

ARCHITECTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

STRUCTURA MUNDI

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Nold Egenter

Architectural Anthropology:

SEMANTIC AND **SYMBOLIC** ARCHITECTURE

An architectural-ethnological survey into hundred
villages of central Japan

STRUCTURA MUNDI

Nold Egenter, Dipl. arch. ETH, ethnologist and architectural anthropologist. Ten years research in Japan (symbolic-semantic architecture of village Shinto in 100 villages of central Japan). Research on nestbuilding behavior of the higher apes (subhuman architecture) and studies related to architectural ethnology (domestic architecture, in particular Ainu, Japan). Works with numerous publications on the buildup of architectural anthropology and an anthropologically founded architectural theory, Occasional lecturer at the University of Zurich (ethnology). Director of the ›Documentation Office for Fundamental Studies in Building Theory‹ Zurich. Researcher at the Department of Architecture, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne. Co-director of the ›Indian Rural Settlement Survey Institute, Ahmedabad, India, with Miki and Madhavi Desai.

I. PREFACE	7	4. SPATIAL STRUCTURE	45	IV DOCUMENTATION OF FORM TYPES ACCORDING TO SETTLEMENTS	71
II. THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES	11	5. FORM	46	1. TYPES OF REGIONAL DIFFUSION	71
INTRODUCTION	11	5.1 Basic form, general aspects		1.1 Hut-like structures with reed and bamboo crown	
1. TECTONIC SYMBOLS IN JAPANESE FOLK CULT	12	5.2 Formal parts		1.11 The villages around Sensōku	
2. ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF THE DESIGN OF JAPANESE CULTIC SYMBOLS	21	5.21 The cult rope as construction and as centre of organization		1.12 Nanatsuya and Shinsaike	
3. THE THEORY OF COLUMN EVOLUTION OF ORIENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR RESEARCH INTO CULTURAL HISTORY	28	5.22 Dual formal structure		1.13 Higashigawa	
4. SYNTHESIS AND PROSPECTS	32	5.3 Variability of the basic form		1.14 Kurahashibe	
III. GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE TRADITIONS SURVEYED	35	5.4 Regional distribution of the basic forms		1.15 Kongōji	
1. THE REGION INVESTIGATED: DISTRIBUTION OF THE CULT OBJECTS STUDIED	35	5.5 Accessory variability of the basic form		1.2 Hut-like structures with reed roof and bamboo crown (1.21) and tall pillars (1.22)	90
2. RELIGIOUS PRECINCTS, DEITIES AND CULT FESTIVALS NOTES ON METHODS USED	35	5.6 Development		1.21 The fire festival of the Himurei-Hachiman shrine in the town of Ōmihachiman	
3. MATERIAL AND BUILDING TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS	40	6. LOCATION	52	1.22 Festivals of the villages surrounding the town and politically subordinate to it	
3.1 Material		6.1 Types of location		1.221 Nakamura	
3.2 Construction		7. TERRITORIAL AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATION	54	1.222 Obayashi (old name, now called Hachimananchō)	
3.21 Basic principles of construction		8. INTERPRETATION	60	1.223 Kofunaki	
3.22 Constructional types		8.1 Reconstruction of the original situation in relation to periodicity: the cult of one year's duration		1.224 Kitanoshō	
3.3 Destruction		8.2 Meaning in terms of settlement history		1.225 Minamitsuda	
		9. SYMBOLISM	62	1.226 Funaki	
		9.1 General		1.227 Ōfusa	
		9.2 Relative symbolism		1.228 Takagai	
		9.3 Fundamental symbolic structure		1.229 Utsuro	
				1.2210 Tsuchida	
				1.2211 Taga	

ANNEX: BOOKREVIEW

THEODORE M. LUDWIG
(Valparaiso University)

From: 'History of Religions'. Chicago 1983/3, p. 89-92

Among the fascinating aspects of folk Shinto in Japanese villages today is the great variety of local cultic practices involving the construction of temporary structures or monuments out of reeds or bamboo and their use in festivals associated with the local shrine. Often they are discarded soon after, or even destroyed as part of the festival. In interpreting these temporary cultic structures, ethnographers and scholars of Shinto have usually tried to associate them with cults of local shrine gods or seasonal agricultural festivals.

Nold Egenter takes a very different and unusual approach to the interpretation of this facet of folk Shinto, with the result that he has managed to put forth a host of new suggestions. His interest is in the material, the construction techniques, the form and the symbolism of the monuments themselves. Thus he presents in this book an architectural-ethnological investigation which seeks to understand them not in terms of their relation to other facets of the Shinto cult but from the point of view of their material and technical development. This viewpoint, Egenter feels, casts fresh light on the development of folk culture in Japan from its earliest stages, freed from impositions of the national cult and other later religious developments.

Egenter's investigation is based on fieldwork which he did from 1972 to 1976, concentrating on temporary cultic structures and festivals in the region of Omihachiman near Lake Biwa and including about one hundred surrounding villages. He considers this naturally bounded area to have preserved an 'isolated sphere' in terms of cultural history and thus to have preserved very ancient practices side by side with the imposition of more modern ones.

One of Egenter's main theses is that these temporary structures, when studied objectively in terms of their material and techniques of construction, will yield important information about the original layers of Japanese culture and religion. By systematically identifying the original elements - on the grounds of material and technique - a kind of cultural history can be reconstructed in which many of the ideas about gods and cults of fertility can be seen as later accretions. For, Egenter holds, the cults associated with regional or national gods and festivals represent layers of Shinto into which have been attached to the autochthonic tradition because of social or political developments. For this reason, he deals with the cultic structures and accompanying rituals not as integrated wholes but as agglomerates or accumulations of different layers of development.

