

## SEMANTIC AND SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE

This lavishly illustrated study yields insights that could be a fundamental contribution not only for architectural theory (non-domestic, semantic or symbolic buildings) but also for art research (the aesthetics of primitive folk art) and for iconological semiotics (the history of signs and symbols) as well as for religious science (non-written, traditional sacrality) and finally also sociology (sedentary significance of cultic institution with territorial traits).

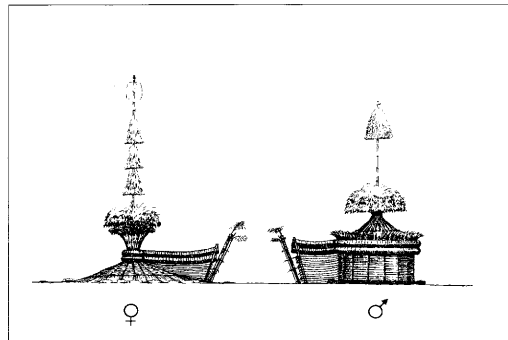
It concerns cult festivals (matsuri), mostly held annually, on the occasion of which free-standing pillars or huts and other symbolic forms of non-domestic (symbolic) buildings (yorishiro, seats of gods) are built, using primitive constructional methods. These symbols are erected annually in the same way and in the same traditional form handed down locally as a kind of local 'history' assumably over centuries.

The detailed study of the places where they are set up by socially representative cult groups and how they are handled ritually, allows a meaningful reconstruction of Japanese pre-Buddhist and prehistoric practices of sacred territorial demarcation.

The universal distribution of similar non-domestic buildings, formerly termed as fetishes, idols, spirit-huts, life-trees etc. make this study an important contribution to cultural anthropology in general because it shows a model how architecture can be structurally formative within important aspects of culture.

In the framework of 'architectural anthropology' this study is fundamental for the establishment of the architectural class termed 'semantic architecture'. It shows the inductive method with which such built signs and symbols can be researched systematically, using objective architectural criteria such as material, construction, form, spatial conditions comparatively, and further, describing them in the context of ritual behaviour and social structures related. The study shows clearly how this type of complex analysis leads to surprising insights into the philosophical meaning of this particular type of built form. And in the larger context of the settlements it shows a new and spiritually very profound type of agrarian village culture doubtless of prehistoric origins.

## Architectural Anthropology: SEMANTIC AND SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE



An architectural-ethnological survey into  
hundred villages of central Japan

## 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.

MIRCA ELIADE:

"A VERY IMPORTANT  
WORK"

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, can cast 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.

ARNOLD NIEDERER:

"THIS STUDY WILL STILL BE READ IN  
100 YEARS FROM NOW"

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 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, although of course both are transmitted together. That is, the actual materials, technique of construction, and cultic 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, tying very ancient practices to new layers of regional and national cults.

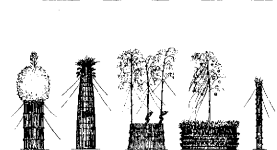
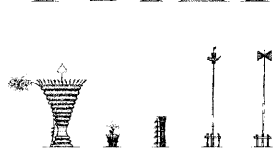
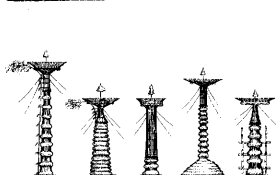
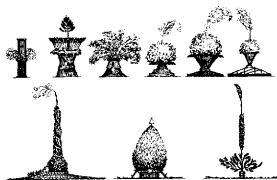


Fig. 1:

Selection of the most important types of semantic architecture found in the region surveyed

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 method of investigation, some interesting suggestions are put forward. 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 are 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 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 sa-

cred woods, finally reaching the stage of a permanent wooden shrine with the temporary structure built in front of it only during the festival.

R. I. ZWI WERBLOWSKY:

*"EGENTER'S PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ARE INVALUABLE, NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE WEALTH OF MATERIAL, THE PENETRATING ANALYSES AND HIS BOLD HYPOTHESES, BUT ALSO BECAUSE HE TEACHES HISTORIANS OF RELIGION TO RE-THINK THEIR OWN MATTER OF COURSE AXIOMS AND ASSUMPTIONS"*

Egenter draws many conclusions from the form of these cultic 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 sacred meaning to the monument. It is this "genetic underground" 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 primordiality spiritual motivation implicit in the material and the form of the monuments themselves. Such unsupported methods for asserting primordiality 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 resi-

dences 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.

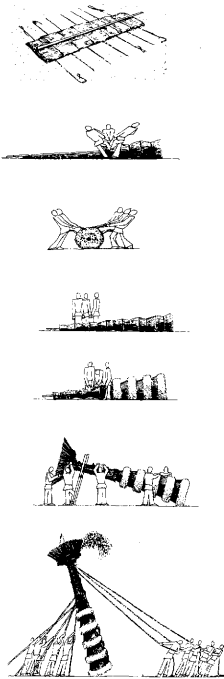


Fig. 2: Phases of construction of a mobile type of semantic architecture



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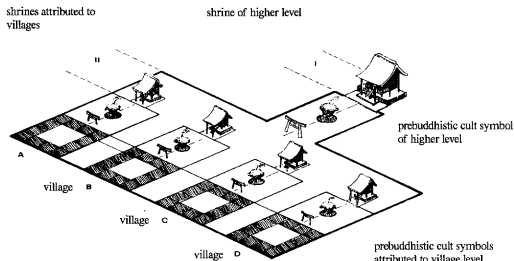


Fig. 3:  
Diagram showing coordination of four settlements (A - D) forming a higher social unit centered on the superior sanctuary.

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 into Building Theory, Zurich. Researcher at the Department of Architecture, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne.

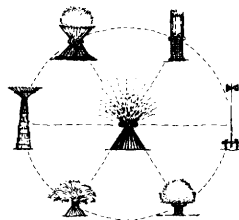


Fig. 4:  
Unity and variety. Individual forms are different but all share the same 'Gestalt' principle.



### ORDER

Nold Egenter, SEMANTIC AND SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE

This is a special edition apart from the »architectural anthropology research series« (ca. 300 pages, over 400 illustrations, sFr 80.-). It will be available, on subscription only. Delivery starts from February 1993 on receipt of payment by check, by mail or on bank account.

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Fig. 5:  
Life cycle of a tree and annual cycle of semantic architecture (pillar, artificial tree). The latter preserve the same form through the times.

