

Columns: A Spiritual Metaphor Found in Traditional Japanese Houses and Culture

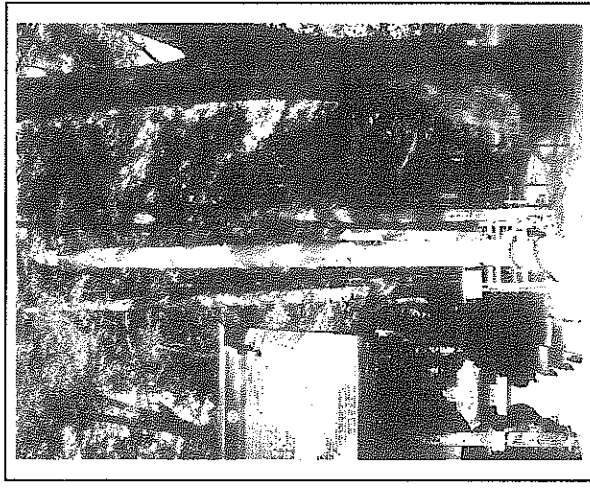
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Elements of the traditional Japanese house provide a rich set of spiritual metaphors. This paper will explore columns as a sacred symbol in various Japanese cultural contexts. Some of these have a specific historical symbolic meaning while other points derive from my speculation. One of these speculations is that the tree/column symbol as seen in Japan as a connection between heaven and earth can be seen as a representation of the Divine Lote-Tree or the “Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing.” This paper concludes with a brief discussion of the building process in Japan that is wrapped with spiritual ceremonies from the beginning of construction to the finish of the framework. These events mark significant steps in the building process and are related to the spiritual nature of building in Japan.

Japanese architecture, which historically uses wood, has some of the oldest and tallest wood structures in the world. Columns play an important role in this heritage and they are seen as sacred elements in many structures. This sacred attitude about columns was brought to my attention when I first visited Japan and heard about a column conceived as connecting heaven and earth. It is from this explanation that I began a search for the spiritual message that Japanese columns hold.

In looking at the architecture of the traditional Japanese houses and their spiritual metaphors, I will begin by tracing the significance of columns in Japan as symbolic elements, then look at their significance from today’s perspective and then finally discuss their relationship with symbols and metaphors in the Baha’i Faith.

Early reference to the importance of columns can be found in the ancient Japanese chronicles, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. These texts began as oral histories and were not written down until 712 and 720 respectively. Consequently, this study is using these documents as metaphorical or mythical stories not as authentic historical records. The importance of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* is that they record the creationist mythology of Japan and give the earliest account of the significance of columns in Japanese architecture. In these texts is the story of the male and female gods, Izanami and Izanagi who descended from Heaven. After their descent they erected a great hall of eight fathoms and a giant “pillar of Heaven.” (1) The union of Izanami and Izanagi produced a daughter who was later sent to heaven by way of this “pillar”. Whether this column was freestanding or was found at the center of the marriage hut is not discernable, but both theories are espoused. (2) These two positions can launch us on a brief exploration of sacred columns found throughout Japan.

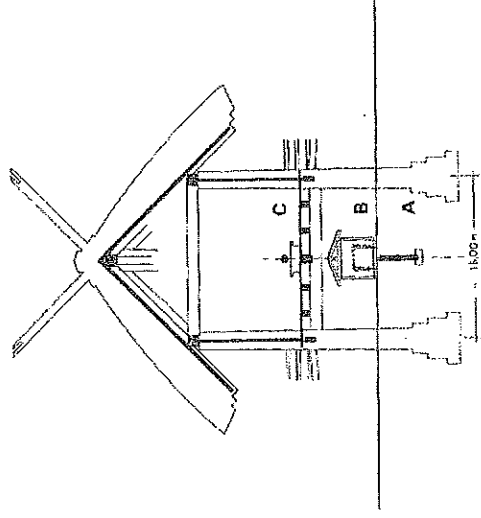


1) Suwa Shinto Shine Columns

Examples of freestanding sacred columns can still be experienced at the Shinto Shrines in Suwa (Motomiya and Maemiya of the Upper Suwa Shrine and Harunomiya and Akinomiya of the Lower Suwa Shrine) in Nagano prefecture as these columns are renewed every 6 years. (Figure 1) The purpose of these columns is not clear but there are a few theories suggesting why they have been erected. One notion is that the gods temporarily inhabited trees. The other notion is that these columns mark the edge or boundary of a sacred space called the place of the gods. Each of the four shrines at Suwa has a freestanding column at the corners of its precinct. These trees/ columns are about 12-17 meters high and have all their branches trimmed. It would appear that both these notions could be considered here. (3)

Another theory is that trees and columns were objects of worship in themselves. As seen in the verse sung as the trees are dragged from Mount Yatsugatake for the Ombashira Festival, "The fir tree of the mountain of Okoya comes down to the village and becomes a god." (4) I think that columns and trees are symbolically interchangeable as the origin of the column is in the tree in both the physical and the ideal form and especially in Japan where columns traditionally are made of wood rather than stone and marble as in other areas of the world.

