

The Sacred Trees Around Goshonai/Japan

—A contribution of building ethnology to
the subject of tree worship—

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Introduction

Throughout long periods of time and in many cultures the human spirit has been preoccupied with trees. Evidence of this is to be found in the many representations, pictorial and textual, which tell us of sacred trees, trees of life and light, cosmic or world trees, the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, trees of everlasting life, of eternal youth and so on. The wide extent of symbolism centered on the tree and its long history as the focal point of ideal worlds is also reflected in the many studies and investigations on this subject.

The abundance of studies is due not only to the great extent of man's spiritual relationship to trees, but also to modern man's attraction to the rich symbolism surrounding the tree. The fantastic associations with which primitive cultures have invested something that now appears to us as a natural object are indicative of a way of thinking that, in its stronger imaginative power, completely overshadows our own sober, objective relations.

And yet, are we right in our ideas about this earlier power of imagination? Has symbolic thinking of this kind really sprung exclusively from the spirit? As suggested by the German word *Einbildung* ("in-imagination"), might it not have been sparked off by structures of the world of things? Does symbolism only *seem* fantastic because it derives from events of cultural history which are now lost in the depths of time? In other words, could it be that what we regard as specifically spiritual in man's relation to the tree is actually traceable to lost culture?



Fig. 1. Artificial sacred tree, constructed on forecourt of the shrine at Tomosada for the festival of the village deity (*ujigami*).

Bearing in mind that the spiritual structure surrounding the tree can be a source of cultural history, we shall proceed to consider an object tradition that, on one hand, seems to be closely related to such lost cultures and, on the other hand, is strongly reminiscent of what, in olden times, characterized man's spiritual relation to the tree: namely, transcendence of the natural.

In regard to the term 'lost culture' several authors have elsewhere indicated that sources which describe certain cult symbols in fact refer to prototypes, primitively made with organic material (Ancient Egyptian and Sumerian: Andrae 1930 and 1933, Heinrich 1957; Ancient Indian: Charpentier 1932; Ancient Chinese: Moriya 1950; Old Japanese: Harada 1961; see also Domening 1976). Such symbols were naturally perishable; they are part of a "lost culture." Their former existence can only be "read" from secondary sources. It is obvious why these suggestions were limited to the specific disciplines and to the subjects with which these authors were immediately concerned. Secondary sources are scanty and even when, in specific cases, many sources are preserved, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct their original meaning.

In Japan the state of research has considerably changed in this respect. During the past fifty years Japanese ethnography has documented an enormous amount of surviving traditions within its own cultural area. Technically primitive symbols (*yorishiro* 依代, "temporary

abode of a certain deity") are of eminent institutional significance in many local Shinto cults (see Egenter 1980: 13-19). Taking account of these materials, it is not a speculative idea to assume that annually renewed symbolic structures made of handy organic material were not only wide-spread in prehistoric times but must also have been of great importance for local institutions. Preservation of their material existence and symbolic expression (polar harmony) could have been a central feature of cultic motivation. Former studies (see Egenter 1980 and 1981) attempted to elucidate the functional significance of such symbols within a traditional institution of great importance in Japan (annual festival, *matsuri* 祭, of the village deity, *ujigami* 氏神).

The following account deals with the question whether, in consequence of the above-mentioned postulate, the tree, regarded as a phenomenon of cultural history, could not be placed in a line of development issuing from such lost cultures. For the time being the value of the attempt is not to be measured on the grounds of its demonstrability since, in the last analysis, every explanation of cultural history remains a hypothesis. The model, here briefly described, draws its significance rather from the fruitfulness with which it indicates new paths of research.

The Sacred Trees Around Goshonai

In a few neighboring villages of the traditional region around the town of Ōmihachiman, which stands on Lake Biwa (fig. 2), it is still possible to see sacred trees in a remarkable variety of forms.

Wandering around this beautiful region of Japan one might easily encounter an object as depicted in fig. 1 and, in a fleeting glance, take it to be a tree. The casual wanderer would certainly be astonished if he had chanced to pass that way on the previous day. He would be unable to remember having seen such a tree on that particular spot. A similar experience would follow a few days later. He would certainly exclaim: "Was I dreaming? Did I not see a tree standing there yesterday?"

A rather more careful investigation of the first impression would have supported the reassuring conclusion that the "tree" was an artificial one.

If one were not satisfied with this degree of enlightenment, but asked how the tree was made, it would soon be apparent to anybody accustomed to drawing objective analogies that he must be looking at a constructed tree. This is clearly revealed by the stages of its production (fig. 5/1-5) and its internal structure (fig. 6/2 and fig. 7). In addition, the circumstance that the tree-forms are part of a surviving

local building tradition in this region, in accordance with which familiar building forms such as free-standing pillars and hut-like structures are erected, plainly identifies the tree-forms as constructed forms (fig. 3).

