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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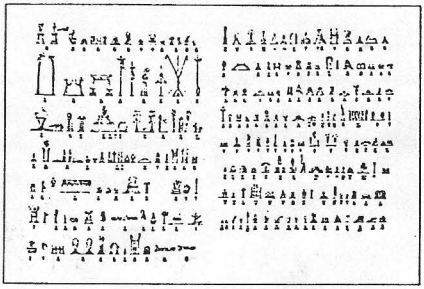

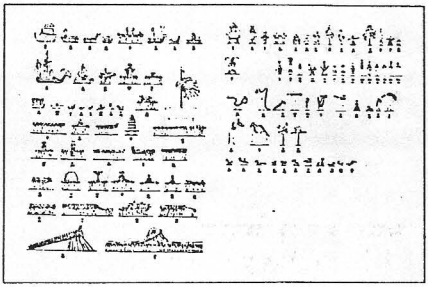

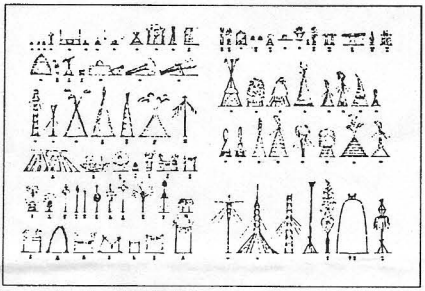

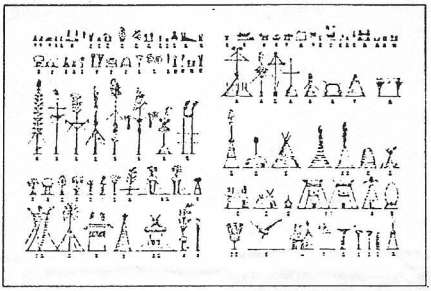

