

## **Dimensions of Sacred Space in Japanese Popular Culture \***

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the centrality of the concept of "sacred space" in Japanese Shinto. Based in large part upon the sacred-space analysis of Dr. Tokutaro Sakurai of Komazawa University, Tokyo (see in particular his *Nihon minkan shinkô ron* [A Study of Japanese Folk Beliefs], 1958), the paper explores the idea of spiritual hierophany in concentric realms of space, from the sacrality of the nation, to the community, to the residence, to the house, and to the person. These realms of sacrality are definitive of Shinto and emphasize the importance of the distinction between the pure "inner" and the impure "outer" in Japanese culture.

It is the *torii* gate which marks the division between sacred and profane space, and the paper explores the meaning and significance of the *torii* and other boundary-indicators to an understanding of the Japanese identity. In particular, I argue that these boundary-markers are indicative of the peculiarly Japanese association of interiority and sacrality, and serve as "invisible barriers" to communication between Japanese and outsiders. In effect, the outside world is "marked" as profane, as it does not participate in the sacred quality of the heart, home, community, and nation.

*Torii* gates are symbolic markers indicating the boundary between two kinds of space: profane space and sacred space. They are located at the entrances to shrines and temples, cemeteries, gardens, mountains and forests, harbors, villages, city wards, imperial residences and private homes. They are not really "gates" at all, as they rarely stand within a fence or wall and have no doors to open or close. But they represent *invisible barriers* between an inner world that is clean, pure, and bright and an outer world that is spiritually polluted and morally uncertain. As such, *torii* gates are powerful symbols of the way that Japanese organize the world, associating the inner with the sacred and the outer with the profane. The "inner" is

peaceful, spontaneous, healthy, natural, simple and good; the "outer" is troubled, dirty, chaotic, ill, false and bad.

*Torii* gates are most often found at the entrances to shrines (*jinja*). Shinto shrines are sacred by definition, as they are habitations of the gods (*kami*). *Kami*, as mythic deities, ancestors, and spirits of nature, sanctify space by virtue of their physical presence, which is noted by symbols of demarcation: *torii* gates, corded ropes, cleared spaces, temples and altars. As simple as a stand of trees or a clearing in the woods, as ornate as a vast temple complex, Shinto shrines are sanctuaries from the pollution of the outside world. Their purity is ritually acknowledged through the performance of sacred dances, the recitation of mythic poetry, and the exorcistic activities of priests and shamans. The physical indication of the presence of *kami* gives Shinto its distinctively spatial dimensionality.

At many shrines, notably the Fushimi *Inari jinja* in Kyoto, the site is marked by a progression of *torii* gates, sometimes placed so closely together that they create a tunnel-like effect. Passing through these gates, there is a magical sense of deepening spirituality: a cleansing of outer pollution and a growing awareness of inner purity.

The distinction between sacred and profane is, of course, a religious universal. In his book, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Mircea Eliade describes the sacred and the profane as "...two modes of being in the world," the first numinous and pure, the second mundane, monotonous, and unremarkable. The profane space of ordinary reality is continuous and measurable, but this space is broken by what Eliade calls "hierophanies" or "eruptions of the sacred" which provide persons with a "sacred orientation" for their lives. Spatial hierophanies "interrupt" space and make it non-homogeneous, and the distinctive realms of sacred and profane space are divided by boundaries and doorways that allow one to pass from one "mode of being" into the other.

The threshold that separates the two spaces ... indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds -- and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.<sup>1</sup>

Shinto, with its emphasis on defilement and purification, associates profane space with pollution and evil, and sacred space with purity and brightness.<sup>2</sup> The dichotomy between parallel clusters of concepts -- inner/sacred/pure and outer/profane/polluted -- is definitive of Japanese cosmology and the Japanese character, cutting across the boundaries of nature, nation, community, home, and

person. For each of these concentric realms, the distinction between two modes of being is clear, marked by the *torii* as well as by other boundary symbols.

