

## Shinto Ritual Building Practices

Philip E. Harding

History of Art 681

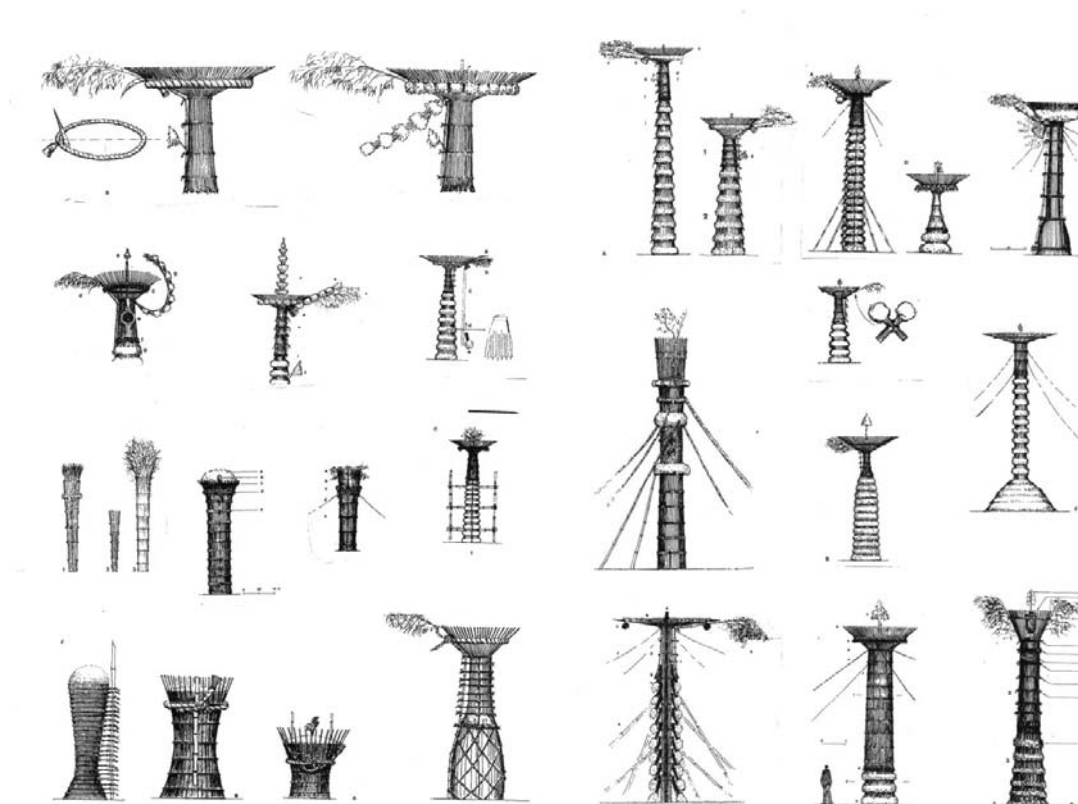
The Ohio State University

Shinto, the native religion of Japan, is a very diverse tradition yet one unified by certain ritual practices. Roughly speaking, Shinto can be divided into “folk Shinto” and “shrine Shinto,” but even within these divisions can be found considerable diversity. Every village has its own local traditions that operate independently from, yet related to the shrine tradition. (The folk activities take place on land owned by the shrine.) Within the shrine system there is also diversity, and today we can readily identify at least eighteen separate cults, each with its own style of shrine building<sup>1</sup>. Within Japan’s own official histories the shrine tradition, particularly the Imperial shrine tradition, has been given the most attention. This tradition experienced continental influences from China and was the one with which the Japanese upper class identified itself. Japan’s folk traditions, practiced in the locale where they first evolved, have largely gone without reference in Japan’s history of art and architecture. Both traditions, however, embrace many related themes and practices. One can find formal dualities expressed in the design of the folk forms and layouts of shrine buildings, as well as some shared motifs such as a “heart pillar.” Most significantly, both traditions periodically build and re-build sacred structures so that the particular built forms are simultaneously ephemeral and enduring – sharing in a kind of temporal immortality. These periodic rebuilding practices serve to reinforce cultural memory and place individuals into the larger stream of sacred time which transcends the temporal, constantly changing world of mortal time.