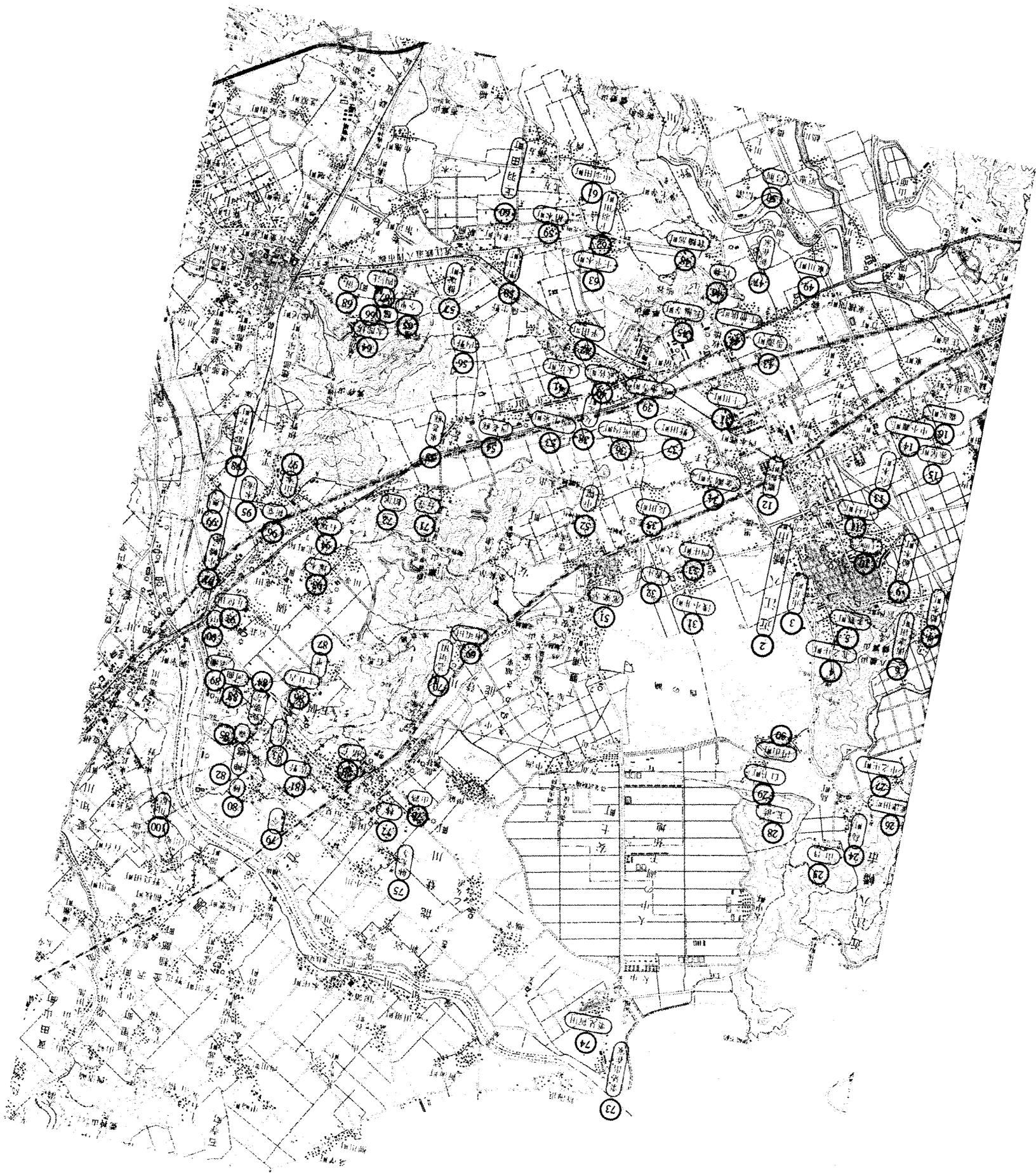
However, the building of a tree is no common, everyday event. A tree normally grows by itself. When it comes to building a tree, the normal state of affairs would seem to be completely reversed. In building, trees are of importance as a source of wood. They are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. And with regard to the question of symbolism, relations would again appear to be reversed, since in this connection one normally thinks of a natural tree and not of a constructed one. Thus, seen from the angle of normal relations between man and tree, the trees around Goshonai seem rather strange and crazy.

Contradictions also arise when an attempt is made to give the thing a name. Should this phenomenon be called a constructed "tree" or a tree-like "construction?" The quotation marks are unavoidable since there are neither trees among buildings nor buildings among trees. The paradox is easier to understand if it is set in the sphere to which it properly belongs: an intermediate sphere between building and nature. For the sake of simplicity, we shall henceforth call these phenomena "artificial trees."

The conflict in which we find ourselves was long ago resolved in the realm of Art. Thus even when it is a question of canvas and paint one speaks simply of a tree, perhaps of a painted tree. In a similar way, for instance in Goshonai, a natural tree is portrayed by constructional means. Uncertainty only arises because, in contrast to painting and drawing, it is rather unusual to represent trees by building them and because the actual position of these trees and their similarity to natural trees strike us as strange. Although a painted tree appears relatively remote from reality, the constructed tree is alien to us because, artifice though it is, it stands where a real tree might be expected to stand. The following account will show something of the peculiar nature of these trees and how it results from the unusual manner of their formation. And, as in looking at a work of art we shall make use of the unusual, intermediate position of the artificial tree and first enquire about the conditions of its fashioning, i.e. we shall be concerned for the time being not with the tree itself, but with the people who make it.

Fig. 2. Map of the region around Ōmihachiman. The names of villages with torch ► festivals are framed. Circles indicate villages with tree forms. 39 Chōkōji; 40 Musa; 36 Goshonai; 38 Tomosada; 45 Chōfukuji.





The Sacred Trees Around Goshonai and Local Torch Cult Festivals

Because of their sacred meaning, these artificial trees are classed as a part of the widespread Japanese tradition of temporary cult monuments (*yorishiro* 依代 or *kariya* 仮屋) and within the narrower compass of the Ōmihachiman district, as sacred torches (*taimatsu* 松明), built in about one hundred villages on the occasion of the local fire festivals (*hi-matsuri* 火祭) (fig. 3).

As a source for the ethnology of building and for building history, the value of the *yorishiro* tradition has scarcely been noticed, even in Japan itself. Led by the theories of religious science, the sacred torches of the Ōmihachiman district are classified as belonging to the fire festivals (*hi-matsuri*). The problems of interpreting such phenomena purely in terms of spiritual postulates become very evident precisely in connection with the cult torches of this region. This will now be discussed.