In unraveling these layers of accumulation and reaching the earliest autochthonic layer, Egenter lays down an important methodological presupposition: the most ancient circumstances are better preserved in the material tradition (Sachtradition) than the ideal tradition. That is, the actual materials, technique of construction, and behavior represent a material tradition which tend, at least in an isolated sphere, to be passed on relatively unchanged from the most ancient times. But the people's interpretation of these structures and cultic events tends to rationalize the meaning as they accommodate to the spirit of the times. Egenter thus feels it is fruitless to ask the local people about the accumulation of tradition. Rather, the spiritual motivations which stand behind the most ancient cult are to be recovered from the forms of the cultic objects themselves and in the structures of order and meaning which are expressed in them.

As Egenter follows through on this architectural-ethnological and method of investigation, some interesting suggestions are put for-

ward. He finds that the temporary structures are "survivals" of a most ancient cultic marking system which used primitive means of constructions. Still today these same primitive materials are used: reeds, bamboo, rice straw, and rape. Further, no tools are used, only the hands, in the most original sense of "handwork". The resulting cultic structures are temporary characterized by their perishability and inflammability - and indeed, the events of the festival usually lead to the destruction and, often, burning of the monument. From such material and building data, Egenter concludes that these monuments were originally part of a marking system involving their annual construction in connection with the growth of new materials a practice still found in some areas of Japan. It is true that around Omihachiman today these monuments were constructed for a festival and then immediately destroyed. This can be explained, he feels, through the conflict that was produced by the introduction of wooden construction from China, which obviously had no role in the annual cultic cycle. The conflict was resolved by subordinating the temporary monument to the wooden shrine and by making it even more temporary, building it and destroying it in the same festival. thus conflating the cultic annual destruction-renewal cultic proceedings.

Egenter finds that these monuments can be seen as signs for territorial entities and social groups of ancient times. Thus the monuments can help in reconstructing the settlement history of the villages, starting with only a temporary cultic structure in a reed plain, going through phases of additional family huts and sacred woods, finally reaching the stage of a permanent wooden shrine with the temporary structure built in front of it only during the festival. Egenter draws many conclusions from the form of these structures, which is very abstract and geometric. The form depends strictly on the material and the construction techniques. The basic form is not simple but membered, combining Dionysiac and Apollonian elements in a clear dualistic structure. Divided by the binding rope, the upper part is flexible, empty, unlimited, free;

but the bottom part is stable, compacted. limited. These bundles of opposite pairs. Egenter holds, represent the most general ranks of concepts by which ancient man comprehended the world. This dualism of the formed and the not-formed plays a part also in the accompanying ritual and music; it must therefore be the essential "ground-structure" of the symbolism, giving the primal sacral meaning to the monument. It is this 'genetic under-ground' based in the form of the cultic construction which then provides the motivation for the human spirit to compare, analogize, and symbolize, producing what Egenter calls 'relative symbolism' the various types of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, mythic, cosmic, sexual, temporal, and numerical symbolism. But, he insists, the symbolizing movement is always from the basic structure to the relative symbol, not the other way around. This discovery, he feels, has implications for the study of all symbolic creations and, in fact, for searching for the origin of the religious impulse itself.

Amidst this wealth of field data, drawings, diagrams, photos, methodological discussions, and interpretative suggestions, many interesting challenges are found and also, understandably quite a few questions arise. For example, Egenter's confidence that he can establish the most ancient or original layer must be called into questions. He simply states that he will consider the standing, anchored monument type as the original, with the others derived from it. He insists that a type of monuments which is spread over a larger region is always secondary while the type found only locally is primary. Any connection with cults of gods or spirits he likewise always considers secondary to some primordially spiritual motivation implicit in the material and the form of the monuments themselves. Such unsupported methods for asserting primordially raise some doubts about the reliability of his reconstruction of the accumulated stages of cultural history,

Further, Egenter's view of religio-historical research is curious. He

is of the opinion that 'Religionswissenschaft' as a discipline proceeds from theological presuppositions, and thus it seeks only to relate these cultic structures to residences of gods or calls them fetishes or idols. Because he considers the ideas the people themselves have about the meaning of these structures and rituals to be later accumulated layers of interpretation, he discounts the concern of 'Religionswissenschaft' to understand the structures and rituals at least partially in the context of the people's own self-understanding. It is true that Egenter's method of separating the material tradition from the people's interpretation of it can lead to some surprising and challenging results, as witnessed by Egenter's own work, and historians of religions could learn much from this methodology. Yet I wish that, along with the rich and extensive descriptions Egenter provides of the monuments and cultic activities in these villages, he would also have included more details about the villagers' own interpretation of these ancient traditions. In spite of these questions, the book is an important addition to research on folk Shinto and ancient Japanese cultural development. The wealth of material presented here should be valuable to all who are interested in this area.

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Since the publication of the first edition of this book in German (1980), the author has worked in many other disciplinary fields and has constructed a framework of 'architectural anthropology' of which the present book is the foundation stone, semantic architecture being one of the essential supporting fields of the concept 'architectural anthropology'. Further, the intensive and inductive study into all details of the present book makes sense only in view of this wider framework which it supports. Therefore, in the following, a complete list of texts and publications written by the author is included. A great part of these texts listed below will be published in 'Architectural Anthropology Research Series [see Egenter 1992f]

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