### The Folk Tradition

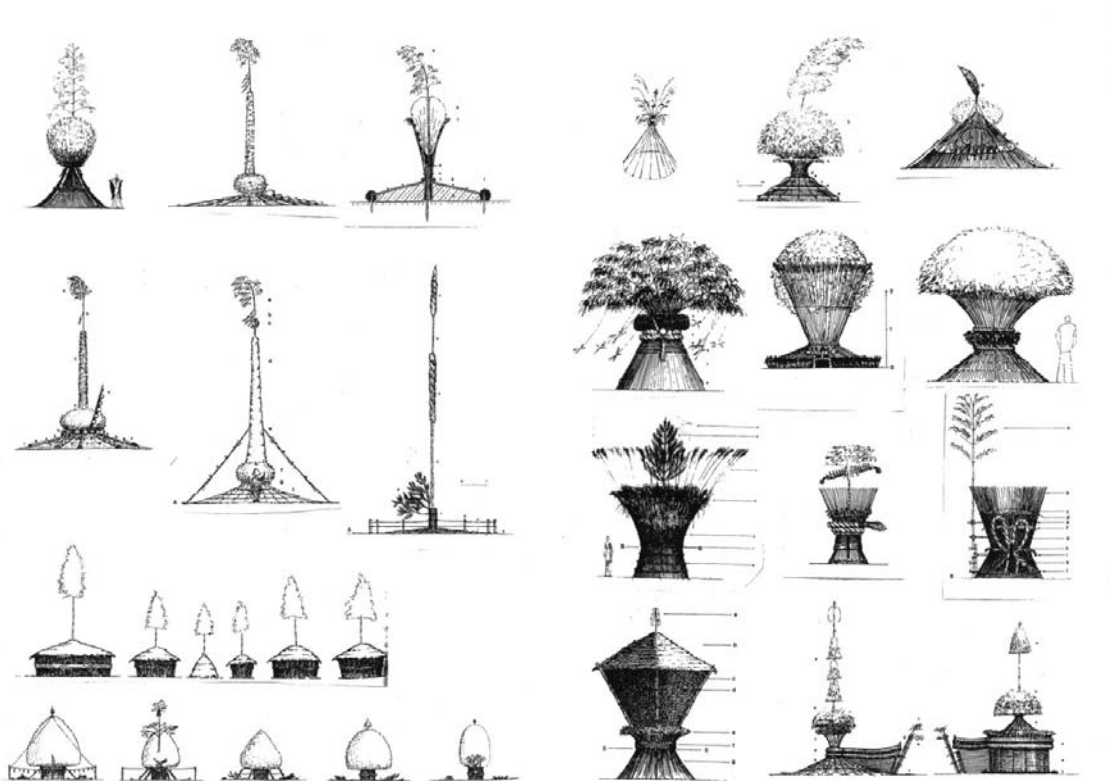
Within the folk tradition, elaborate constructions are built out of ephemeral materials, left standing for only a few days, and then destroyed. These are not architectural spaces but are formal constructions in space that stand as signs, and express a kind of heraldry connected to those who built them. They relate to the system of village deities (*Ujigami*)

and different types may be built for different festivals. The architectural anthropologist Nold Egenter, in his book *Architectural Anthropology: Symantec and Symbolic Architecture*<sup>2</sup>, has performed a detailed study of the tradition of cult torches (*taimatsu*) in one hundred villages of central Japan. These torches, built for the spring festivals, are but one example of the phenomenon. There is a related festival that occurs a month earlier that builds temporary cult objects (*sagicho*) in the form of bamboo huts, festivals that build small rice straw huts, and some that build temporary artificial trees. All of these forms are often treated collectively, and dismissively, as parts of fire festivals, however fire is only one means by which they are destroyed. They may first be beaten, tipped over, or have their bindings cut before being set on fire. The important point is that they are highly symbolic forms that, at some point during the festival, are robbed of their signal character.