If the festivals that make use of sacred torches are interpreted as fire festivals, as is usually the case, there is obviously no justification for a closer investigation on a case-by-case basis. Fire is fire and always more or less the same. A few examples or even a single representative festival, such as that of the town of Ōmihachiman, would suffice to explain the nature of the whole thing. In this sense the many events would be mere parallels showing variations of minor significance. And in fact, looked at in this way, the one hundred festivals still held annually in the villages of the region are of very uniform character. In each case fires are kindled at night and these fires form the central point of colorful cult activity.

The evaluation of these activities as fire festivals is based on the idea that the structures used as "vehicles" of fire are things which stand in a purely functional relationship to the fire: they are regarded as fire brands or torches, the forms of which are deducible from the traditionally controlled use of fire. This seems quite logical since the whole social event, including the emotional aspects of the festival, turns on the nocturnal ritual fire.

But real difficulties arise when, in the course of a festival, one specifically asks for an explanation of the background of a certain form, such as one of the locally erected cult objects. It soon becomes clear that the functional theory cannot be upheld after a thorough investigation of the entire region (fig. 3).

In contrast to the perspective directed towards the general character of fire, a structural investigation implies an interest in materials, the manner of construction, and form. For this purpose a case-by-case examination is inevitable and, with the change of viewpoint, there

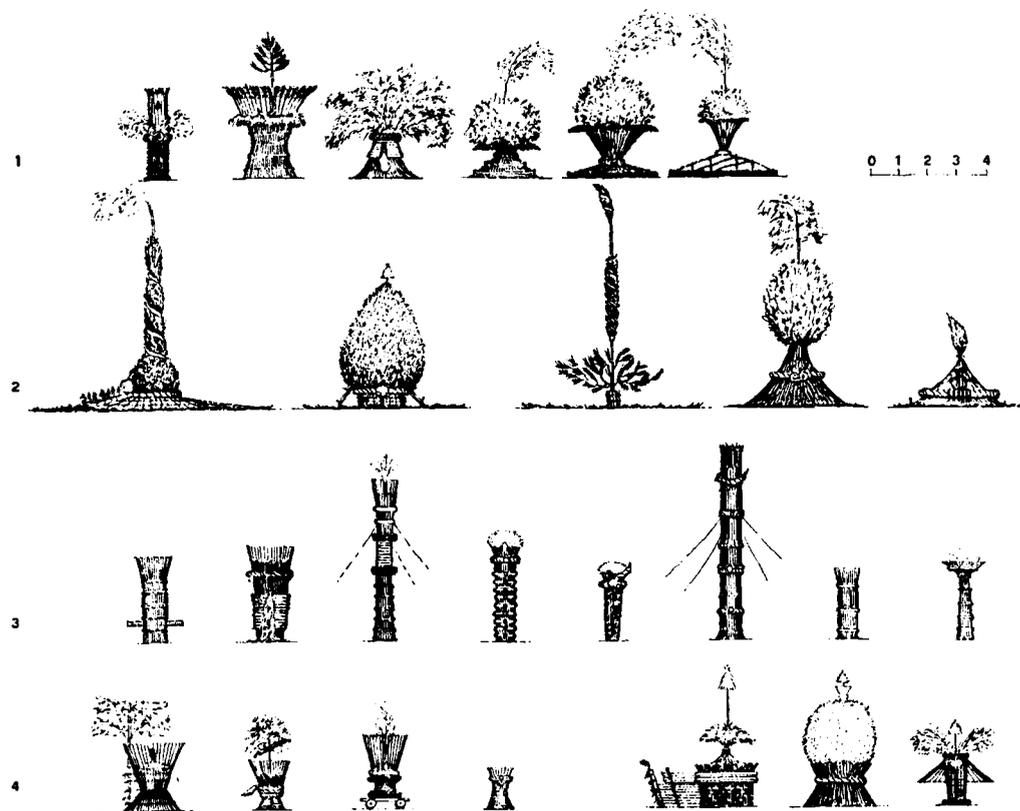


Fig. 3a

Fig. 3a-b. No. 1-7. The various forms of cult objects found in the region. Inset shows two variants of the hypothetical original form (experimentally made of rooted reeds).

