Sacred groves in modern Japan : notes on the variety and history of Shint shrine forests

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SACRED GROVES IN MODERN JAPAN: NOTES ON THE VARIETY AND HISTORY OF SHINTŌ SHRINE FORESTS

Gaudenz Domenig, Leiden

One of the puzzling features of Japanese landscapes is the presence of sacred forests or groves within a built environment that in other respects shows the marks of a highly industrialized civilization. While more and more hills are cut down, often brutally, to make space for housing projects and for the construction of new highways, shrine groves have nevertheless persisted in countless number all over the country. Partly they appear as conspicuous elements, as islands of trees in the midst of an open plain or even in the cityscape; partly, if situated on mountains or hills, they merge with other forests and may be less visible, although even then they are often distinct as stands of older trees that raise their tops above the others.

Shrine groves belong to those aspects of Shintō history that have received relatively little attention by students of Japanese religions. That the precinct *(keidai)* of a Shintō shrine usually has the appearance of a forest or at least includes a small stand of trees may draw the interest of a foreigner who might feel reminded of the long vanished sacred groves of ancient Europe. For the Japanese, however, and for students of Japanese religion in general the shrine grove is a matter of course and as such, it seems, not something that would raise important questions. This is the impression one may get when reading general books on Shintō and finding that descriptions of shrines mention many things, including single sacred trees, but usually give little space, if any, to the obvious fact that the precinct where all these things have their place usually has the aspect of a forest or grove

The impression is somewhat different if we turn to scholarly literature about Japanese religions. Although books dealing particularly with the shrine forest are rare, they nevertheless exist,[1] and books and articles containing materials and discussions relevant to the subject are legion. In this respect the state of research seems at first sight to be similar to that in other parts of the world. The study of sacred groves has been neglected

1 E.g. UEDA, 1984.

quite generally. In a recent collective work dealing mainly with the sacred grove in ancient Europe, one author says that studies have usually treated the sacred tree, rather than the sacred grove as such. He also draws attention to the fact that in classical encyclopedias there is sometimes not even a separate entry for the sacred grove, the subject being only scarcely treated under entries such as 'tree' or 'tree worship'.[2] Similarly, an Africanist writing in the same volume knows of no synthetic work about the subject, neither for Africa as a whole, nor for a larger region of the continent. He notes that the relevant materials are scattered in innumerable monographs, and doubts that there exists a single Africanist work the main subject of which would be the sacred grove.[3] Similar statements could be made for other parts of the world as well. If things seem to be slowly changing, also in Japan, then probably it is due to the modern trend towards studies dealing with subjects of environmental interest.

In the present essay I will deal mainly with the Shintō shrine grove, neglecting Buddhist temple groves and groves of cult places classified with the so-called little tradition of Japanese folk religion. After describing observations made and impressions got when visiting shrines at different times over the last thirty years, I shall sketch a few aspects of the history of shrine forests and of the more recent developments that have led to the present situation.[4] The intention is to show that the local variations observed today suggest that the spatial organization of shrine groves, the ideas associated with them, and the attitudes taken towards them, must have undergone considerable change in the course of the long history of the institution. Reflecting on two extreme cases, I will in the last section of the essay propose an interpretation that may explain why in Japan some shrines have a grove that is still regarded as highly sacred, while the great majority of shrine forests is valued rather for their contribution to the scenic beauty of the shrine precinct.

2 SCHEID, 1993:15.

3 CARTRY, 1993:194.

4 I studied the present situation and recent history in 1994 during a four months' stay in Hiroshima and Kyōto. Former research was partly done in the context of research projects supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Visiting shrine forests today

If we approach shrine groves with the hope of finding luxuriant vegetation inside, we will usually be disappointed. Most of them are orderly forests that are rather common in their appearance. Even groves that have been found to be reserves of rare vegetation are often not very impressive when seen from inside. From the outside they may look dense and wild, but on entering we rarely find the kind of undergrowth one might think to be typical of a forest that has not been disturbed by human hands for a long time. Also groves of the more common kind are often quite impressive when seen from outside. When recognized as shrine forests, they can still be imagined to be the dwelling places of some deity, provided we forget about the reality that will face us when walking inside. The deities are said to be present through their material symbols, and these are normally kept in a shrine made by carpenters, not in the shadow of the trees.

Figure 1: Grove of the Matsushita Shrine in Futami-chō, Ise City, Mie Prefecture. A shrine forest with a rich and rare vegetation. (Drawing based on photograph: Mioko Domenig-Doi).

The spatial organization of shrine groves and their interpretation in local ritual may differ considerably from place to place, and to do justice to the whole variety of patterns would require much more space than is available here. In general terms one may say that the basic arrangement usually includes at least one *torii* or symbolic gate, often positioned at the entrance to the grove, a way leading from the entrance inside and up to the main cult place, and the cult place itself with the *honden* or wooden shrine in which the *shintai* or material symbol of the main worshipped deity is kept. Usually, however, a shrine precinct would also include a prayer hall

(haiden), subsidiary shrines and other structures, such as a *heiden* (hall for offerings) and a *shamusho* or shrine office.

Figure 2 (left): Plan of the Matsushita Shrine with its grove extending up a hill behind the cult place (cf. figure 1).
Figure 3 (right): The cult place in the front part of the grove, separated from the back forest by a retaining wall. Situation in 1973 (survey and drawings: G. Domenig).

1- The main shrine or *honden,* raised on piles and enclosed by a fence, 2- a subsidiary sanctuary, 3- *haiden* (prayer hall), 4- *okomori-dō* (hall of confinement, used in a New Year's ritual that is special to this shrine), 5- store-room, 6- well, 7- *shamusho,* 8- an old camphor tree (prefectural natural monument), 9, 10 and 11 *torii.*
The subsidiary sanctuary is shown as it was in 1973 when it consisted only of a bundle of evergreen *sakaki* twigs, erected on a round stone platform. Recently, a small wooden shrine has been added, and the place is now fenced off at the front.

The precinct of the Matsushita Shrine, shown in figures 2 and 3, can serve as an example for one of many different arrangements one can find today.[5] Since the visitors to a shrine usually enter only the front part of a grove, the interior of a shrine grove may be expected to have somewhat different connotations in the parts in front of and behind the *honden.* To consider this means to acknowledge that the forest is not simply a collection of trees, but a special kind of space in which movement is restricted, not only by the presence of the trees, but also by the ritual that requires visitors to keep to the ways and paths that are marked for them. Theorizing about the spatial structure of such a forest, it would seem that the front part, which is familiar to regular shrine visitors, it is experienced as relatively profane, but as growing more sacred towards the place where the symbol of the main deity is kept in the *honden.* As a consequence of this, one might perhaps expect that the forest behind the cult place, which is usually not experienced from inside, might assume the character of an even more sacred space beyond, so that from a more general viewpoint the back and the front parts of the grove might appear to be opposed, in relative terms, as sacred and profane.