These temporary forms are all referred to as *yorishiro*, “temporary abodes of the Gods.” In the area which Egenter studied, the cult torches most often took one of two forms – fixed cult signs that were constructed in place, and multi-local pillars that were built horizontally and then raised into a vertical position. These two types are typically placed

together with one fixed sign and several multi-local pillars erected before the village shrine. Among these principal types there is considerable variation. There are also a large number of unique and rare forms such as those shaped like inverted tetrahedrons or those identified as fish or dragons and carried, burning, in the horizontal position to the shrine. By mapping the occurrence of particular variants one can gain some insights into the settlement history of the region. While in general these are very tradition bound forms, built the same way every year, some change does occur. For example, villages or hamlets that once had separate festivals may now come together for a common festival or villages that once erected a dozen pillars might now raise only half that number. Similarly, in one locale the local shrine possessed a very old photograph showing that pillars previously raised in that village were once much taller than those currently built.



Egenter speculates that the practice of building temporary cult signs for festivals predates the shrine building tradition – that were formerly used as spatial/territorial markers that stood in place all year<sup>3</sup>. In a few locations such territorial markers are still created. It is possible that when permanent shrines were introduced, the villagers began to destroy the

cult signs shortly after they were created each year. In current practice all the cult signs are brought before the local shrine and placed in an axial relationship to it. The proximity of the sign to the shrine expresses something of the importance of the sign and the group that created it. Certain groups within the villages are responsible for the creation of certain forms and for passing on the techniques for building them – instructions are not written down.

The number and organization of cult signs before the central shrine reveals something of the village/cult organization<sup>4</sup>. For example, in one locale each of five villages creates its own cult sign and then brings it to the central shrine to be placed in a hierarchical order. In another group of villages, each creates a fixed cult sign before its own shrine every year, and then alternate each year building a fixed cult sign before a central shrine hierarchically superior to their own. Different social groups may be responsible for different forms. In one locale the heads of families jointly build one fixed cult sign, while the young men of the village build a tall multi-local pillar, and the fathers of boys of certain age make small cult torches (so-called children's torches – *kodomotaimatsu*). In one area the settlement is divided into two halves each consisting of several hamlets. Each half builds a fixed cult sign and the young men of each hamlet build a tall pillar. In another locale a village is subdivided into ten neighborhoods, each of which builds a tall column, while a superior cult group consisting of the chairmen of the ten neighborhoods builds the fixed cult sign. The festivals of the villages around the town of Omihachiman are the most complex. The settlements come together before a central shrine and representatives form two groups, each of which builds a fixed cult sign. Each also contributes one or more multi-local pillars. Each village also has its own festival as well, typically consisting of one fixed sign and several multi-local pillars. (It should be mentioned here that women are forbidden from ritual handicrafts and men are responsible for building all of the cult signs and pillars.)

Egenter does not speculate on the meaning of the forms – such as their possibly having to do with fertility – but rather sticks to formal analysis. The forms that are created are ones that naturally emerge out of the materials and techniques employed. The principal

materials are bamboo, reeds, rice straw, rape plants, and twigs and branches (the latter primarily limited to the tree forms). The techniques employed involve simple methods of tying and plaiting. Traditionally, gathering of materials was part of the ritual, but now many areas obtain reeds commercially. The archetypal form of the fixed cult signs is a simple bound bundle. This simple form can be found in the form of a ten-inch tall bundles of straw gathered and tied at the top.