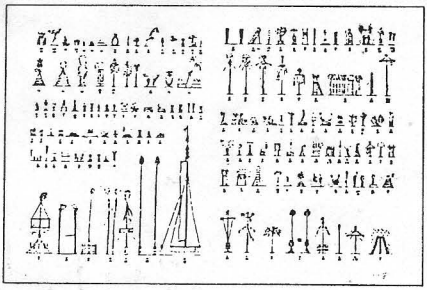

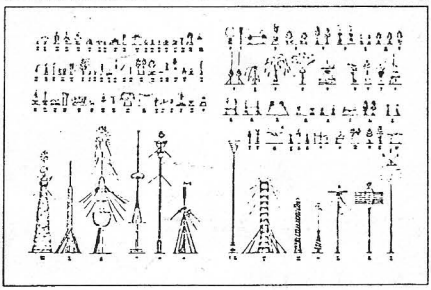

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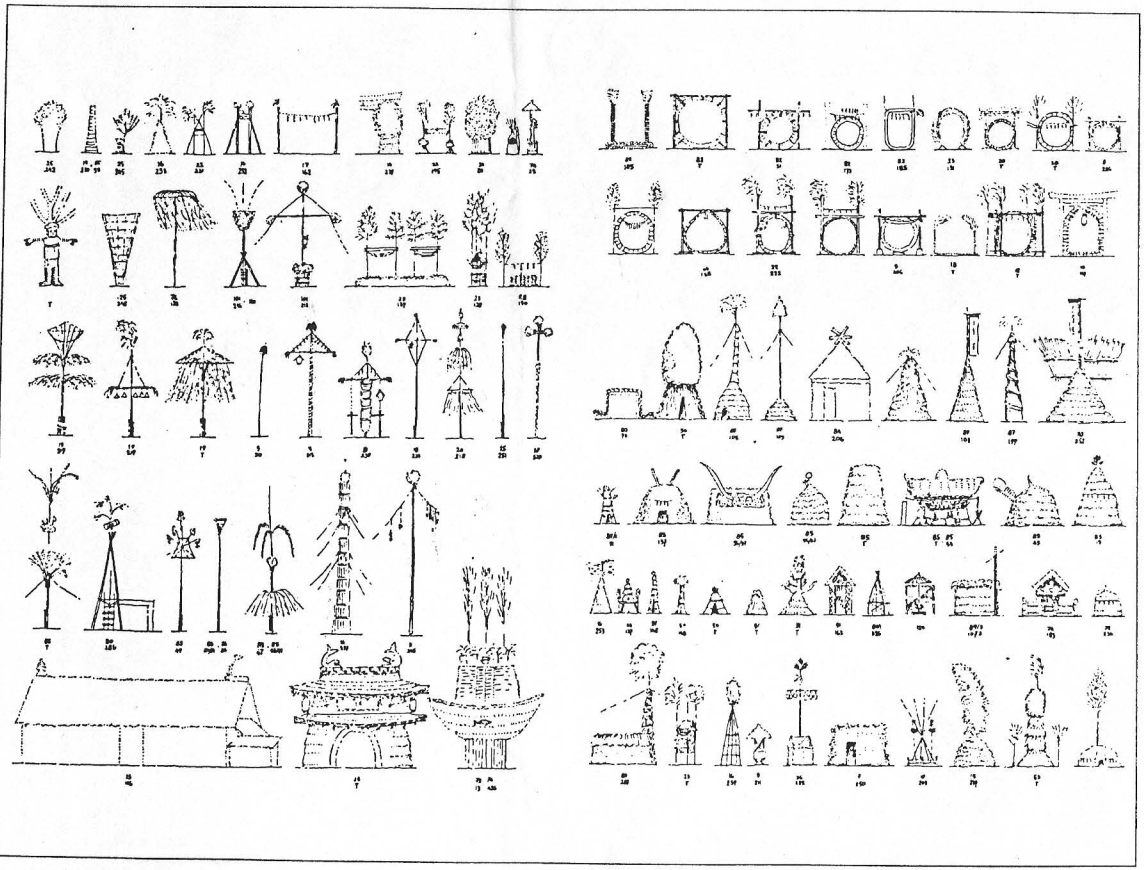
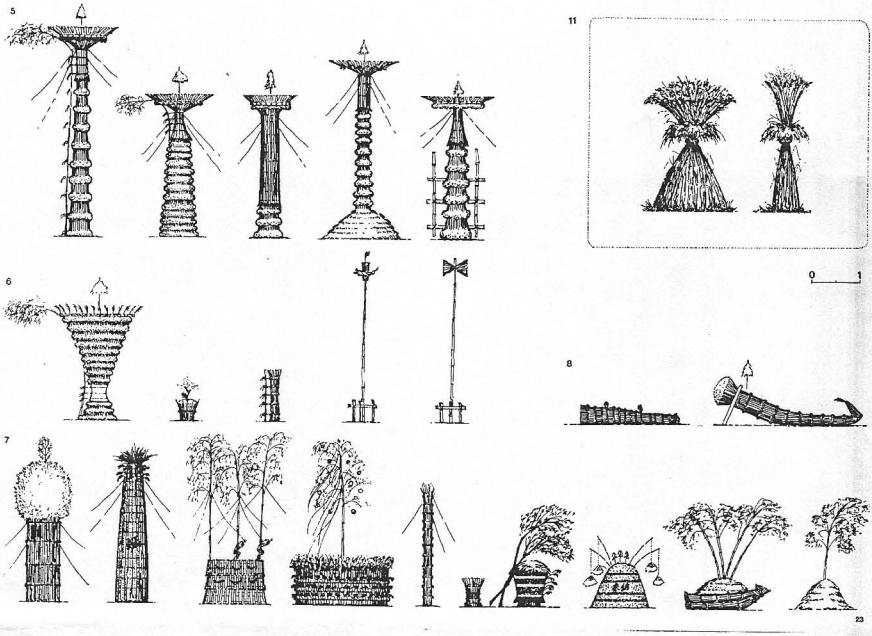
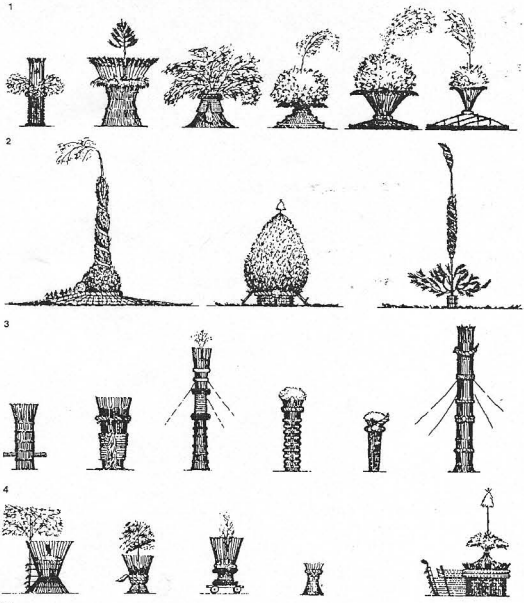
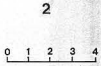