However, although this theoretical view may have a correspondence on the subconscious level of a shrine visitor's space experience, it would be wrong to assume that it also characterizes the way shrine groves are

5 This shrine precinct, however, has two untypical features: The *Okomoridō* is a structure rarely found, and the standing *sakaki* bundle as a permanent marker of the place of a deity is by now perhaps entirely unique in this particuler shrine. All in all there are 14 such bundles of evergreen *sakaki* twigs, locally called *sakakimaki* in the precinct. One marks the place of the *honden,* which is raised on piles above it, another one marks the subsidiary sanctuary, now newly also covered by a small wooden shrine. For a discussion of all *sakakimaki* of the precinct, see FURUKAWA, 1952:14-15, for an interesting interpretation, see HARADA, 1961.

now generally interpreted and consciously approached. The reality is that the back part of the forest is usually not recognized as particularly sacred. Its presence is taken for granted, and if it were entirely lacking, this would be felt as a great loss that might make the shrine appear as poor in atmosphere. But the idea that the back part of the forest deserves special attention as a distinct sacred space seems to be far from the mind of shrine visitors. For them, the most sacred space in a shrine grove is the closed interior of the *honden* which contains the *shintai* of the deity. Apart from this, a shrine precinct often features other shrines of subordinate status, marking other sacred places to which a visitor may pay attention. Often there are also additional cult objects such as stones or single trees, identified as sacred either by a *shimenawa* (taboo rope) or by a small wooden enclosure.[6] In short, for the common shrine visitor the shrine grove, although of course known to be in a sense also sacred as a whole, is not something to be further analyzed as consisting, on another level of observation, of a less sacred front part and a more sacred space behind. Instead, the reality actualized upon entering such a grove is a vaguely sacred space in which the shrine buildings and other cult objects mark particularly sacred spots.

Considering that the individual cult places in a shrine grove detract from the spatial organization of the shrine precinct as a whole, it is not surprising that the common idea regarding the latter seems to be oriented on the idealized image of a centralized space in which the main shrine building would mark the middle, with the trees of the grove surrounding it equally everywhere. However, this common image is deceptive. Many shrine groves are far from centralized in that sense, and we shall see that those which are, are likely to represent only what was left after parts of the grove had been cleared away in the course of history, often quite recently.

The back part of the forest

When we visit shrines of the type that does not correspond to the common image of a centralized space we often find that the back part of the forest is not only larger than the front one, but often also clearly distinguished as a

6 The bundles of *sakaki* twigs mentioned in the previous footnote also belong to this class of objects, but they have to be annually renewed in order to be able to function as permanent markers or symbols.

separate entity. This is so in the frequent case where the cult place is partly cut into the foot of a hill or mountain and therefore ends just behind the shrine buildings in a steep slope or in a retaining wall (figure 2). For the common visitor the precinct would then end with this physical barrier, and that the forest beyond still belongs to the shrine would probably be taken as a matter of course. Looking at such groves from a distance, we may sometimes notice a large patch of higher trees that extends up the slope and contrasts with the younger growth around it. The chances are great that we see the shrine grove as a whole and recognize that the cult place with the buildings is situated in its lower part, sometimes even at the very bottom of the grove. Moreover, we will often find that such a back forest reaches up to the very top of the slope or to the nearest level part of a spur projecting from the larger hill or mountain.

To penetrate inside a shrine's back forest may evoke a feeling of doing something wrong, but sometimes there is a marked paht that leads visitors further in. In such cases the space behind the *honden* is actualized as another important part of the sacred grove in which one may discover one or several additional cult places, for instance a special tree or stone marked by a *shimenawa,* occasionally also a smaller wooden shrine. Sometimes one may even notice quite surprising things. Thus the old back forest of the Mononobe Shrine of Oda City in Shimane Prefecture contains what is said to be the tomb of the deity. Although the idea does not fit the concept of a Shintō deity, this tomb is not treated as a secret matter, but made accessible to visitors by a way leading up the hill.[7] In other cases, however, such cult places in the back forest of a shrine may be reserved for esoteric rites from which common visitors are excluded. For outsiders who know about the practice of such rites, the back forest may then assume a somewhat mysterious character, and if access should be strictly forbidden, one may come to regard the forest in the back of a shrine as a particularly sacred zone.

Such cases are now rare, but they allow us to state, in general terms, that as far as the back part of a shrine's forest is concerned, the typical patterns can be found to lie between two extremes. At one end there is the back forest that is small and holds no secrets, the common type that can be found everywhere in Japan. At the other end of the scale we have the now

7 For an aerial photograph of this shrine forest, see DOMENIG 1993:164.

unusual type of back forest that is not only relatively large and physically distinct from the front part of a shrine precinct, but moreover is also established as a forbidden and highly sacred zone. The example *par excellence* is the grove of the Oomiwa Shrine, situated some 17 kilometers south of Nara at the western side of Mount Miwa.

The forbidden grove of the Oomiwa Shrine

The Oomiwa Shrine is traditionally famous for having a prayer hall *(haiden),* but no *honden* enclosing the *shintai* of the worshipped deity. Instead, the material object of worship is said to be the mountain as such, which is therefore called a *shintaizan (shintai*-mountain). However, although the precinct of the Oomiwa Shrine is one of the largest in Japan, this does not make it yet a mountain in the common sense of the word. The shrine precinct includes most of what is visible of Mount Miwa when seen from the western plain of the Nara basin, but it does not extend all around this mountain. Moreover, the precinct's most sacred part is a twenty times smaller 'forbidden land' *(kinsokuchi),* which in form is actually a hollow bounded by two of the mountain descending spurs.

This smaller, forbidden and most sacred part extends some 900 meters up the hill to the point where the two spurs meet. Having thus the shape of a small valley, it is also called Oomiyadani (Shrine Valley).[8] It is separated from the cult place at the foot of the mountain by a straight wooden fence, about 36 meters long, with a central gate in the form of a threefold *torii,* all executed in careful carpentry work. Before the sacred gate, which unlike a common *torii* is usually closed, the priests present

8 The *kinsokuchi* would seem to cover an area of about 16 ha (figure 5). See the map of the shrine precinct reproduced in NAKAYAMA 1971:65 and in *Oomiwajinjashi,* 1975:after p.726. According to OKADA, 1981, the whole precinct of the Oomiwa Shrine measures 324 ha (980'000 *tsubo).* There are only five still larger shrine precincts in the whole of Japan, their size varying between 900 ha and nearly 6000 ha (Ise Shrine). Normally, however, shrine precincts are many times smaller. According to the norms set up at the beginning of the Meiji Period, the standard size for the precinct of high-ranking shrines *(kankoku heisha)* was 5000 *tsubo* (1.65 ha, or an area of e.g. 100 by 165 meters). For other shrines, the standard size varied between 1500 and 700 tsubo, the latter being the standard for village shrines *(sonsha).* For unranked shrines *(mukakusha)* the standard was set at 500 *tsubo.* See OKADA 1981.

their offerings, while the way of approach for the ordinary visitors ends before the prayer hall that partly eclipses the fence from sight. The precinct in front of the cult place consists mainly of a long and narrow stand of trees to both sides of the way of approach. Given these facts, how can one explain that the cult at this shrine passes for a case of mountain worship?