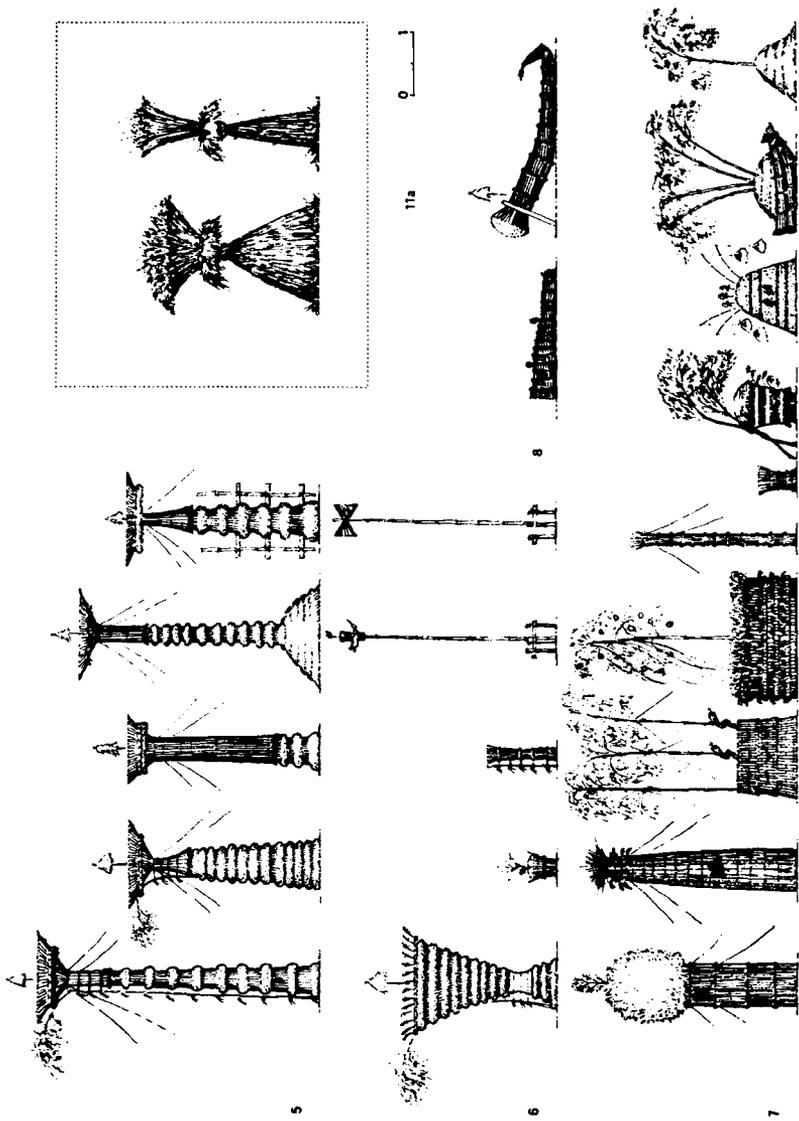


Fig. 3b

is a change in the result. This turns out to be considerably different from that which emerges from the "fire festival" approach. Neither the forms nor the structural build-up of the "torches" are uniform; the multiplicity of demonstrable forms cannot possibly be explained by the mechanics of combustion. There is also a great variety of ritual accompaniments, in the midst of which stand the cult objects. These rituals are also associated with clearcut symbolism and are to be regarded as signaling social and territorial entities, and they reveal a close connection with the traditional village structure. Although the term *taimatsu* is in general use, it is locally differentiated by the addition of qualifying prefixes. The distinctions are usually between important (*ō-taimatsu* 大松明), formal (*hiraki-taimatsu* 開き松明), ritual (*nobori-* 上り, *furi-* 振り, *hiki-* 引き, *te-* 手, *kodomo-taimatsu* 子供松明) or material (*kashi-taimatsu* 榿松明) cult objects.

In view of these richly varied distinctions and their explicit sacred meaning, it must be concluded that their real significance lies in their specific local character, and not in the all-embracing nature of fire.

A structural investigation not only testifies to a lively interest in material things, it also implies a specific outlook. Structural analysis deals with artifacts, i.e., with things made by man from certain materials by certain methods and exhibiting a definite form. As synthetic products they are also accessible to objective analysis. Such analysis is justifiable because, being applied to a fashioned product, it shows the plan, the order, which is of decisive importance in construction. It allows conclusions to be drawn concerning the thought behind the plan. The result of such analysis is of importance insofar as the structures analyzed are traditional. It is characteristic of object traditions that the mental concept on which the structure is based need no longer be present in the awareness of those who carry on the tradition. This concept can lie many generations back. Structural analysis, especially when it reveals the typical in a widespread living tradition such as that of the Japanese *yorishiro* (seats of the gods, temporary cult objects), can not only reconstruct the history of the object studied; it can also facilitate insight into past thinking.

Stated briefly, these are the tools with which we shall address ourselves to a detailed consideration of the trees around Goshonai.

Structure and Form of the Artificial Trees Around Goshonai

Temporary cult objects in the form of trees are set up annually in five villages near Ōmihachiman. These are the adjacent settlements of Chōkōji 長光寺, Musa 武佐, Tomosada 友定, Chōfukuji 長福寺 and Goshonai 御所内; (see fig. 2 villages nr. 36, 38, 39, 40, 45). In each

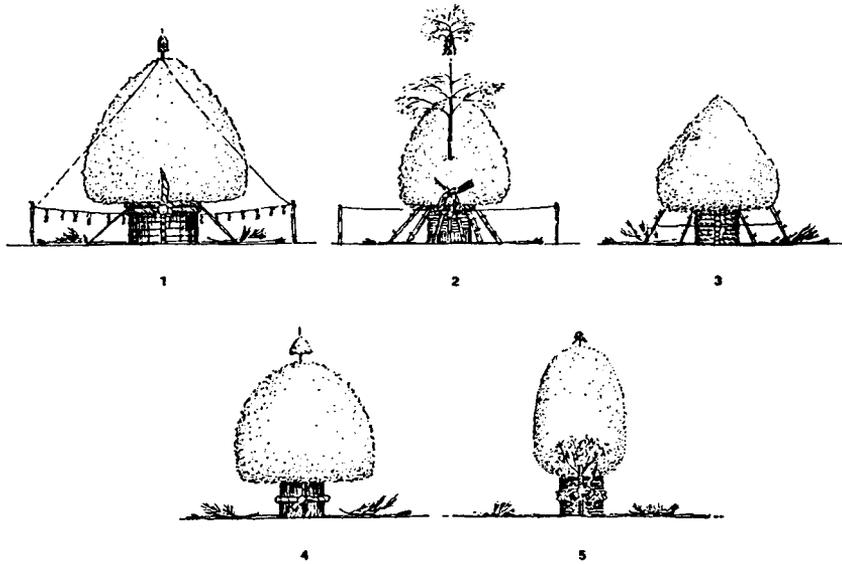


Fig. 4. Comparison of the tree forms of the five villages.