A certain natural geometry emerges from these materials and techniques. The fixed cult sign typically has a conical base and a rounded bushy top. This creates an image of polar opposites with the base appearing solid, fixed, clearly defined, and earth-bound, while the top appears loose, unrestrained, vaguely defined, and sharing in the free movement of the air. This duality is brought together at the middle with the use of a *shimenawa*, or cult rope. This rope binds the structure to formal unity and provides proportional harmony to the whole<sup>5</sup>. The cult rope is a particularly potent symbol in Shinto and is used to demarcate the boundary between the sacred and the profane at Shinto shrines. They are regularly attached to gateways (*torii*) and sacred rocks, and are frequently ornamented with cult signs in the forms of strips of white paper (*gohei*). The fact that the cult ropes are made of rice straw (an agricultural product in contrast to the wild elements of bamboo and reeds) is also significant. It shows a civilizing human element restraining the wild. The rope is not always functional but is placed at the symbolically significant place over the bindings that are doing the actual work. The knot on the rope is often very elaborate and ornamental. Its ends may suggest a snake or be named for parts of a crab. The ends of the rope usually point up, and the location of the knot defines the front or face of the cult sign. It most often faces the shrine, though occasionally may point out from it.

The multi-local pillar forms share a different vocabulary. These are made of reeds and rape plants and often bound to a central core of bamboo (variously called heart bamboo, heart pillar, or heart tree). The tops of the pillars typically fan out like great wheels and are often referred to as “sun wheels.” They may incorporate other forms of symbolism such as rows of knots representing the months or a sequence of lucky numbers. In some areas the reed section is called *in-yo*, the Japanese equivalent of the Chinese *yin-yang*.

Many are also given anthropomorphic symbolism and have parts with such names as “headband,” “belly,” or “trousers.” Many also have sexual symbolism and are equipped with an *otoko-no-sei*, male sex organ. Most of the pillars are made in the horizontal position on the shrine grounds before being raised, but some may be created and placed in other locales such as the village streets before being transferred to the shrine for their eventual destruction. Similarly, the children’s torches are often placed outside the home where they were created until the night of the festival.

Egenter has also looked at the construction of artificial trees – a practice similar to the cult torches but involving a separate festival<sup>6</sup>. These “tree of life” forms are distinguished by having a cylindrical lower part and branches of trees (camellia, oak, or *sakaki*), rather than bamboo, for the upper part. Egenter emphasizes that the artificial tree transcends natural trees, biological life, and time. In form they do not imitate any particular type of tree but rather a general idea of “treeness.” They are stylized, symmetrical, proportionally balanced, medium-sized, and perfectly shaped. They are bound to the settled life of the village. They require a creator and the chain of tradition for their existence. In time, their lifespan in tangible form is short, but in the minds of the community it is long. It is bound to cycles of time and embodies a constancy of form throughout long passages of time. They are, in effect, “timeless” and invoke the hope of continuity and permanence amid the changes of life.

### The Shrine Building Tradition

Shinto shrines are also periodically rebuilt, although on a different scale than the cult torches or artificial trees. At one time a great many shrines were periodically rebuilt but now only a few are. For example, Sumiyoushi shrine was originally rebuilt every 20 years but the practice was suspended in 1807. Today the grand shrines of Ise are among the only ones periodically rebuilt. At Ise, 16 separate shrines, incorporating 65 buildings, bridges, fences and auxiliary structures, are annually renewed<sup>7</sup>. The two major shrines are the Naiku, or inner shrine, and the Geku, or outer shrine. These are now both under the control of the Imperial cult but for much of their history were at odds with each other<sup>8</sup>. The outer shrine, originally controlled by the Watarai cult, is dedicated to

Toyoyuke, now identified as a goddess of grain but originally identified as “first God of the universe.” Watarai Shinto finally expired in 1871 when the government prohibited their *onshi* business. (The *onshi* were semi-lay figures that taught, hosted, and guided pilgrims.) The Imperial presence at Ise goes back to the emperor Suinin (249-280 AD) who sent out a princess to find a good site for the Imperial cult shrine. Led by an oracle they settled upon Ise.