Figure 4: The Oomiwa Shrine as illustrated in the late 18th century *Yamato Meisho Zue* (section). Note that the buildings are oriented to a forest, not to the top of the mountain.

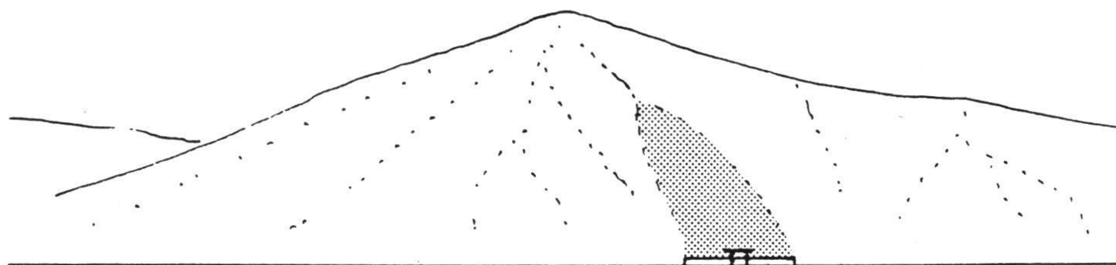

Figure 5: The spatial relation between the larger precinct of the Oomiwa Shrine, covering the whole western side of Mount Miwa, and the smaller forbidden zone (Oomiyadani) behind the fence with the threefold *torii* (schema).

That there is something wrong with the traditional way of dealing with this case has recently been made clear by Yamada Hiroyuki. Scrutinizing the relevant historical sources, Yamada comes to the surprising conclusion that the earliest document of the shrine that calls Mount Miwa as a whole a *shintaizan* dates only from 1871. A document from 1664 says that the mountain is established as the "shrine place" *(shadan),* while the trees are worshipped as *shintai.* From another document that two years later describes the boundaries of the forbidden zone, calling it the 'mountain' of the shrine *(honsha yama),* we learn that 'mountain' here means, in the technical sense, only a limited piece of reserved land. Also when a shrine document from 1810 calls the forbidden zone a *kinsoku-yama,* saying that this is worshipped as the *shintai* of the shrine, it is still a mountain *(yama)* in this special sense - a forest - that is meant. As for the view of outsiders, such as is occasionally expressed in works from the 17th and 18th centuries, they stress the presence of the trees or even state explicitly that worship is directed at a *sugimura,* a stand of *sugi*-trees (cryptomeria). In 1838 a source mentions that the visitors at the Oomiwa Shrine worship a "grove of *sugi*-trees" *(sugibayashi).*[9]

Considering the various sources, Yamada reaches the conclusion that there was a change at the Oomiwa Shrine in the use of words describing the object of worship. First the object was called *ki* (trees), then *honsha-*

9 YAMADA, 1993. The reference to the technical use of the term *yama* in the given summary is added by me. Yamada does not make this point explicitly.

yama (shrine mountain), then *kinsoku-yama* (forbidden mountain), and finally *shintaizan.* Only the last term refers to the mountain as a whole.[10] Apart from tracing this change in the use of words, Yamada's study also provides a highly interesting explanation for how this change came about. The reason was, in short, that the sacred mountain land of the shrine had come to be repeatedly misused by gatherers of firewood, stones, or mushrooms, and by people cutting trees or even making fields for agriculture. The sources quoted for this indeed leave no doubt that it was this continued exploitation for economic reasons that eventually called for a new way of protecting the shrine's forest and its purity as a sacred ground. After the traditional means of declaring the shrine forest a forbidden zone had failed to improve the situation, was finally a more effective solution found by calling the whole mountain a *shintaizan.*[11]

This stratagem worked. The new term, which according to Yamada was forged at the Oomiwa Shrine and later diffused, is now widely used also with other shrines that have no main hall but a mountain of conspicuous form in the back.[12] It would however be wrong to think that the cult practice in such cases really corresponds to the high idea that might seem to be implied the term *shintaizan.* At Miwa we at least find that a considerable part of the mountain is fenced off as a sacred territory, but this does not mean that it is also treated as a *shintai* in the literal sense of the word.[13] To climb up through this sacred territory was probably always allowed, provided one followed the proper ritual procedure and kept out of the smaller forbidden zone behind the sacred fence. Today, the visitors are not only permitted, but almost encouraged to go up to the top. A place at the Sai Shrine, a subsidiary of the main shrine, is now clearly marked asthe entrance, and the required ritual involves only the payment of a smallentrance fee, the waving of a purification wand, and the wearing of a white shoulder band with an inscription proving permission.[14]

10 YAMADA, 1993:74.

11 YAMADA, 1993:60-73.

12 See for instance KAGEYAMA, 1971.

13 An English glossary of Shintō terms defines *shintai* as an "object of worship in which the spirit of a deity is believed to reside". *Basic Terms of Shinto,* 1958:61.

14 In 1994 the fee was ¥200, and on entering the forest we were asked to take no pictures and to return within two hours. When we arrived at the top, we met a

Thus finally at the Oomiwa Shrine only the Shrine Valley behind the sacred fence is established as a truly forbidden space of high sacredness. There is no way to peep inside without violating the taboo, but it is known that the forbidden zone formerly contained two flanking wooden structures serving as treasuries. One of these is still standing, and further in there are said to be some rocks, probably with straw ropes hung up on them marking them as temporary seats of the worshipped deities. In short, in principle it is an open air cult place like so many others in Japan, with the big difference, however, that in this case it has the form of a small valley that is withdrawn from sight and ritually treated somewhat like the hidden inside of a closed wooden shrine.[15]

While this is reality of the cult, a pamphlet prepared for visitors to the shrine includes a photograph that gives a distant view of the gentle silhouette of Mount Miwa and below this a text claiming that the tradition of worshipping the mountain through the threefold *torii* corresponds to the archaic style of worship.[16] This is rather typical of the way the topic of the sacred grove is often misrepresented in Japan in terms of mountain worship. One reason for this is that the traditional use of the term *yama* in its technical sense of 'reserved piece of land' or 'forest' is usually ignored or, if noticed, neither made explicit nor considered in the interpretation of source materials. This is all the more astonishing as it is a common word for the shrine forest. Numerous *miyayama* (shrine 'mountains') of Japan are in fact shrine forests situated on level land.

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group of what seemed to be members of some religious sect practising sun worship to the sound of a tape recorder.

15 In principle we find the same arrangement at the old Asuka-ni-imasu-jinja, not far to the south of Asuka. There, however, the hidden valley is reduced to a hollow only a few meters deep, and instead of the spurs of a mountain only a low embankment marks the back and the sides of the place. The front is closed by a straight fence, like at Miwa, and behind this a few sacred stones are lined up, invisible to the worshippers. On a visit in 1983 the sacred stones were partly covered by the remains of little roofs that had collapsed.

16 *Miwa myōjin*, Oomiwa Jinja (ed.), Miwa-shi, n.d. (a pamphlet received on a visit to the shrine in 1994).