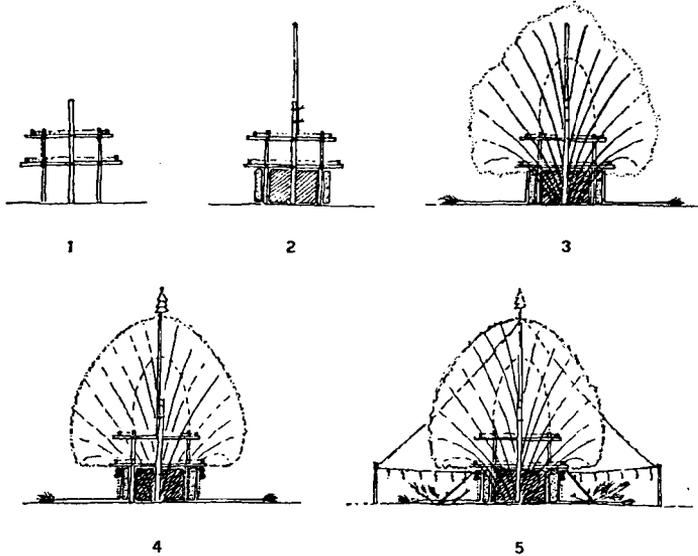


Fig. 5. Construction of the tree form of Chōkōji.

1. Piled bamboo support. 2. Filling the "trunk" with bundles of rice straw. 3. Insertion of bamboo rods with broom-like clusters of evergreen twigs attached to their tips. Covering of the trunk with reed stalks of approx. 4 m length (*yoshi*). 4. Binding of the cult rope (*shimenawa*) and insertion of the Shinto cult sign *gohei*. 5. The now consecrated cult object is surrounded by a further cult rope, marking off a square space around it. This sacred zone around the tree is thus shown to be inaccessible.

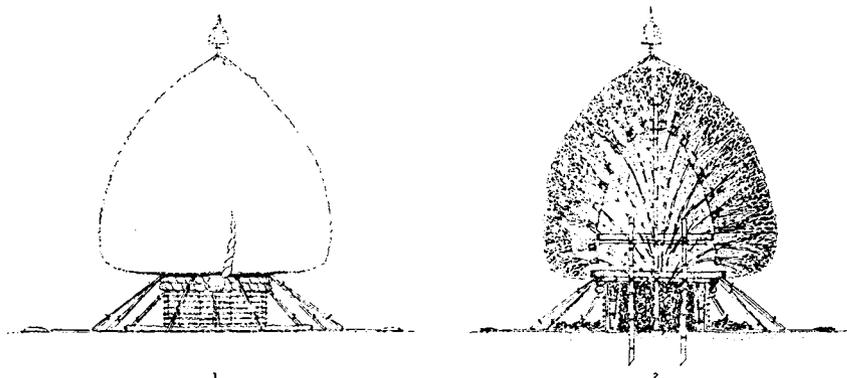


Fig. 6. External view and longitudinal section of the Chōkōji cult object.

case this takes place on the occasion of the main annual festival of the village shrine and is held in honor of the village deity (*ujigami*). The structures are set up in front of the shrine on land belonging to it (shrine precinct, *keidai* 境内; sacred rice-field, *shinden* 神田; horse-place, *baba* 馬場) and especially in line with the central axis of the shrine or on the path leading to it. All the material used is freshly gathered each year. Of all the cult objects set up in each village, only one is tree-shaped.

Everywhere the tree-forms are marked as the temporary abodes of the gods, sacred and inviolable. This is done by putting up Shinto cult signs (*gohei* 御幣, tufts of white paper), by draping one or more sacred ropes (*shimenawa* 注連繩) around the cult objects or by surrounding the complete structure with a *shimenawa* set up at a certain distance from it.

All these tree-forms play a part in the local fire festivals. That is to say, after standing for one or several days at the place of their construction, they are set alight with a sacred flame and are completely consumed in the ensuing blaze. They are similar in form in that each has a lower cylindrical "trunk" bearing one or more sacred ropes (*shimenawa*) and sometimes also minor functional bindings. Above the trunk section there rises another section, shaped like the crown of a tree or at least like a trimmed tree-crown (fig. 6/1 and fig. 4/1-5). In contrast to other forms of the district (fig. 3), these are distinguished by their cylindrical lower part and by the evergreen twigs that are used for the crown (*tsubaki* 椿 (camellia), *kashi* 欒 (oak), *sakaki* 榊). In the other similar forms (see fig. 3a, line 1) the bushy upper part is always made of bamboo (*sasa-take* 笹竹). There is thus a clear reference to the natural tree, both in form and in the material used. On the other hand, in

their construction they have one feature in common with many other local structures, namely that they are supported by a six- or eight-cornered framework which has been driven into the ground. Stripped bamboo canes with broom-like bunches of twigs attached to their ends (not *sasa-take*, as in the non-tree-shaped types) are stuck into this framework so that they project freely.

Thus the structures readily evoke the idea of "tree," both in their outward form and in the materials used for the upper part; but as far as their internal make-up is concerned, they are entirely similar to the pillars and hut-like structures that are found throughout the district.

The covering of the trunk shows that the tree-form is determined not only structurally but also materially by impulses which emanate from the traditions of the whole district. The covering consists of reeds (*yoshi* 葦) in all five "trees." The natural lower part of the stalk is woven like a mat and, secured by external strings, it forms the cylindrical outer covering of the trunk (exception: Goshonai, where several *shimenawa* cover the reeds which surround the trunk). At the circle of intersection of trunk and ground the upper parts of the reed stalks, still bearing ears, are bent so that they radiate out over the surrounding ground (fig. 7). The covering of reeds, which would seem rather unusual for a tree-trunk, clearly places the tree-form within the traditions of the whole region. It is precisely as a covering with a recognizable symbolic character that this material plays a decisive role there.

In spite of their special character as portrayals of the shape of the natural tree, the cult objects in and around Goshonai are recognizably related to the building traditions of the region.

