexes. It is also maintained that the ritual tradition of material culture offers a more fruitful field for research because its degree of continuity is much higher than that of religious ideas. From

The annually reproduced type of such signs and symbols is thus to be considered as the precursor of the shrine which today marks the centre of cultic activities. Nooden shrines originated under Chinese influence (mainly during the period of ryobu shinto) and spread into the villages from central Shinto-systems such as those of Ise (imperial line) and Kasuga in Nara (Fujiwara) etc. In prebuddhistic times, annually renewed signs and symbols of the type described marked the sacred places of the villages. The renewal formed the main content of the local rituals. This also explains why the construction and destruction of the symbols were continued after the introduction of durable shrines.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Buddhism was imported into Japan in the 8th century AD, chiefly by the aristocratic elite. Through its influence on centralised Shinto, it greatly changed the religious ideology of the villages.

such considerations we may derive the following scheme:

see Fig. 3: Scheme of interpretation of annual rites related to the clan- or village-deity of 100 villages surveyed in the region around Omihachiman-city

<u>Cyclic times</u> In the centre of the scheme we find the cyclic reproduction of the signs. The **tradition begins with the foundation of the settlement**. The sign is the document of the foundation.

Social nors: The house of the village founder often occupies a dominant position in the Japanese village. Its current owner, called 'grass-divider' (kusawake), often functions as priest in the local ujigasi-cult. In contrast to the centrally educated priest (shinshoku), the traditional designation for this function is 'owner of the deity' (kannushi (kani-nushi). Of the villagers, only the 'children of the village deity' (ujiko), that is to say the representatives of the houses of ancient residents, take part in the cults. Newcomers are excluded. Further, the houses of ancient residents (ie) clearly distinguish as the 'earliest house' (honke) and 'branch-houses' (bunke). Together with similar distinctions at the level of the kinship system (dozoku), the village has clear knowlege of its settlement history.

see fig. 4: Comparison of the internal structure of the three main types of 'sacred seats of the gods' in Weda (Egenter 1982:97). To make the homologies clearly visible, the high-column type has been drawn inverted within the dotted frame.

Legend: 1: column-type sign (hamlet Ishibashi of Weda); 2: hutlike sign (village Weda); 3 and 4: reed symbol of high-column type (inverted and in normal position).

Aesthetic norm: A comparative study of the signs, their construction and forms, reveals their traditional meaning. They express a unity of opposite categories and are thus models of formal, spatial and social concepts. The spiritual and philosophical meaning of the cults is not revealed by an alien spiritual concept; the morals of the village are inherent in the tradition of the signs. As in the case of the Chinese Yin-Yang, its objective is the transmission of a harmonious view of the world.

see Fig. 5: Spatial organisation of the column-type truss (Otainatsa of Ishibashi, Weda; Egenter 1982:82) Legend: CA: central axis, f: front, B: back, P: place, M: towards the symbol (or away from it), M: middle, W: upper part, L: lower

par U:	empty	not defined	free	movable	natural	
L:	full	defined	bound	fixed	artificial	

Ritual nors: the pattern of these traditional rites becomes comprehensible in a new way. The symbol is perishable. To preserve it, it has to be periodically renewed with new material. If it designates a particular place, this has to be freed before the renewal. The old symbol is removed. Since this symbol is the embodiment of the local social order the village abandons its norse for a short time, submerges into chaos and creates itself anew. Many ritual phenomena can be explained in this way. The destruction of such symbols usually takes place at night. Customs such as ritual nakedness, drinking sacred wine until all are drunk, the chaotic use of musical instruments, are widespread. Social ecstasy corresponds to the objective spatial ec-stasis of the symbol. The following day, the symbol is created anew and the normal order of the local world is reestablished.

# THE TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE JAPANESE VILLAGE

The whole ritual complex can be explained genetically in analogy to the signs: they determine the ritual, aesthetic and social norms of the village.

The temporal pattern of the village follows the ritual requirements. The sign is annually destroyed and renewed. Since it is the 'pars pro toto' of the village order, the village also destroys its usual standards. Social hierarchy, as expressed with clothing, normal behaviour is given up. The whole village is thrown into ecstasy and chaos and recreates itself. The material

<sup>&</sup>quot;Napanese New Year's rites are a rich source of various types of 'sacred seats of gods' (sagich6, dondon goya etc.), which are set up in relation to various cultic systems (yashikigami, ujigami, sai no kami, ta/yama no kami). Ideas of 'renewing' the house (6-50ji), the fire etc. are widespread. On New Year's morning the first new water (wakamizu) is tasted; later the fields are worked for the first time (kuwahachime, nodade). And, last but not least, the shimenawa, the holy rope seen on each house all over Japan around New Year's time, basically symbolises the rebuilding of the whole house.

conditions of the sign relate time to the cycle of nature. Thus signs made of reed are associated with the natural growth cycle of reeds.

By virtue of the sequence of renewals, the signs are a kind of prehistorical script, documents of a distant past. The act of the founder, through the repetition of the same, breaks into the here and now, again and again. An act of long ago determines what exists now, makes visible the dependence of the present upon the past. In addition, participation in the ritual act of sign renewal implies power. The founder once occupied his land, organised it in a customary way, was able hand it down to his descendants, rent it to peasants etc.. As the 'first' he became a kind of king, or, in German, etymologically related, 'Fürst' in his village. Thus the social hierarchy is based on the foundation of the settlement and this is annually re-enacted in the renewal of the document of this foundation. Even if the settlement changes under external influences, the chain of cyclic renewal remains objectively and spiritually the same, retains continuity within this cultural change. In a traditional village of this type it is not the history of facts (Faktengeschichte), as we understand it from our linear standpoint with regard to time, but the local past and present of the cyclic cult festival that matters.