Sacred groves as reserves of rare vegetation

I have stated that shrine groves are now mostly well-kept forests that show the marks of human care and intervention. It is therefore usually futile to hope they would harbour an unusually rich vegetation such as is found no more in their surroundings. However, there are exceptions, and these have in recent times attracted the attention of scientists.

Since the 1950s Miyawaki Akira, a professor of Yokohama University, has been the leading figure in promoting the systematic study of vegetation in all parts of Japan, and since 1960 the results have been represented on vegetation maps. One basic interest in these studies was to identify the "potential natural vegetation" in the sense of Miyawaki's teacher Reinhold Tüxen, the founder of phytosociological studies in Germany. In a handbook on the natural environment of Japan the concept is defined as "the vegetation that is supposed to appear after all human intervention stops. Different from the original vegetation that grows before human intervention, [the potential natural vegetation] represents the capacity of the site to grow that kind of vegetation".[17]

The shrine groves played a prominent part in such studies because it was found that the few remnants of the potential natural vegetation of Japan are now to be found only in groves of shrines and temples, around old farmhouses and on steep slopes. In a study dealing with the area around the Seto Inland Sea, Nakanishi and Hattori give the following sketch of the "history of human disturbance to vegetation" in that part of Japan:

> According to the results of pollen analysis in the coastal area of Osaka Bay, it is definitely deduced that the original form of the present evergreen broad leaf forest was established about six thousand years ago. [...] It is also concluded from the palynological investigations that the extensive destruction of the natural vegetation by human activities happened in the Yayoi period (2300—1700 BP) with the advance and spread of rice crop agriculture [...] Such human disturbance as deforestation, mowing and firing forests has continued throughout history until recently. In this way, in the lowland and hills of the Setouchi district, the natural vegetation has been replaced mostly by such cultivated vegetation as rice field and the secondary forest dominated by *Pinus densiflora* and partly by the grass land of *Miscanthus sinensis*. Today, the natural vegetation remains mainly in the sanctuaries around shrines and temples to keep

17 *Nihon no Shizen Kankyō*, 1982:113.

> a sacred atmosphere [...]. So, most of the field investigations were carried out in the sanctuaries of shrines and temples.[18]

What was found to be true in the area of the Seto Inland See is true, *mutatis mutandis,* also for Japan in general. It is therefore understandable that shrine groves that still partly feature some vegetation of this rare kind have come to be appreciated as valuable natural monuments. Many of them have by now been put under government protection and have thereby become sights that may attract Sunday visitors from the cities. In Hiroshima Prefecture I found that the Prefectural Forestry Department has prepared a small guide to some seventy sites with protected vegetation, many of them associated with shrines.[19] Apart from these there are other shrines the groves of which have not yet been put under protection officially, but that nevertheless proudly draw the attention of visitors to the result of studies done by vegetation scientists in their precincts. When visiting shrines in the 1960s and 1970s, I was often frustrated to find that plans of precincts such as found in pamphlets given to shrine visitors usually neglected to show the grove and represented as 'precinct' what in fact was only the part where the shrine buildings were standing. Revisiting shrines in 1994 I found that things had changed in not a few cases. Not only do such pamphlets now occasionally inform also about the botanical value of a grove; in a number of cases I found that a plan of the whole grove, copied from a scientific report, was included in the pamphlet or even displayed on a large signboard at the entrance to a grove. On such plans (figures 6 and 7), the trees of special biological value are usually numbered, identified by name, and marked in their position within the grove. Thus in a time when environmental issues have come to be recognized as important the value of a shrine grove is often assessed also by scientific criteria, a way of seeing it that apparently appeals also to visitors who come to a shrine for prayer.

18 NAKANISHI and HATTORI, 1979:114-115.

19 *Hiroshima-ken Kankyō Hozen Chiiki no Shiori,* 1991.

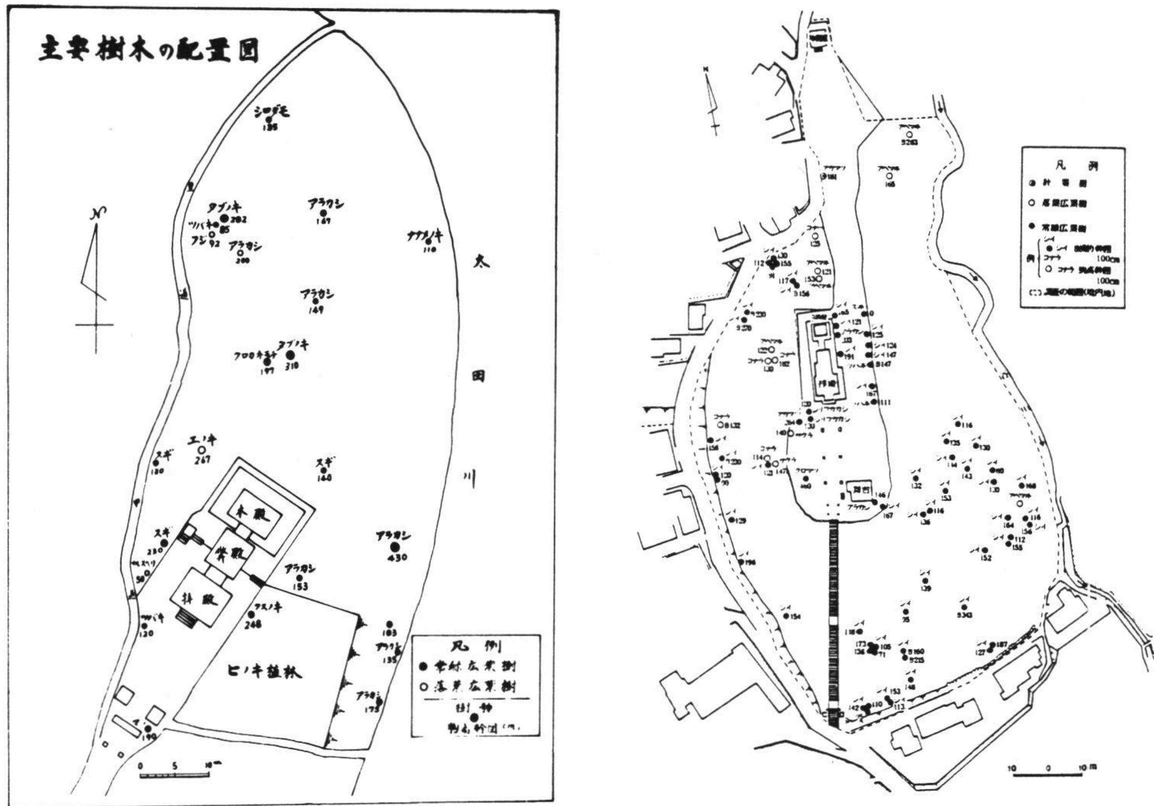

Figure 6 and 7: Plans of groves from reports by vegetation scientists, displayed on a signboard at the entrance to a shrine precinct.