Yet another example of freestanding columns from the Nihon Shoki concerns Emperor Kimmey (539-71). He ordered each clan to erect a tall column at the Hinokuma Sakai Burial Mound. The construction of tall pillars on graves was a practice also recorded in the life of Bishop Son'i. (5) These freestanding columns hold a special significance and one can consider these as sacred objects or markers of sacred places.



2) Sacred Column at Ise Shrine

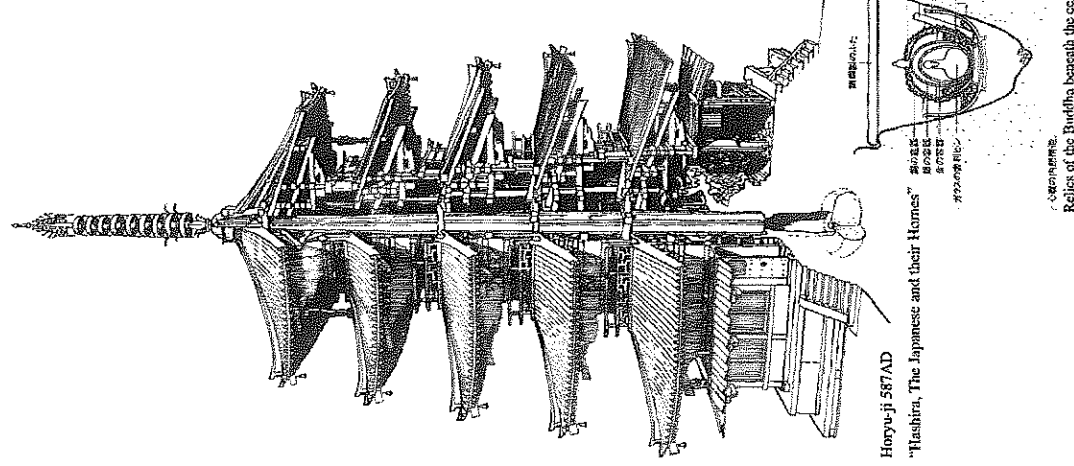
Sacred columns found within structures can be seen in the two great Shinto shrines at Izumo and Ise. In the Izumo Shrine the central column is at the middle of the structure with a diameter of about 1 meter. Currently it stops at a cross beam but was once thought to ascend to the top of the ridge beams like the end columns. (6) It is larger than the other columns; however, its structural significance is not related to its size. At the Ise Shrine the central column was believed to be initially similar in position as the one at Izumo. However, it has lost its structural significance through advances in structural techniques and became smaller. (7) It is now under the floor representing the scared. Although it is not viewable by the public, it is worshiped and a special ceremony is held when it is relocated. The following quote indicates the special position that this column plays in Shinto thinking and worship: "The scared center column is the origin and basis of all things, it is the life of the emperor, the foundation of the state, the source of wealth, and is forever immovable." (8) Sacrificial offerings are made to this column and a special ceremony is held when it is transferred to its new site during construction. These sacred buildings have been rebuilt every 20 years since 685 AD.

Another example of the sacred column can be found in the floats created for the Gion Festival. At the center of the wood frame of some of these floats is affixed a column. It ascends past the frame and at the top is attached a blade to cut the wind to wards off evil spirits. The column is called the *shingi* ("tree of truth") or the *shin no mihashira* the central column extending

toward heaven. (9) All these references are found within the Shinto tradition and give some indications of the belief of the ancient Japanese religion regarding the sacredness of columns.

The examples I have given so far are all from Shinto, the native religion of Japan. However, sacred columns can also be found in Buddhist structures such as five-story pagodas. The pagoda is said to have evolved from the Indian *stupa* a representation of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. Pagodas are reported to contain a life tree and holy relics. (10) There are many examples of these structures throughout Japan but just two examples will be considered here: One is found in the city of Nara at Horyu-ji Temple. The other is in Kyoto at To-ji Temple.