The polar categories or, philosophically speaking, the system of >coincidentia oppositorum(, devide the social and spatial structure of the village into upper and lower, unlimited and defined, mobile and fixed, natural and technical, inacessible and domesticated spheres. As 'the superior' (kami), the village chief governs his folks (tami), not in an absolute but in a complementary sense. He is dependent on them just as they are on him. The deity of the woods (yama no kami) is brought into the house in spring, is treated with great respect, then carried into the fields where he becomes the field god (ta no kami), protecting the various phases of the rice cycle. After the harvest he is again entertained to a meal in the house, then brought back to the woods and again becomes yawa no kawi, god of the woods. During the cold half-year the fields are given back to nature. Further, the sanctuaries (honden) of the village shrines (baiyasan, jinja) always stand on the threshold between an inaccessible part of 'primeval forest' and the precinct (keidainai) used by the participants in the rites. Very likely the prebuddhistic 'sacred seats of gods' were erected at the same place, in order to unite in a harmonious way what was understood to be the mysterious force of life, the limitless extent of nature, with man's defined domain where he acted modestly on his own behalf. Man even submitted his own body to this traditional law of polar harmony. In many parts of Japan we can still see participants of cultfestivals, dressed in very ancient clothes or hats made of reed or straw that show the same forms as the symbols of harmony.

Under continental influence, the ancient traditional signs and symbols were replaced by durable wooden shrines. The small-scale local system, with its cyclic renewal of the sacred markers, gradually lost its meaning. Values developed in the spacious Chinese culture came to be considered as progress. Local traditions relying on local harmonies were replaced by broad cosmological ideologies. The delicate roots of the human environment were lost. Fortunately, Japanese farmers in those isolated villages have still preserved the traditions of their 'sacred seats of the gods'. If not, how could we gain these insights into a 'history from below', which radically questions our customary approach'

#### CONCLUSION

The multitude of 'sacred seats of the gods' preserved in the frame of Japanese folk- and village Shinto allows the conclusion, that cultic traditions of this type were widespread in prehistorical Japan. Village rites with annually renewed territorial signs and built symbols must have been the general rule. It is not hard to imagine this 'pointillism' of local territorial 'constitutions', nor to see why in early history government was called a 'matter of festivals' (asésuri-godo).

The territorial component of our approach leads us to a new explanation of Japanese myths. The aristocratic elites of early Japan, politically intents on building a unified empire modelled on the Chinese example, will have ammalgamated the local traditions of agrarian deities with their astonishingly concrete namee? With broad cosmological myths of the division of heaven and earth, in order to smother autochthonous foundation legends and corresponding territorial claims and thus pave the way for Buddhism as prerequisite for a the new territorial order to be imposed by imperial authority. With the so-called Taika reform of 646-49 the emperor became an absolute ruler and all land was

<sup>\*</sup>See Egenter 1989: Omihachiman - The foundation of a town; an Ethnohistorical Model. Berkeley

<sup>7</sup>E.g. taka-mi-musubi no kami, or kami-musubi-no-kami. Note that the ergologically basic phonetic meaning of musubi is 'knot'.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What was traditionally considered to relate to the foundation of a settlement, was now moved into cosmogonical depth. Time was 'stretched' tremendously! Butthe political intention is obvious. The new version imported from China the 'division of heaven and earth' and 'tricked' the indigenous deities, which had their homes in the vast reed fields of Yayoi and Kofun nerinds.

declared to be state owned.9

The philosophical component of our suggestion challenges the established concept, which identifies the beginning of Japanese cultural history with its isports from advanced Chinese civilisation. According to our view, the agrarian villages of the Yayoi and Kofun periods possessed a very complex cyclic tradition, that for centuries handed down ritual, aesthetic and social norms which still can be addired in rural regions of presentday Japan. In other words: the prehistoric villages of Japan had a fairly high object culture and, correspondingly, a very humane philosophy of life. For reasons mentioned in the introduction, and chiefly our multi-disciplinary ways of describing cultural history, this has been totally ignored or misinterpreted; it represents the failure of both our historical and archaeological methods, 10

To conclude, two important points.

1) What we always valued so highly in Japanese culture, namely the great talent of a whole nation for the aesthetics of form, probably has far deeper roots than just an urban learning from models imported from the mainland. \*1 And

2) what the Japanese regard as their specific mental quality, their very own way of reasoning and what is generally denoted by the term wa, meaning harmony, balance, might be something that was not simply taken over from China. It might have existed long before such contacts were established. Maybe the village cultures of the Yayoi and Kofun-periods were much richer than the archaeologists and their speculative methods would have us believe!

<sup>\*</sup>This concept is described in greater detail in a three hour radio-lecture by the author. Under the title Japan, the big Village - Notes on the History of Japanese Historical Consciousness( it deals with three methodologically distinct phases of Japanese historiography (China-school, National school, modern cultural anthropology) and shows their conditions and projections (see Egenter 1983).

<sup>\*\*</sup>See Egenter 1986: Software for a Soft Prehistory; structural history and structural ergology as applied to a type of universally distributed 'soft industry': sacred territorial demarcation signs made of non-durable organic materials. The World Archaeological Congress, Southampton and London.

<sup>\*\*</sup>The concept that the aesthetic culture of the prehistorical village cultures strongly influenced the later 'history of art' in Japan was worked out in an earlier study, s. Egenter 1988 The Evolution of Japanese Art from Agrarioan Culttraditions, Jagreb July 1988

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