Figure 6 (left): Tsutsuse Hachiman Shrine (Hiroshima-shi, Asakita-ku, Asa-chō, Tsutsuse), after photograph taken on the site.

Figure 7 (right): Umaki Hachiman Shrine (Hiroshima-shi, Higashi-ku, Aki-chō, Umaki), from Andō, 1983:6.

On the other hand it is also true that only few of Japan's present shrine groves can cope with the criteria set up by vegetation scientists. When in 1975 about 1500 out of the 1905 shrines of Ishikawa Prefecture were surveyed, only 46 of them were noted as having "important" groves.[20] This corresponds to about 3%, and although the number would differ for other prefectures, it raises the question why the great majority of Japan's shrine groves have lost the potential natural vegetation of their site. The answer is that they are not as old as one might expect and that the history of shrine groves and shrine forests is to a great extent also a history of logging in sacred territory.

20 FUJIWARA, 1993:171.

Tree-cutting in shrine forests

Infringements on the shrine forest have a long history in Japan. If the 10th century *Engishiki* includes a rule saying that it is not allowed to cut trees and to bury the dead inside the boundaries of a shrine,[21] then probably because the back mountains of shrines were in practice often used for such purposes. As far as tree-cutting is concerned, this was so also in later centuries, but the circumstances that caused it were not always the same. In former centuries the main reasons were the opening up of new land for agriculture and the need of timber for a culture building mainly with wood.[22] An early case of cutting timber from a shrine forest is reported in the *Nihon Shoki* (720 AD) when an entry in this official chronicle says that for an imperial palace of Empress Saimei "trees of the Shrine of Asakura were cut down and cleared away." The angry deity is said to have demolished the structure and caused illnesses and many deaths. The Empress herself died in 661, only two months after she had taken up residence in the new palace. At her funeral, the chronicle says, people saw a "demon" sitting on Mount Asakura and looking down on the proceedings.[23]

While this was a case of using shrine timber for building a palace, often the upkeep of the shrine itself would in time consume the timber reserve of its own grove. As long as trees were sacrificed only for the occasional rebuilding of a single small structure, the situation was not yet grave. The purpose - building a dwelling for the deity - would have seemed to justify the action. But when eventually a prayer hall *(haiden)* and other buildings came to be added to an enlarged main hall, the amount of timber needed for the occasional rebuildings of a shrine could easily exhaust the reserves of an average grove. This became a very serious problem for important shrines with a building complex of considerable size and a ritual that required them to be periodically rebuilt in relatively short cycles. Such shrines needed special timber forests *(somayama)*. Originally these were probably a part of the shrines' own sacred hinterland, but the need for timber would eventually exhaust the reserves. The back forest would then

21 BOCK, 1970:117.

22 TOTMAN, 1989:9-33. DOMENIG 1993.

23 ASTON, 1956 (1896), II:271-272.

turn into a 'bald mountain' *(hage-yama),* and the material needed for further rebuilding would henceforth have to be cut and transported from a new *somayama,* which sometimes could be found only far away in another part of the country. Thus the Kashima Shrine of the ancient Hitachi Province had already in the 9th century to transport its timber for the rebuilding ritual from a place a hundred kilometers away and plant new trees on its site.[24] The large old *somayama* in the hinterland of the Inner Ise Shrine was exhausted by the end of the 13th century,[25] and ever since the beginning of the 14th century the timber needed for the periodic rebuilding (as a rule then still every 19, later every 20 years) had to be transported from forests further away.[26]

Apart from such processes that transformed forests into bare land, there were of course also natural catastrophes that would achieve the same result in a short moment. In 1866 the Oomiwa Shrine is reported to have lost 12'000 trees in a storm,[27] and in more recent times a typhoon raging in the Ise Bay destroyed parts of the sacred forests of the Ise Shrine. How radical the destruction by storms can sometimes be I saw in 1994 on a visit to the Oomori Hachiman Jinja of Saeki-gun in Hiroshima Prefecture, a shrine grove that had been classified as a "natural monument" *(tennen kinenbutsu).* Arriving at the site, we found a single young tree, standing by the side of a freshly rebuilt *honden* in the midst of the wide open plain. Two years earlier, we learnt, a typhoon had swept away the entire grove together with all the buildings.

Groves for preserving the "dignity" of the shrine

To trace also some aspects of the modern part of this history, let us look first at the period beginning with the Meiji Restoration and ending with World War II. This was the time of State Shintō, and for half a century (1897-1945) also the time when Shintō was officially considered to be a national cult, but not as a religion as such.

24 DOMENIG, 1993:159.

25 TEEUWEN, 1996:147, n. 34.

26 *Jingū Nenpyō,* 1929:38-44, e.g. entries for the years 1283, 1302, 1322, 1339, 1359. See also DOMENIG, 1993:158-159.

27 YAMADA, 1993:72.

When at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) Shintō was newly organized as a national cult following the model of the shrine system *(jingi seido)* of the ancient Ritsuryō State, the condition of the shrines all over the country was studied and the details were noted down in special records *(jinja meisaichō)*. It was found that the shrines were not only very numerous, but often in bad conditions also with respect to the state of their groves. Various measures were therefore taken to improve the situation. Sometimes a neglected shrine with a very poor grove would be moved to another place where it could be newly built in an attractive forest as was thought to be necessary for preserving its majesty or dignity *(songen)*. This is what happened for instance with the Hikosasuki Shrine of Fukuyama City, Hiroshima Prefecture. An illustration published in 1901 shows the shrine as an orderly complex of buildings with a stately grove and to the right of it the former site, an empty square on a hill with only a few single trees (figure 8). The commentary explains that the shrine was moved to the present place in Meiji 21 (1888) because at the old site it had been neglected and through extensive logging come to be deprived of the woody scenery needed to keep up its dignity.

The fact that the back part of a shrine forest was often used for timber production explains why at the time of State Shintō it was usually established as a *keigai* property, that is, as an external property not counted as part of the *keidai* or precinct proper of the shrine *(keidai*, 'inside the boundary', *keigai* 'outside the boundary'). The trees of the precinct *(keidai jumoku)*, although usually forming a grove or small forest, were distinguished from the "shrine owned forests" *(jinjayūrin)* which normally were not included in the *keidai* land. Among the latter forests held as assets for the purpose of managing the upkeep of a shrine were distinguished from forests that were protected as necessary for the scenic beauty *(fūchi)*. Forests of the first kind were treated like private forests, but their exploitation would require government permission. As for scenic forests *(fūchirin)*, the regional government would decide about their necessity and fix their areas, and in them the cutting of wood, the taking of earth and stones, and the gathering of natural products was prohibited.[28] These prohibitions were the same as those set up for the shrine precinct,

28 *Shintō Daijiten* (Great Dictionary of Shintō), vol. 2, p. 174, article *Shajiyūrin*.

which may explain why a scenic forest was sometimes nevertheless counted as part of the precinct.