It should be noted that early Shinto deities were not originally personified but looked upon as abstract spirits<sup>9</sup>. The practitioners did not create images of the deities but thought about them in terms of the objects they inhabited or the space in which they moved. A straw rope, *shimenawa*, typically indicates that space or presence. One of the most ancient forms is an *Iwakura*, a stone around which rope has been tied. Of equal antiquity is an *Iwasaka*, a raised area bordered by rocks that may include an *Iwakura*. A *Shiki* is a larger area covered with pebbles where humans and deities could jointly participate in festivals. An altar set up on a *Shiki* is called a *himorogi* and commonly incorporates a branch of *sakaki*, a tree sacred to Shinto. The image of a *sakaki* branch in a *himorogi* on a pebble covered *Shiki* is reflected in the *shin-no-mihashira*, or heart pillar, placed under the main shrine of both the Naiku and the Geku. The heart pillars do not actually come in contact with the shrines. Under the inner shrine the heart pillar is completely buried, while under the outer shrine half of its five-foot length protrudes above the ground<sup>10</sup>.

The Naiku, or inner shrine at Ise is dedicated to the Imperial ancestor and sun Goddess Amaterasu-omikami. The story is told that Amaterasu was once offended by her brother and withdrew into a cave, thus plunging the world into darkness. In order to coax her out of the cave the other gods hung a mirror in a *sakaki* tree and began to celebrate as if it was a new god. When Amaterasu looked out of the cave she saw her own shining reflection, and believing it was another god, she emerged from the cave. Symbolically this may represent a shift in Shinto beliefs from the Kami primarily inhabiting stone *Iwakura*, to inhabiting *sakaki* trees or wooden pillars<sup>11</sup>. When the Divine grandchild of Amaterasu came to earth as the first emperor she gave him the sacred mirror together

with a sword and jewel to serve as imperial regalia. To this day the mirror is housed in the Naiku in a special wooden boat directly above the heart pillar, and the sword and jewel are passed on to a new Emperor as part of the coronation ceremonies.



Naiku, Ise Shrine

Both the Naiku and the Geku and many of the subsidiary shrines at Ise are designed on a dual structure. Two identical sites sit side-by-side with the shrine rebuilt alternately on one side or the other every 20 years, while the remaining side sits as an empty *Shiki* with nothing but the heart pillar and its protective cover in the middle. (Originally Ise was on a 19 year cycle.) The rebuilding has thus maintained stylistic influences that date back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century when the earliest shrines were modeled after ancient granaries. With the exception of a brief break between 1463 and 1585 due to a Civil War, the buildings have been very consistently and conservatively reproduced every 19 to 20 years since the practice was first initiated. There have been some minor alterations over the centuries such as the incorporation of the enameled balls representing Buddhist jewels added before the end of the eighth century, but this elaboration might be considered the exception rather than the rule.

The construction process itself takes approximately 17 years with the major portion occurring in the eight years prior to the *Sengyo* ceremony (when the mirror is transferred