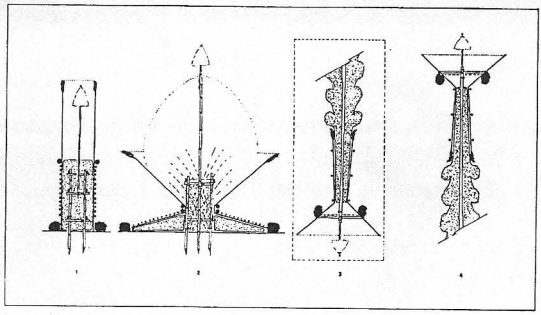




Abbildungen 11.1 und 11.2: Zusammenstellung der wichtigsten Formtypen der untersuchten Gegend.

Die Ordnung der Tabelle ergibt sich aus Prioritäten, die in der exemplarischen Studie (Egenter 1980/1) dargestellt sind. Im Rahmen 11.1 sind die zwei prinzipiellen Varianten der hypothetischen Urform dargestellt. Sie sind nach experimentell hergestellten Marken gezeichnet (Massstab beachten).





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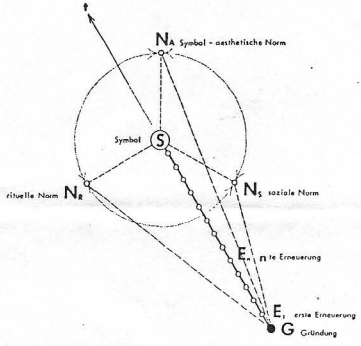
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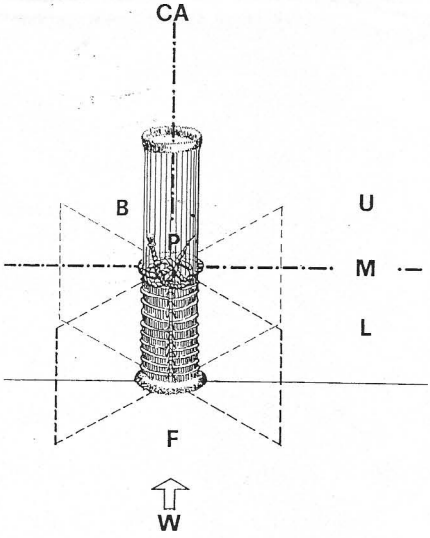
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INTRODUCTION

"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', >spiritual 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 **aesthetics**, 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 **euro-theological 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 (*ta/yama no kami*). In his study on the *ujigami*- 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,g,h, 1989a,c,d,e).

YORISHIRO - 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 peripheral 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 **many 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, NMJ 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'** *(yorishiro, kami no za)* are of central importance (Egenter 1980b, 1981a,b, 1982b,d, 1984b, 1988c,f).

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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, wakamono)* 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 deities into the developed cult system. The sacred seats are interpreted as temporary cult **objects into which the godly spirit descends** through consecration rites *(kami 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 *(kami asobi)*. **At the end** of the festival the sacred **object is desecrated 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).

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

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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**

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[1]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 then 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.[2]

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 museums 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 1983b).

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.

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[2] In philosophical terms this can be compared to the medieval concept of >coincidentia 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 eurocentric perspective.

The approach is **quite different in the case of >structural ergology<.** Guided 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 pre-buddhistic markers of sacred places[3] 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.**[4] From

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[3]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. Wooden 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.

[4]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.