Horyu-ji Temple was constructed in 587 at the order of Emperor Yomei as a prayer to recover from a serious illness. The work was carried through by his son Prince Shotoku. The section drawing of the pagoda shows the column suspended at the center of the building (11) creating a vertical axis within the horizontal plan which is in the form of a mandala, as in most stupas. The column transforms this conception into a three dimensional mandala. The vertical axis, as one may imagine, appears to represent the life tree. The To-ji Temple Pagoda can also be seen to have similar features. Like the pagoda at Horyu-ji Temple, the center column is also suspended, however, this installation took place during reconstruction following a fire in 1643. A unique feature of the To-ji Temple Pagoda is that its central column has a sculpture of the Buddha at its base. Although these columns appear to have no structural significance for the pagoda in terms of load bearing or support, it is thought that they have an effect in protecting from earthquakes. (12)



3) Horyu-ji Temple

As for the metaphorical meaning, I have been told that there are several concepts behind these columns and ultimately the meaning is determined at each temple. One of these concepts is 無用之用 (*muuyonoyo*) which in English is roughly equivalent to “purpose without purpose.” In my understanding, this means that the function has no meaning but, without it, perhaps there is no existence or meaning. This column is metaphorically floating between heaven and earth giving an ethereal sense to the existence of another realm or world.

With the reverence paid to columns as sacred symbols in various forms and locations, one can surmise that in people's homes that the column also holds a special significance. Near the center of many traditional Japanese houses there is a sacred column called the *daikokubashira*. These columns traditionally divide the *doma* or the earthen entry floor from the main living dining space. At times these columns are symbolically wrapped in string with white streamers or

are encircled by a sacred rope (*shimenawa* 注連縄) (13) marking its distinction. These columns are usually the main structural element in the house and are therefore larger than the others. They form space as defined by their location and mark the transition to the main interior living space of the home. According to the Japanese architect, Kikoo Mozuna, these *daikokubashira* form a connection between heaven and earth and are thus similar to the “pillar of heaven.”

It was Mr. Mozuna who first mentioned to me the idea of the *daikokubashira* as being a connection between heaven and earth. This idea raised the question: Could this symbolic pillar or column signify another reality? In examining this question the importance of symbols and metaphors as a process of portraying abstract reality through concrete reality becomes important. What could this reality be of connecting heaven and earth?

Thus far I have discussed the sacredness of columns in Japan. I have explained how the original meanings and ceremonies that surround them have a number of interpretations. At the same time, different ceremonies are performed in different locations among different sects and this is expressed by the columns seen at the center of structures or as freestanding elements. Over time, the exact meaning of some of these symbols has changed and evolved while others have been lost and forgotten. Thus, through these many traditions one cannot suggest that all of these columns have the same meaning or interpretation. However, because they are significant and are viewed as sacred, they share a similar condition of symbolic meaning or sacredness.

If we examine some traditions outside of Japan, the concept of trees and columns as symbols can be found in many other cultural and religious traditions. The following are just a few examples. The concept of the tree of life has existed from ancient times and it appeared as a central image in the story of the Garden of Eden, as recorded in the Bible and portrayed in an alabaster relief from the time of Nimrod (9th century, B.C.). Other examples of sacred trees are the Egyptian Celestial Tree; the Asoka Tree of Tibet; the Persia Talking Tree; and in Spain the Tree of Life (14). Each of these images has its own spiritual or religious roots. As religion is updated, the concepts of the time are also updated. Thus I would like to suggest that it is possible that the full meaning of the symbolism that flows around trees and columns has been buried by time and our lack of understanding.

A possible meaning for these metaphorical columns can be found in the writings of the Baha'i Faith, in which there are many references to trees as spiritual metaphors. One particular example is the *Sadratu'l-Muntaha* which literally means the “Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing” or the “Furthestmost Lote-Tree.” (15) The “Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing” is a designation given to Baha'u'llah by Shoghi Effendi in his book *God Passes By*. (16) In another place Shoghi Effendi clearly states that “It (the *Sadratu'l-Muntaha*) is often used in the Baha'i Writings to designate the Manifestation of God Himself.” (17) From this we can understand that this symbolic tree is synonymous with the Manifestation of God.

The “Sacred Lote-Tree”, and the Sidrah Tree are also expressions that are used to suggest the same theme. This tree also is referred to in *The Hidden Words*, “In the night-season the beauty of the immortal Being hath repaired from the emerald height of fidelity unto the *Sadratu'l-Muntaha*,” (18) Here a designation of place is suggested and one may recall the Night Journey of Mohammad when He ascended to heaven and experienced a “point in the heavens beyond which neither men nor angels can pass in their approach to God.”(19) This point establishes the place of demarcation where man cannot enter, the limits of man's knowledge and the unfathomable depths of Divine Knowledge. The existence of these two separated worlds heaven and earth are connected by a personage, a symbolic tree, a “Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing,” who is the messenger of God revealing the knowledge of God to mankind. This is a major reason for the periodic appearances of the Manifestations or Prophets of God: To establish a bridge or tree that reaches across this void to bring enlightenment to mankind.