In practice, it seems, the protection was often limited to the trees of the precinct, and the precinct was often reduced to the area of the cult place and its way of approach. Thus the Kibitsu Jinja of Kōnu-chō (Hiroshima-ken, Sera-gun) had according to a document from 1873 a precinct *(keidai)* of about 88 *tsubo* (ca. 290 m^2). The additional shrine owned forest in the back and on the two sides of this included about 1286 *tsubo* and was classified as *keigai* land, a note in the document indicating the value of this land and of the 144 standing trees with a diameter of one foot and more.[29] Later the situation changed, however. In a document of 1968 only an uppermost part of 330 *tsubo* is still marked as *keigai* land, while an area of about 821 *tsubo*, reaching up the hill right behind the cult place, was now integrated into the shrine's *keidai* as "land needed for preserving the dignity" *(songen hoji yōchi)*.[30] The same kind of change is documented for other shrines of the region and may be typical for shrines in other parts of Japan as well. This suggests that in the Meiji period the whole back part of a shrine's forest was often considered to be external property and used as an economic asset. Under the later policy one would partly continue to realize the economic value of such back forests, thereby often also reducing them in size. On the other hand one would also protect them to some extent by having them partly established as scenic forests such as considered necessary for preserving what used to be called officially the 'dignity' or 'majesty' *(songen)* of a shrine.

29 Document reproduced in *Kōnuchōshi,* 1988:547. Another document reproduced at the same place shows that the situation was in principle still the same in 1895.

30 According to the plan of the precinct contained in the *Kibitsujinjashi* (Record of the Kibitsu Shrine, comp. 1968), reproduced in *Kōnuchō Kyōdoshi,* 1978:259.

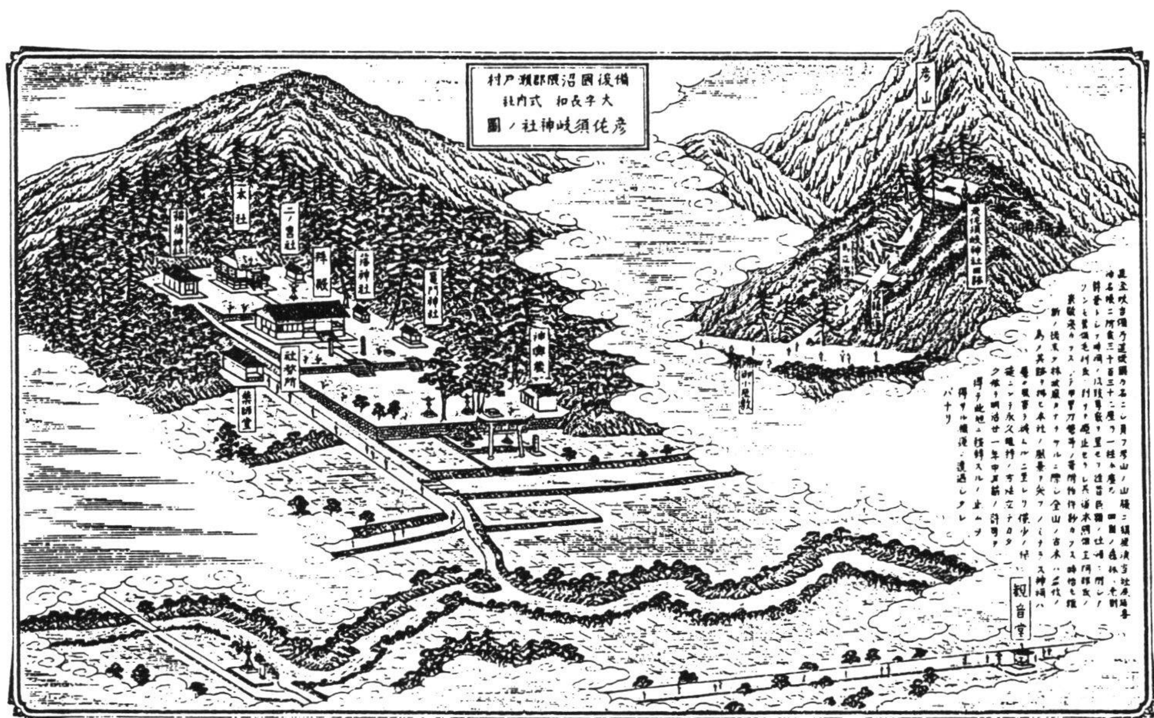

Figure 8: The Hikosasuki Shrine of Fukuyama City, shown together with its former site (right) where its grove had nearly disappeared in the course of time. Illustration from a pictorial record of important shrines and temples of Hiroshima Prefecture (*Hiroshima-ken Jinja-bukaku Meisho Zuroku,* 1901).

Shrine forests falling victim to the shrine merging policy

Towards the end of the Meiji period the wish to restore the numerous shrines to a better state and to make their administration easier was finally responsible for a new policy that was to reduce the number of shrines drastically. This policy was not implemented everywhere with equal rigidity, but it achieved the result that the total number of shrines in the country dropped between 1906 and 1914 from about 195'000 to about 122'000.[31] In principle shrine merging meant that if on the territory of a new administrative village there were, say, four traditional shrines, three of them would be merged into the forth, so that the new village would then have only one. In such cases the *shintai* or sacred symbols of the abolished shrines used to be transferred into the remaining shrine, and the deities

31 MORIOKA, 1987:10.

would continue to be worshipped there.[32] As regards the forests of the merged shrines, they often were cut down in order to sell the timber and use the money for providing the remaining shrine with more impressive buildings.[33]

Of course many were unhappy with the new policy, but public criticism was rare and opposition to shrine mergers were the exception to the rule. Fridell, who has devoted a highly interesting book to the subject, gives many examples showing how villagers were sad and often reacted shrewdly when their local shrine was abolished and the deity came to be enshrined somewhere else. Sometimes the compound of a merged shrine was preserved intact for festivals, but as the gods were no more present at the site, a feeling of melancholy would overshadow the festivities. In one reported case the spirit of a deity was divided into two partial ones *(bunrei)* and one of these was kept at the old place. In other cases a shrine was even reported to have been merged when in reality it had not been so. And when this was found out by checking officials and the shrine was merged, it occurred occasionally that villagers would later steel the *shintai* of their deity and return it to the old place.[34]

Considering the nature of the shrine merging policy, enforced at a time when Shintō was officially viewed as a non-religion, it is not much of a surprise to find that the shrine forests were partly considered as capital assets, partly as scenic features necessary for creating an appropriate atmosphere, but usually not said to be sacred in a religious sense. This is true also for the trees of the precinct proper. An official government document of 1913 says with regard to the "trees and bamboos" of the shrine precinct that it is forbidden to cut those which have a history and those which are necessary for the scenic beauty *(fūchi)*.[35] Similarly, the *Shintō Daijiten* explains:

> Since the trees of the shrine precinct are very important for the preservation of the beauty and dignity of the shrine precinct, it is forbidden to cut them, except

32 FRIDELL, 1973. In Mie Prefecture, where such shrine merging was performed most rigidly, the number of village shrines dropped between 1903 and 1912 from 1699 to 617, that of the ungraded shrines even from 8763 to 519.