It is easily conceivable that the tree-forms represent a differentiation of the form common to the whole area. They must have developed from the hut-like type that occurs in Ueda and several other places. There the crown of a tree is already hinted at in the bamboo cluster that surmounts these reed cores (fig. 3/1). In some villages close to Ōmi-hachiman (fig. 3/2) we find a reversal of the natural position of the reed stalks. They are attached by their lower ends to the point of fixation of the bushy upper part and radiate out over the ground. The ears lie at the periphery of the cone-shaped lower part of the cult object. The bushy upper part thus appears free of the funnel-shaped, projecting wreath of reed-stalks such as is found in Ueda. The free bush can thus evoke associations with the crown of a tree. If in constructing this type, the spars are omitted which carry the cone-shaped covering of reeds and if the lower parts of the stalks are allowed to lie vertically and externally on the supporting core, then, after bending the reed-stalks at right angles, one obtains the cylindrical trunk of the tree-shaped type.

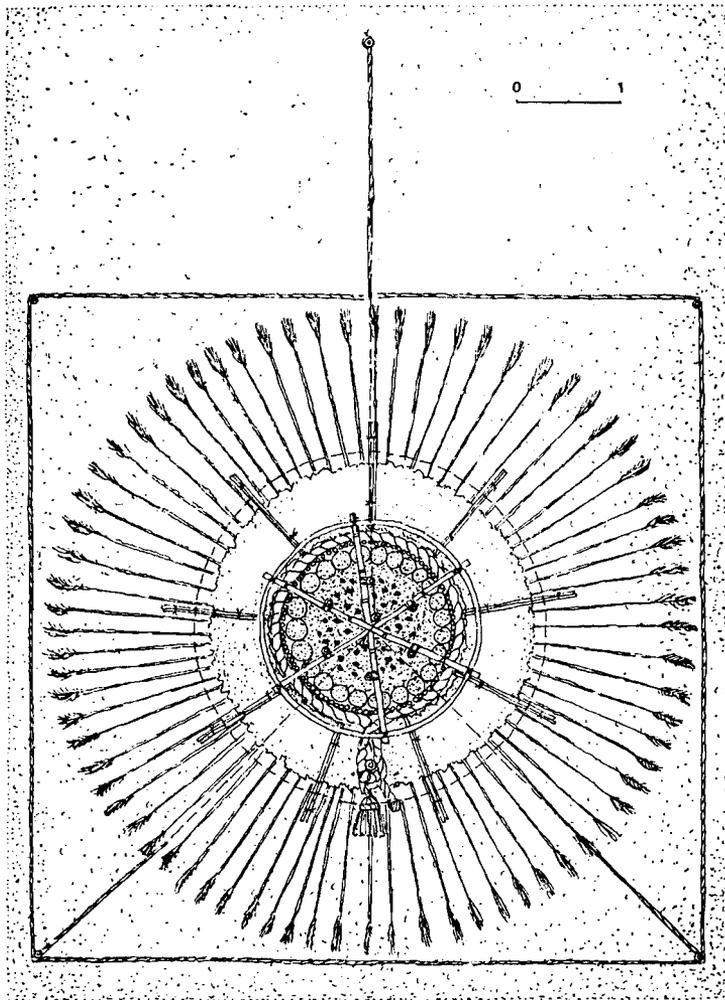


Fig. 7. Ground plan of the cult object of Chōkōji.

Once the idea of a "tree" is allowed to lead, it is easy to replace the broom-like clusters of bamboo leaves attached to the bamboo canes with tree twigs.

In this way one gains a very solid impression of how a nature-imitating form could have developed from a primitive building tradition. If the primitive nature of the construction is considered from the standpoint of the history of building, this model acquires a certain significance. Working from the idea that man built with grass in pre-historical times and that symbolic forms were made of tall grass and

used for the marking of territory, the suggested reconstruction may offer a new hypothesis as to how man's relation to the sacred tree and to trees in general may have come about. In the following section a few features will be discussed to illustrate these ideas.

The Artificial Tree Transcends the Natural Tree

It was indicated above how a natural form could be imitated by a primitively made structure. But this by no means exhausts the inspiration to be drawn from these hybrids between buildings and trees. In so far as the structure of the artifact relates to the two fields of building and biology, it speaks a complex language which is of special interest by virtue of its intermediate position. It is clear that the structural traits predominate over the natural and that, by transcending them, they are capable of exerting a strong poetic influence on us.

Transcendence of the idea of the living thing by the synthetic quality of the artificial tree. All four examples are made of different kinds of plants: reeds, rice-straw, bamboo and tree twigs. All four are also many-plant trees in a wider sense. In three of them this aspect seems to be explicitly exemplified by the crown, with different types of trees providing its materials: twigs (*kashi*, *tsubaki*, *sakaki*), and sometimes flowers as well (*tsubaki*).

Only oak leaves are used for the crown of the tree at Chōkōji, but any idea of portraying an oak tree would be defeated by its shape, since a natural oak tree looks quite different. This demonstrates another aspect of these artificial trees: they transcend nature in their form. The trees around Goshonai are stylized. They are perfectly regular in shape and their proportions do not correspond to those of natural trees. They are ruled by symmetry, geometry and stylization. They do not imitate this or that tree in its physiological state or as it has been formed by the weather. Here the aim is the representation of a pregnant, idealized form. It is the "idea" of a tree and not its concrete reality that is aimed at.

There is also an unmistakable aesthetic impulse at work. The proportions are balanced. The crown is perfectly shaped, sometimes trimmed to give it a rounded, even form. The trunk is upright, cylindrical, smooth and beautifully clad. The addition of camellia flowers clearly demonstrates the desire for beauty. A "beautiful tree" is what is desired. This aesthetic impulse is also a transcendence of the "merely" natural.

The trees around Goshonai are of medium size. Since they are fixed in the ground their height is limited. That did not have to be so.