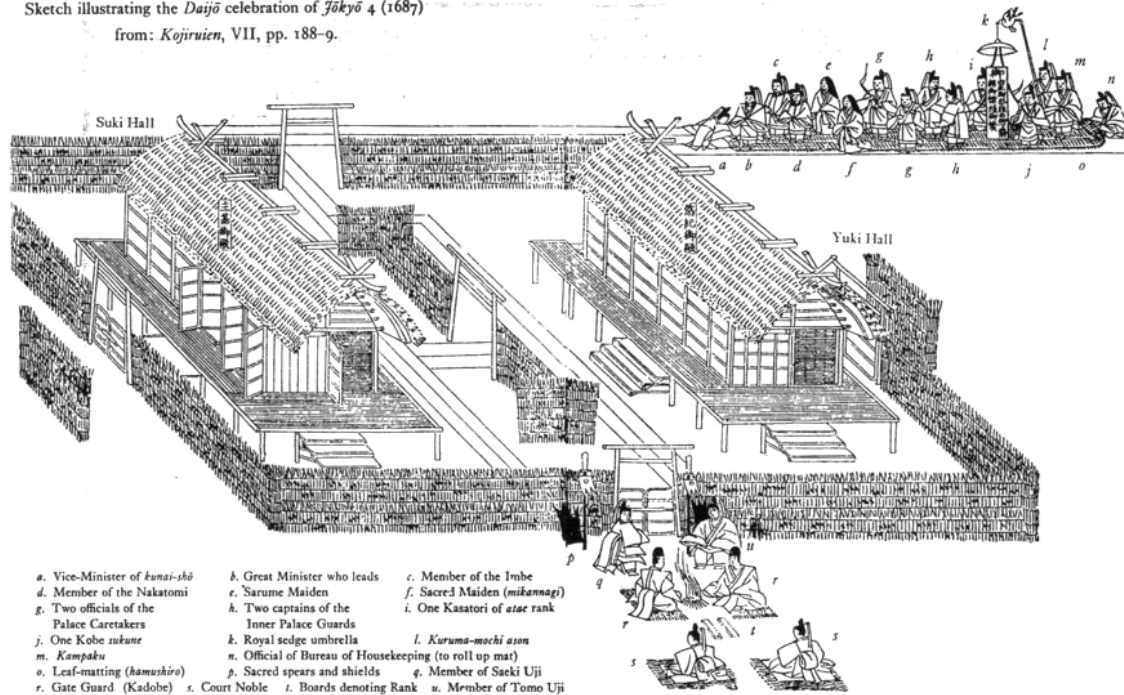


from the old shrine to the new), and an additional year afterwards. It is a highly ritualized project involving the labors of carpenters, architects, metal workers, thatchers, as well as the volunteer efforts of several hundred thousand worshipers who transport logs and pebbles. There is a great variety of construction rituals including those needed to appease the Kami for disturbing the natural environment, rituals marking important points of completion, rituals related to the installation of particularly sacred elements like the heart pillar, and a month-long stone placement festival where 173,000 worshipers from every part of Japan bring white pebbles to place around the newly completed structures<sup>12</sup>. The *Sengyo* ceremony itself is a night ceremony that involves a final ritual performed before midnight in the old shrine, the transfer of the mirror in its sacred boat to the new shrine, and a repeat of the ritual performed in the new shrine after midnight.

#### Imperial Accession Ceremonies

The Japanese conception of time, and the renewal of time, is closely bound to the life of the emperor. When an emperor dies there are three ceremonies of succession and the calendar is returned to year one. First, immediately after the death of the emperor, the sacred regalia (the sword and the jewel) are transferred to the new emperor. Second, after a year of national mourning, the civil accession rites take place. Finally, one or two years after the civil rites (since 1915 it is held in the following autumn of the same year), the *Daijosai* or “great first fruit tasting rite” is held<sup>13</sup>. The *Daijosai* is related to another ancient renewal rite, the *Sento* or “removal of the capital.” In prehistoric times when an emperor died the palace was moved and rebuilt in a new location. During a few instances during the Asuka and Nara periods, the entire capital was moved. The *Daijosai* is a quasi re-enactment whereby the palace is symbolically renewed. It is an elaborate variation of the annual harvest rites of the Imperial court, the *Niinanesai*, or “new fruit tasting rite,” and the *Kannamesai*, or “divine first fruit tasting” rite held at Ise. For each of these rites rice is specially raised on dual plots of land.

Sketch illustrating the *Daijō* celebration of *Jōkyō* 4 (1687)  
from: *Kojiruien*, VII, pp. 188-9.



The “Great Harvest Place” where part of the imperial succession rites are held.