33 FRIDELL, 1973:16, 76, 91, 95.

34 FRIDELL, 1973:81-96.

35 *Naimushō-rei*, dated 21.4.1913, §6.

> for wood that is withered or presents an obstacle. Even when trees are sacrificed as timber for the respective shrine, a permission by the regional governor is needed.[36]

Again and again the key words are *fūchi* (scenic beauty) and *songen* (dignity, majesty); a reference to sacredness, however, is consistently missing. Needless to say, this choice of words was part of a doctrine that was to leave considerable space for justifying occasional tree cutting also in those shrine forests that survived the shrine merging policy.

The view of Minakata Kumagusu

One of the few outspoken opponents of the shrine merging policy was Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941), a scholar of wide interests who valued shrine groves both as sacred grounds and as places in which sometimes rare plants were growing. In a letter to the governor of Wakayama Prefecture, he criticized in 1911 the violation of "sacred groves" *(shinrin,* literally, "god-forest") caused by the new policy. In particular he pleaded for the protection of two shrine groves on the pilgrimage road to Kumano which were then planned to be partly cut down. Drawing attention to a new field of science called ecology, he argued that these were the only two famous forests still remaining in the region and that they contained many old and partly rare trees, such as otherwise found only in Kyūshū. With this argument Minakata opposed the opinion of the prefectural priest superintendent whom he quotes for having said that a shrine *(jinja)* and its grove *(shinrin)* were two completely different things and that there was nothing wrong about cutting a grove for providing necessary funds.[37]

A year later Minakata also wrote a long essay addressed to professor Shirai Mitsutarō, the founder of plant pathology at Tōkyō University. In this he criticized the shrine merging policy more extensively. Among other things he pointed out that many old shrines, having no shrine building, consist only of a grove of old and big trees. These, he argued, represent the style of ancient times, as shown for instance by the fact that in the ancient Manyōshū the character for 'shrine' *(sha)* sometimes stands for *mori* ('grove'). Minakata also noticed that to evoke the right feeling of the

36 *Shintō Daijiten,* vol. 1, p. 492, article *keidaichi* (my translation).

37 *Minakata Kumagusu Zenshū,* vol. 7, 1971, pp. 525-528.

majestic nature of a deity, a shrine grove needs not only a few trees, but a rich and luxurious vegetation that reminds of primeval times. The new policy of the government, however, would encourage the enlargement and embellishment of shrine buildings, often at the cost of having to cut down parts of an already unimpressive grove.[38]

Thus for Minakata Kumagusu the shrine groves were valuable natural monuments with a deep religious meaning, and the shrine merging policy was to be condemned for destroying so many of these cultural assets. However, Minakata was nearly alone with his opposition to this policy, and as a pioneer in ecological thinking he was too much ahead of his time.

Recent developments and the present situation

How did things change after State Shintō was abolished at the end of World War II? As far as the merged shrines are concerned, many have been re-established and groves have been replanted. But the general doctrine seems to remain in force. According to the author of an informative book on Shintō shrines first published in 1977, it is still "for safeguarding the dignity of the shrine" that "to some degree" also a forest or grove is necessary.[39] That is, it is not the sacredness of the grove that is stressed, but again its function to provide the shrine with an appropriate atmosphere. This is not only a matter of words, but reflects what shrine forests normally have become in Japan.

With the abolishment of State Shintō at the end of the war the shrines became private institutions (religious legal persons) and as such they were, and are, no more supported by the state. Having therefore to find other means for being able to keep their buildings intact and remain functional, many have occasionally taken profits from their forests in one way or another. Understandably, for if the forest is not considered as sacred in the strict sense, but only as an important decoration of the shrine, so to speak, then one may think and argue that it is really only needed in the immediate surrounding of the shrine buildings. Thus shrine forests that traditionally were larger than apparently necessary could easily come to be reduced for

38 *Minakata Kumagusu Zenshū,* vol. 7, 1971, pp. 549-550,.

39 *Jinja no songen hoji no tame niwa aru teido no hayashi ya mori mo hitsuyo de aru.* OKADA, 1981(1977):80.

economic reasons. Parts were either sold for the price of the timber, or they were cut down in order to make space for other uses, for new streets, housing projects, parking lots, children's playgrounds, and so on. Looking at maps of shrine precincts that show the present boundaries of a shrine forest one can often see the traces of such changes even without knowing what has actually happened.[40]

The grove and the changing concept of the deity

Having sketched a few aspects of the history of Shintō shrine forests and sacred groves, I want to conclude this essay by raising a question of interpretation. It regards the present variety of forms and ritual contexts in which the sacred grove has been able to survive in modern Japan. More particularly, the question is how to explain the varying degree of sacredness that is now attributed to groves, or parts of groves, in ritual practice. How to understand that the Oomiwa Shrine keeps a part of its large forest precinct as a highly sacred, tabooed, and even hidden place, whereas at the other end of the scale of intermediate types there is the common shrine forest of today, a well cared for stand of trees around a wooden shrine, sometimes quite impressive, but not treated as very sacred? The answer I would like to propose is that the variety of types has to do with two different concepts regarding the nature of a worshipped deity.

The paradigm for the advanced idea of a Shintō deity is Amaterasu, the ancestral deity of the imperial family. Her shrine in Ise is a thatched wooden structure raised on piles, equipped outside with a kind of verandah going all around and furnished inside with a bed or throne, with curtains, and with other articles such as in early times may have been found in a noble lady's residence. In other words, the wooden shrine is in this unique case also architecturally marked as the residence of an ancestral deity, with the consequence that we recognize the grove around and in the back of it as belonging to this deity, but not as her dwelling place proper. The real living area of Amaterasu is a temporally far-removed space of myth, but

40 For a study that discusses these changes and also presents numerous plans of shrine precincts from Shiga Prefecture, see UEDA, 1984.

her *shintai* in the form of a mysterious mirror deserves to dwell in a wooden palace that fits the deity's anthropomorphic nature.

On the other hand we have Oomononushi, the deity of the Oomiwa Shrine. In myth he is the important figure that stands for the gods that must first "make" (open up) the lands that the descendants of Amaterasu are later to reign over. He too is an anthropomorphic god, but the *Nihon Shoki* contains two stories that tell us how he occasionally appeared in the form of a snake. One of these stories pictures him as a beautiful little snake that changes into human form when seen by human eyes at daybreak. The other story tells us how Emperor Yūryaku wants to see the deity's form and asks to fetch him in the Mimoroyama, as the mountain was called in ancient times. A great serpent is caught, but because the emperor has not practised religious abstinence it takes on a frightening appearance. The emperor covers his face, flees into the interior of the palace, and orders the divine snake to be returned to the mountain.[41]

Perhaps it is due to the fact that these episodes were recorded in the ancient national history that at the Oomiwa Shrine the zoomorphic aspect of the deity has not been forgotten in the course of time. The visible sign of this is an old *sugi* tree that stands on the open space before the prayer hall, surrounded by an octagonal fence. While the grove behind the prayer hall remains a highly sacred and hidden place, this tree, marked by a *shimenawa,* is exposed to attract attention from the side of the visitors. A signboard gives its name as *mi no kamisugi,* which means "divine *sugi* of the snakes", but the offerings presented at its hollow foot, eggs and saké, are not intended for the old tree, but for that which is said to dwell in there: the snakes. I have not been able to see these snakes, but according to Nakayama, who was chief priest at this shrine, there were at his time four or five of them, more than two meters long, blue in colour, and sometimes beautifully shining in a golden hue when met by the rays of the sun. Not afraid of humans, they would often crawl under the feet of shrine visitors to a small river nearby. Other snakes, yellow striped, are said to live near the threefold *torii,* and if one should enter into the mountain there would also be the small poisonous *mamushi.*[42]

41 ASTON, 1956 (1896): Vol. I, 158-159, 347.

42 NAKAYAMA, 1971:160. Nakayama devotes a whole chapter of his book on the Oomiwa Shrine (pp. 160-171) to the subject *hebi to sugi* (Snake and Cryptomeria).