The distinction between sacred space and profane space, between the pure "inner" and the impure "outer," is not limited to the boundaries of Shinto shrines.<sup>3</sup> The "inner" is the world of nature, in opposition to the cosmos and heavens. It is the nation, in opposition to what lies beyond the seas. It is the native place (rural village or city ward), in opposition to outside communities. It is the home, in opposition to the homes of strangers. And it is the heart or private self, in opposition to other persons and one's own public self. All of these inner, sacred realms are marked by symbolic gates -- whether material or immaterial -- which serve to distinguish sacred and profane realities or ways of being.

The most basic distinction is that between the natural world (the space of productive activity) and the cosmos or heavens, which are outside the realm of manipulation and are thereby threatening and unpredictable. *Kami* reside in both realms, but only the *kami* identified by symbols of sacred orientation and physical separation (shrines, gates, etc.) are designated as part of a pure "inner" realm. Shrines to the *kami* of the cosmos/heavens such as Amaterasu and Susano-o serve to "domesticate" these deities and bring them into the "inner" world.

The heavens represent one "outside" world. The space beyond the seas represents another. The islands of Japan are sanctified by the *kami* of nature and by the creator-*kami* of the mythic chronicles (*Kojiki* and *Nihongi*). The dramatic *torii* at Miyajima, as well as similar off-shore gates symbolically surrounding the Japanese islands, show that Japan itself is "inner" and sacred, a closed circle isolated from the threatening and impure space beyond the seas. At the center of the circle stands Mt. Fuji, divine symbol and *axis mundi* of the sanctified world.<sup>4</sup> And within this world are the protective *kami* of natural features, inhabiting the space of the productive field. The *kami* of the natural world are sanctifying agents for the nation as a whole, exorcising evil and purifying the land by their presence.

On a microcosmic level, the distinction between inner and outer applies to the individual community, home, and person, all demarcated by "gates" or thresholds that serve as boundaries between the sacred and the profane. These may not be physical *torii*-style gates, but the division between inner and outer is marked symbolically.

The village or neighborhood community is bounded by small shrines indicating the protective presence of local *kami*, isolating it from the outside. These include the *kami* of fields, ponds, streams, and bridges, all marked by their shrines (often simple structures only a few feet or even a few inches in height). Most significant are the shrines of the *dōsojin*, the boundary gods protecting travelers and overseeing the community as a unified whole.

A similar function is performed by the fence or wall surrounding the individual residence, which, in the rural household, is sanctified by the *kami* of the traditional

farm buildings: storehouse, shed, barn, and latrine. Walls and fences are obvious boundary markers separating the pure inner and impure outer, and are a common architectural feature of a variety of structures. The effect is heightened when fences are encased within fences, in concentric patterns of enclosure, as at the Grand Shrine at Ise, its space so sacred that access is forbidden to ordinary persons.

The inner purity of the household itself is protected by the vestibule or entranceway (*genkan*) where shoes are removed, guests are greeted, and rites of purification are performed when the house is consecrated by the Shinto priest. Each room of the house has its protective *kami*, with altars to ancestors and, in traditional homes, to gods of the fireplace, kitchen, and alcove.

Perimeter shrines, fences, and entryways all serve as protective barriers between profane and sacred space.

In terms of personal psychology and social relations, there are also symbolic barriers between inner and outer. Among East Asian cultures, Japan is unique in preserving a strong sense of the private self in opposition to the public self and the social roles required by duty and position. The self (*jibun*) is inner and private, and is represented by the heart (*kokoro*) and belly (*hara*), the seat of personal purity and genuineness. The *kokoro* is driven by its own impulses, the "spontaneity" and "emotion" (*ninjô*) of the private self. And no matter what the requirements of one's social position and obligations (*giri*), this private heart is perfect and pure. The private, inner self is almost never expressed, except in the indulgences of literature and film and the odd culture heroes of the popular imagination: the *rônin*, the *yakuza*, the *nihirisuto*.<sup>5</sup> For most, the yearnings of the heart cannot be gratified, and public duty cannot be compromised. In fact, displaying the heart would threaten its purity, and it is precisely the facade of outward principle and pretense (*tatema*) that preserves the sanctity of one's true feelings (*honne*) and keeps the *kokoro* free of outer pollution.<sup>6</sup> The "gate" between inner and outer is the face and mouth, or facial and verbal expression. Their conformity to social expectation masks and thereby insulates the pure and sacred heart within.<sup>7</sup>