This dual structure is also reflected in the layout of the Great Harvest Palace, the *Daijogu*. The *Daijogu* is erected five days before the rite and dismantled immediately afterwards. In the ninth century this temporary ritual palace involved as many as ninety buildings arranged on identical sites. Nowadays only three main components of the inner precinct are constructed – two primitive lodges, the *Yukiden* or “Hall of Purity,” and the *Sukiden* or “Succeeding Hall of Purity,” and an ablution hall, the *Kairyuden* or “Hall of Recurring Flow.” These buildings reflect something of the earliest forms of palace architecture and in contrast to the shrines at Ise are quite rustic. The supporting pillars are un-peeled timbers sunk directly into the ground, the walls are made of grass panels, and the roofing is made with reed thatch. The buildings are designed on a simple bay system and the floors are raised but not nearly so high as the Ise granary type. Noticeably missing from the *Daijogu* is any form of a “heart pillar.” Perhaps the presence of the emperor, traditionally considered a Kami, renders the need for a sacred pillar unnecessary. The ritual itself is preceded by the *Chinkonsai* or “rite of quieting the spirit” and is followed by *Enkai*, a festival of banquets and dances. The actual climax of the ritual begins at 8 p.m. with a ritual bath by the emperor in the *Kairyuden*. He then

proceeds to the *Yukiden* where he offers food and wine to the deities and symbolically takes them himself. He then returns to the *Kairyuden* where he bathes and changes. At 2 a.m. he then proceeds to the *Sukiden* where he repeats the offerings. Because of the presence of a bed in the sparsely furnished lodges some scholars have seen these rites as representing a symbolic marriage feast<sup>14</sup>. This does not however explain the dual structure of the rite. Others have noted the similarity to the *Yuki-omike*, or “great food offerings” presented at Ise at 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. in three annual festivals. The first rite gives thanks for the past year and the second rite is for protection during the new one<sup>15</sup>.

### Conclusion

In all of these ritual building practices, folk, shrine, and imperial accession, we see an expression of what Eliade has identified as the “myth of eternal return<sup>16</sup>” – that by periodically re-enacting ancient rituals it restores sacred time and such rituals allow traditional people to live within their myths and find meaning that would otherwise be inaccessible. As stated at the outset, the periodic rebuilding practices serve to reinforce cultural memory and place individuals into the larger stream of sacred time which transcends the temporal, constantly changing world of mortal time.

### Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Aisaburo Akiyama, *Shinto and its Architecture* (Kyoto: Japan Welcome Society, 1936).

<sup>2</sup> Nold Egenter, *Architectural Anthropology: Semantic and Symbolic Architecture* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Structura Mundi, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Egenter, “Architectural Anthropology,” 60.

<sup>4</sup> Egenter, “Architectural Anthropology,” 54-59.

<sup>5</sup> Egenter, “Architectural Anthropology,” 46,47.

<sup>6</sup> Nold Egenter, “The Sacred Trees Around Goshonai, Japan. A contribution of building ethnology to the subject of tree worship,” *Asian Folklore Studies* XL-2: 191-212.

<sup>7</sup> Cassandra Adams, “Japan’s Ise Shrine and Its Thirteen-Hundred-Year-Old Reconstruction Tradition,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, September 1998, v.52, n.1, P.49-60.

---

<sup>8</sup> Allan Grapard, review of *Watarai Shinto: An Intellectual History of the Outer Shrine in Ise*, By Mark Teeuwen, Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies (June 2000): 293-303.

<sup>9</sup> Kenzo Tange and Noboru Kawazoe, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1965), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Gunter Nitschke, *From Shinto to Ando: Studies in Architectural Anthropology in Japan* (London: Academy Editions, 1993), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Tange, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Adams, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Nitschke, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *The Feast of Kingship: Accession Ceremonies in Ancient Japan* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1973), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Nitschke, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Eliade, Mircea; *Cosmos and History: the myth of the Eternal Return*: Translation by Willard R. Trask, (New York: Harper & Row, 1954, 1959), 34, 35.