Many other tectonic structures of the *yorishiro* tradition are not staked into the ground and built up in stages but are constructed in the horizontal position and erected only after completion (fig. 3/5). This offers considerable opportunities to lengthen the structure and it is quite possible to envisage the building of giant trees. On the other hand, a small bunch of twigs can also be fashioned into a "small tree," bringing us to the idea of the miniature tree. This play with size is a general principle in the extensive tradition of temporary cult objects in Japan. The same constructive principle finds expression in small huts of rice-straw (*waramiya* 藁宮) of the *yashiki-kami* (屋敷神, the courtyard deity) and in bamboo huts of considerable size (*sagichō* 左義長, *dondon-goya* だんだん小屋, cult huts) for the Little New Year. This kind of Japanese traditional cult building also offers us examples of pillars which are adapted to the natural size of the material used. In the case of reeds (*kaya* 茅, *yoshi*), this means a height of one to four meters according to the type used. Employing more complicated building methods pillars are constructed which can reach a height of 20 m and then assume a monumental character. Thus if there were any desire for a giant tree, this would be entirely possible. It would simply be built as such. Therefore in terms of size too, the artificial tree can transcend nature.

The artificial tree transcends the biological idea of life. Unlike the natural tree that develops by itself, growing from a seed until it reaches its full size, the constructed tree needs man. It can only exist where he exists. It needs a "creator" to summon it into being. In the villages around Goshonai the creators are the men belonging to the cult organizations of the village deities. Each year they meet before the shrine and proceed to build the tree. Thus the creation of the tree is repeated at definite periods of time.

However, the periodic rebuilding demands a particular place for its realization. Its first creation must have taken place in the neighbourhood of a settlement. We shall suggest its possible origin.

The tradition would have to be maintained if the artificial tree is or was to be kept. An interruption would mean the disappearance of the tree in the mists of time and oblivion. Like everything that is dear to creative man, artificial trees require care and attention. They are bound up with his life, with his continued existence in a certain corner of the earth, with a local settlement and its social history.

One first becomes really aware of man's close relation to this type of tree when one bears in mind that the chain of tradition of which the trees are a part is a series of interactions between them and man. We shall return to this later.

The *shimenawa*, the main sacred rope, is the epitome of the synthetic character of the constructed tree and the visible expression of its close "bond" with man. Its presence on such structures symbolizes the intense unity of the whole. The *shimenawa* embodies the concrete existence of the artificial object since, as we have seen, this is essentially a bundle (also in the case of the differentiated tree-form); that is to say, it is a standing object which owes its existence to the bringing together of many parts to form a whole. The rope is the means by which this is achieved. In terms of *Gestalt* theory it could be said that the whole is "centered" on the rope and that the knot is the "source" of the whole.

This "covenant" with the tree is renewed every year. Not only is the rope annually renewed, but the tree, of which it is, so to speak, the *conditio sine qua non*, is also renewed. In contrast to the custom, widespread in Japan and devoid of meaning, of periodically placing new cult ropes (*shimenawa*) around sacred trees, here in Goshonai we encounter the rope as a symbol in the profoundest sense, with a symbolic content which is comprehensible.

The Artificial Tree's Relation to Time

Any single selected period at time shows two phases: a short span, during which the structure is present in solid, tangible form, and a longer span, in which it exists only in the minds of the cult community. Thus two important phases are recognizable: one concrete, the other purely spiritual. These two phases form a continuum by virtue of transitional situations. During the building process and the gradual setting up of the solid, three-dimensional form, the spiritual phase passes over into the concrete condition. During the fire offering the concrete form is materially and formally destroyed and is transmuted into the purely spiritual condition. In the dark of night the form reappears briefly in the light of the fire and under unusual circumstances impresses itself on the memory of the onlookers for the last time. The next day its former existence is marked only by a small heap of ashes.

There can be no doubt that the substantial phase is the more important of the two. This naturally includes the two transitions which respectively precede and succeed it. The whole festival is centered on this structure, which mirrors the creation of concrete formal order, remains visible for a brief space of time and then dramatically disappears again.

The continuity of the periods can be regarded either as cyclic or linear. If the main emphasis is placed on the reappearance of the same form in the same place, it is possible to interpret this important local

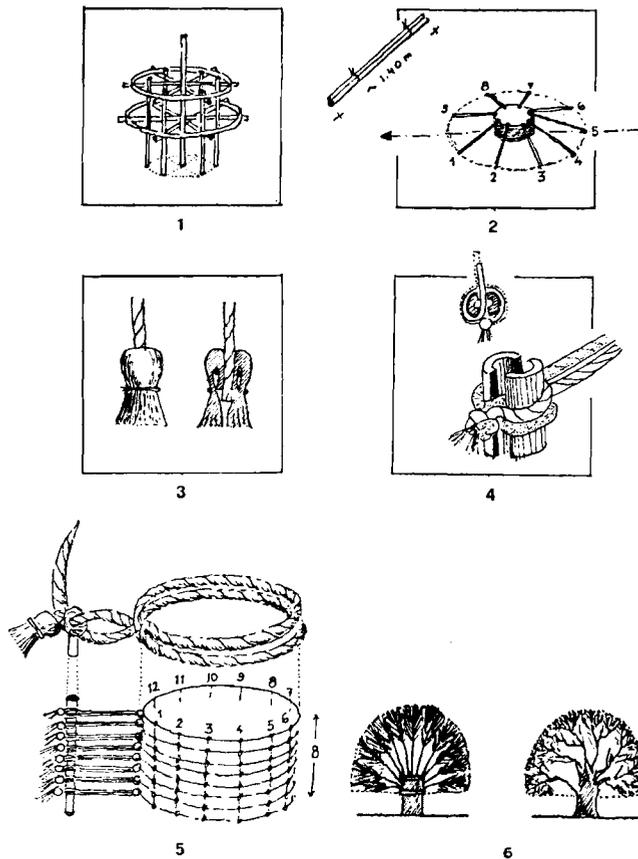


Fig. 8. Details of the cult object of Chōkōji.