A visit to a Shinto shrine affirms a resonance between the purity of the natural setting and the purity of the private self. To pass through a *torii* gate is to enter a sacred realm. And so one dips a ladle into the *kuchisusu-mizu* beside the gate, in order to cleanse the hands, face, and mouth. This act of purification affirms the division between inner and outer, both in physical space and in the human body. For the inner to remain pure, the barrier between private space and public space must be as clear as the barrier between sacred space and profane space. The outer, represented primarily by the mouth (*kuchisusu* means "mouth-cleansing"), is subject to pollution, as it is the medium of social conformity and pretense, which obscures the inner purity of the *hara* and *kokoro*, belly and heart.

The prayers and rites performed at the shrine do not cleanse the self, which is inherently pure, but they *are* exorcistic, in that they eradicate the outer pollutions

that cloud one's inner virtue and light. People visit shrines alone, or with their families (picnics, weddings), or with their defining groups, or with their communities (*matsuri* festivals) to affirm the sanctity of what is inner as opposed to what is outer. Ultimately, what is "pure and bright" belongs to the nation, community, family and self. And this inner dimension of sacred space is demarcated and protected by the invisible barriers of *torii*, *genkan*, and *tatema*: gate, vestibule, public facade.

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## Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: 1959), 25. Eliade applies his analysis to the temporal dimension as well: sacred time is primordial, re-creative, and renewing, "erupting" into the profane time continuum through worship and calendrical rites (*ibid.*, 68-113). In Shinto, the suspension of profane time can be experienced in such occasions as the village *matsuri*, the recitation of founding myths in the *Kojiki* and *Nihonji*, pilgrimages to Mt. Fuji and other sacred sites, family outings to village shrines, and so on.
2. On the association of the sacred with "purity" and the profane with "pollution" in the comparative study of religion, see Mary Douglas' work, especially *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: 1966).
3. The analysis of the spatial dimensions of Shinto can be found in Tokutaro Sakurai, *Nihon minkan shinkô ron* (Tokyo: 1958), *Shukyô to minzoku gaku* (Tokyo: 1969), and *Nihon minzoku shûkyô ron* (Tokyo: 1982).
4. Most religious traditions describe a sacred mountain, where the gods reveal sacred reality to humanity. Since the mountain is within or contiguous with the social boundaries of the community, the whole nation is holy ground, as the "place nearest to heaven." Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 37-41; *Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return* (New York: 1959), 6-21. Mt. Fuji is not only the principle symbol of the nation, but also the most sacred, and the basis of the most popular of the mountain cults. But Fuji is not unique as a holy mountain providing a "sacred orientation" for the nation. On the significance of *sangaku shinkô* (mountain beliefs) in Shinto, see H.

Byron Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendô: An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion* (Tokyo: 1970), esp. 7-16.

5. For an insightful look at the conflict between public exterior and private self in Japanese popular culture, see Ian Buruma, *Behind the Mask: On Sexual Demons, Sacred Mothers, Transvestites, Gangsters, Drifters and Other Japanese Cultural Heroes* (New York: 1984).
  6. An excellent anthropological study of the distinction between 'principle' (*tatema*) and 'intention' (*honne*) can be found in Brian Moeran, *Language and Popular Culture in Japan* (Manchester: 1989). For a suggestive study on the distinction between "inner" and "outer" in Japanese culture and personality, see Kurt Singer, *Mirror, Sword and Jewel: A Study of Japanese Characteristics* (New York: 1973).
  7. For a discussion of the symbolism of heart/belly in opposition to face/mouth, see Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* (Honolulu: 1976).
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