Comparing the two extreme cases of Amaterasu in her archaic wooden palace and Oomononushi in the nature reserve of a hidden grove, it seems not difficult to grasp what makes the difference. The sacred grove is in principle the dwelling place of a nature deity that takes the form of some animal and likes to live in the open. The wooden shrine, on the other hand, is built for the symbol of an ancestor deity that is imagined in human form.

How in early times nature spirits used to be turned into local deities, can be learnt from 8th century sources. A settler opening up new land would send the spirits not only away, but also reserve for them land higher up where they would continue to dwell undisturbed, now as worshipped deities. Such deities were imagined to take the form of some animal, and they would receive their offering, not in a wooden shrine but at an open air cult place marked for instance by a special tree or stone. A snake deity would sometimes have its cult seat in the fork of a tree, where it might be represented by a snake image made of straw.[43]

However, the sources allow us to grasp one more pattern which explains also why a deity like Oomononushi was thought to appear sometimes in human form, sometimes in the form of a snake. In the ancient texts this other pattern finds expression in myths that make the opening up of land the work of deities which are then also worshipped in the territory they have founded. The reality that apparently caused such myths was the custom to worship the founding ancestor after death as a local deity and to tell later that it was this deity that had opened up the respective land. This process is well supported by a case like that of Ameno Hiboko who in the *Nihon Shoki* is described as a prince from Shiragi (Korea) coming to Japan during the protohistoric period in search of a place to settle down. When his first attempts to do so in a part of Harima Province turn out to be unsuccessful, he finally settles in Tajima Province where he marries the daughter of a local chieftain and takes over political power.[44] Although arriving in Tajima as an immigrant

43 The key source for this view is the often quoted story of Matachi and the snake deity Yato-no-kami, contained in the *Hitachi no kuni fudoki,* section Namekata no Kōri *(Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*, vol. 2, pp. 54-57). For my analysis and interpretation of this source, see DOMENIG, 1988. For a recent study that fully acknowledges the unique importance of this source, see e.g. YOSHIE, 1993.

44 ASTON, 1956 (1896):vol. I, 168-170, 185-187.

conqueror,[45] Ame no Hiboko is later worshipped there as the god of the Izushi Shrine, and according to local legend he is even credited with having originally reclaimed and opened up the land of Tajima. Like the Oomiwa Shrine, the Izushi Shrine, too, still keeps a part of its precinct as a strictly forbidden land *(kinsokuchi),* but in this case it is an area of only about 300 tsubo (0.1 ha). It is said to be densely overgrown with old trees,[46] and in the Edo period it was regarded as the tomb of Ame no Hiboko.[47]

True, Shrine Shintō normally advocates the concept of the mythic ancestor deity according to the pattern propagated in the mythology of the ancient Ritsuryō State rather than the idea of a posthumously deified human ancestor who may occasionally even have a tomb in the shrine precinct. However, there are enough exceptional cases to tell us that the latter idea must not be neglected when thinking about the nature of the protohistoric cults. These cults were, after all, a reality long before the grand nationalmythology, which forms the foundation of Shintō, was constructed after the middle of the 7th century.[48]

How the idea of the posthumously deified ancestor relates to that of the zoomorphic nature spirits can be grasped by comparing traditions such as those regarding the ambivalent nature of Oomononushi. That is, when the founder of a territory would die he would be deified and worshipped at the same place as the nature spirits for which he himself had initiated the cult. Consequently two different concepts of a local deity would come to coexist and eventually to merge, making place to an ambivalent concept of an anthropomorphic deity that may occasionally also manifest itself in the form of an animal.

At the already mentioned Mononobe Shrine of Oda City, the animal aspect finds expression in a local tradition according to which the tomb of

45 The unsuccessful attempts to settle in Harima are reflected in several stories of the Harima no Kuni Fudoki which have him compete with a local rival represented in the text as the god Iwa no Ookami. One of these stories *(Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei,* vol. 2, p. 331) explains a place name by reference to Ame no Hiboko's "eight thousand soldiers", suggesting that he came to Japan with an army.

46 KUWABARA 1984:661.

47 SETODANI, 1985:314.

48 For this aspect, see e.g. YOSHIE, 1993.

the deity is protected by snakes.[49] In most other cases there is no tomb of the deity, but many shrines regard some special kind of animal as the "god's messenger" *(kami no tsukai),* some keeping even living animals of the kind in their precinct.[50] Significantly, such divine messengers are in folk religion sometimes treated like deities of a kind. The Okyakusan no Mori of Mihozaki-chō, Shimane Prefecture, for example, is a dense grove without a shrine building. It is said to be protected by snakes, and although these are called "messengers" *(o-tsukai-san),* they are represented by snake-shaped ropes *(nawahebi)* and offered eggs by local people.[51]

Considering the early sources, the history and the variety of sacred groves to be found in Japan, it would seem that the ordinary shrine forest of today could make sense not only as a scenic feature providing a shrine with the appropriate "dignity", but also as a symbol of the complex nature of Shintō deities and of their historical relatedness to nature spirits. The sacred grove in the ancient sense, however, was basically intended for a deity imagined to possess, or to occasionally assume, the form of an animal. This type is best preserved with shrines that keep part of their precinct off limits, let it grow wild, and reserve it as an exclusive and highly sacred dwelling place of the deity. The most famous example is the forbidden zone of the Oomiwa Shrine, but variations of the type are sometimes found with other shrines and particularly with minor sanctuaries such as those kept in rural areas according to the little tradition of Japanese folk religion. That such groves still exist in modern Japan at all illustrates the great variety, but sometimes also very conservative nature, of local religious customs that we encounter in this country.[52]

49 Personal communication of the shrine's priest on a visit in 1981.

50 Famous with tourists are the deer of the Kasuga Shrine at Nara which in great numbers move around freely in the shrine's wide park. For a synthetic article on the subject of the animal messengers, see KŌNO 1974:42-47. For a discussion in a similar context as here, with reference to ancient sources, see DOMENIG 1988.

51 HAYAMI, 1980:141-143. Another highly interesting sacred grove of the little tradition I have discussed and illustrated in a former article (DOMENIG 1975:7-10).

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