1. Isometric view of the piled supporting frame. 2. Bundles of three reed stalks are placed radially around the trunk. 3. The finishing of the cult rope tassel. 4. The knots of the secondary trunk fastenings are wound around a split outer bamboo (*tedake*) and arranged in a vertical row. 5. Diagram of the trunk fastenings—cult rope (*shimenawa*) and secondary bindings. The two ends of the cult rope are differently finished off. The pointed end is turned up. 6. Comparison of the inner structure of an artificial and a natural tree.

event as a kind of comforting reassurance: the sacred sign always appears in the same form, in the same place and after the same interval of time (fig. 9). Such an emphatically cyclical interpretation would be in harmony with the cycle of the vegetative year, the more so since the cult object itself is directly affected by the vegetative cycle in point of its material requirements. Other parallels are obvious: the forces of regeneration, the waxing and waning of nature. In this sense the constructed trees do not transcend nature: they are analogous with it.

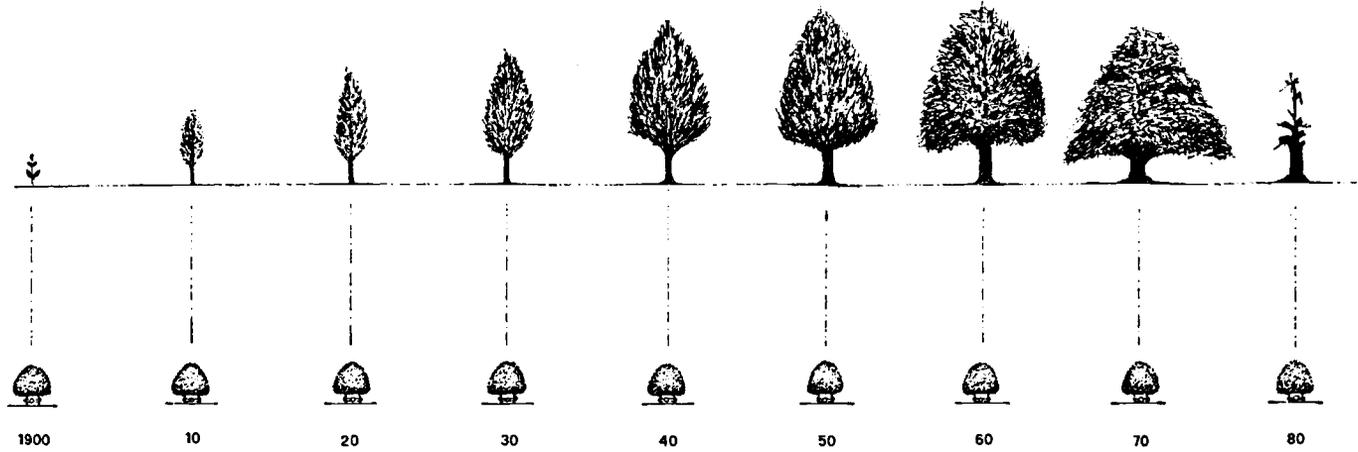


Fig. 9. Comparison of form behavior of a natural and an artificial tree over a period of eighty years. The artificial tree remains theoretically unchanged.

But a formally more individualistic appraisal of the phase structure must emphasize the large series of ever similar signs. Seen against the background of the major cycles of change, those of human life included, they must embody the idea of the constancy of form throughout long passages of time. The form itself can then evoke the hope of continuity and permanence amid the changes of life. Perhaps one could speak of a tree of security, of stability, a tree of perpetuity. In view of its repeated appearance in ever-fresh material form, it could also be described as a tree of everlasting youth. The hope of continued existence is a deep-seated human quality, manifesting itself in spiritual ascendancy over the inevitability of death. In olden times this feeling was closely bound up with the sacred tree, or the Tree of Life.

In considering these structures it must be remembered that human identification with the artificial trees must be greatly strengthened by frequent confrontation not only with the forms themselves but also with the process of building them. This becomes abundantly clear when it is realized that in the villages around Goshonai everyone who participates in the cult has at least forty or fifty opportunities to engage in the construction of these trees. On such occasions he not only learns the complicated manual skills involved he also learns the course of construction and the plan. He not only learns these things he will later teach them too, since there are no written records of these matters. Everything is passed on by active transmission. One learns by taking part in the building process. This knowledge of procedure and of the ideas behind it is very clearly demonstrated during the building activities: with little exchange of words, each plays his part in creating the whole. Each man knows the procedure and the "plan."

We can therefore confidently say that one "comes to terms" with artificial trees. But it is also likely that the structure which is expressed in and through them has a formative influence on the human mind.

The Artificial Sacred Tree and Fire

Constructed trees differ from natural trees in yet another, quite different way: namely in their relation to fire. In general it is hard to imagine a single tree burning since the substance of a natural tree, that is its trunk, is compact and full of moisture. Its structure is also not exactly favorable to the spread of fire. In contrast, the artificial tree goes up in flames as soon as it comes in contact with fire; it becomes a tree of light. The dry stalks, closely packed and vertically aligned, are ideally arranged for the starting and spreading of fire and also for the provision of an air-draught. The artificial tree is, so to speak, built like or for a fire and its material destruction is almost complete. This

aspect has an almost philosophical or aesthetic quality: there are no carbonized or twisted remains but only a small heap of ashes, practically nothing. From this latter standpoint it could also be said that the properties of the constructed tree transcend the natural attributes of a real tree.

This is not the place to consider the significance of this structure in terms of cultural history. We must be satisfied with an objective consideration. It can be left to the reader to notice similarities with myths and legends. Here it suffices that we have learned about something from various aspects, something which, while possessing a form clearly comparable to that of a natural tree, on structural grounds has features quite different from those of a real tree. We have tried to represent the qualities differentiating the artificial from the natural tree as "transcendence of the natural."

This structural analysis should now be followed by a survey of the cultural history of the sacred tree. Yet, since this would go far beyond the limits of a short article, we shall have to leave it to some future occasion.

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See also:

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