Another concept that also appears to be embedded in this symbol is the idea of God's Covenant. The *Sadratu'l-Muntaha*, the Divine Lote-Tree also symbolizes the covenant between

God and man manifest in the Greater and the Lesser Covenants. The greater Covenant is the promise that God would not leave man alone but would continue to supply him with Divine Guidance. The Lesser Covenant is the promise that each Prophet makes with His followers to follow His chosen successor. A quote from Baha'u'llah alluding to the Covenant: "O thou who hast turned away from God! Wert thou to look with the eye of fairness upon the Divine Lote-Tree, thou wouldst perceive the marks of thy sword on its boughs, and its branches, and its leaves, notwithstanding that God created thee for the purpose of recognizing and of serving it." (20) This quote, with its references to trees, branches and leaves is indicative of relatives, ancestors and lineage of the Prophets. Baha'u'llah designated his son Abdu'l-Baha as the Great Branch and his daughter the Greatest Holy Leaf. This further serves to establish the linkage between the Divine Lote-Tree and the Covenant. The recognition of the "Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing" is a vital duty. If we admit the existence of the need for spiritual knowledge, and it seems that the symbolism discussed above suggests such an Existence in some conscious and/or unconscious way in Japanese culture, then we should consider its Existence and embrace it.

It is unique that in Japan these symbolic trees or columns have continued their sacredness, especially in the ceremonies that continue today. Many other traditions have symbolized trees as sacred, while in Japan both trees and columns are seen as carrying distinction. One factor may be that Japanese architecture--as compared to Western architecture--is one made of wood. This means that the main structure is traditionally made of columns and beams or a frame-like system, whereas European architecture is conceived in stone and can be viewed as a "wall" type of architecture. Wood columns, therefore, carry special importance. From ancient times, the meanings and interpretations of these symbols have varied as they have evolved and changed. With the appearance of a New Manifestation, this sacred concept has been renewed, and the symbolic metaphor has experienced a new life. Thus, the updated interpretation in the Baha'i Writings views the tree/column symbol as a connection between heaven and earth, a representation of the Divine Lote-Tree or the "Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing".

Appendix

As related to the symbolism of columns, the ceremonies for starting and completing the structure of buildings in Japan have traditional ceremonies that mark them as sacred events. The initial ceremony is called *jichisai* (鎮地祭), a ritual for the quieting of the earth gods and for the safe and successful completion of the construction. A Shinto priest performs the sacred rights to quiet the earth gods, as any building is an intervention on the earth's surface. A space called the *himorogi* (神籬) is created in which a place for the gods is marked off by a set of bamboo columns at the four corners. Ceremonial gifts are offered to the gods. During the construction of a friend's house, the *jichisai* ceremony had started but a strong wind was gusting during the ceremony. As soon as it was finished the wind ceased. It was as though the earth gods responded to the ceremony and also to the successful erection of the house.

Another ceremony is the *muneage* which marks the climax of the structural frame. Again a Shinto priest performs a thanksgiving ceremony for the successful completion of the framing job. The senior craftsman, *sakkan no touryou* (左官の棟梁), climbs to the ridge of the roof and makes an offering of food and *sake* to the gods. Then, from the end of the ridge he throws large pieces of pounded rice cake, *mochi* (餅), down to the master of the house and his family. (21) These ceremonies are typically held even today and they mark the spiritual surroundings in which buildings are constructed in Japan.

References

- 1) Robert Treat Paine and Alexander Soper. 1981. *The Art and Architecture of Japan*. Yale University Press, p. 283-4. The central pillar of the Izumo sanctuary recalls a passage in the Japanese creation myth. The male and the female primal deities, Izanami and Izanagi, after their descent from Heaven, are said to have erected a hall of eight fathoms and a 'pillar of Heaven'. Before their first mating they wooed each other by going round the pillar until they meet. (1) Cosmological symbolism of the sort widespread in early architecture is obvious here; the marriage hut was meant as a constructed universe in microcosm, with the axial shaft that joins earth and sky at its centre. Because the text contributes no further details and it is impossible to date the setting of the myth even by millennia, it is as likely that the 'eight fathoms hall' was a round one (like the pit dwellings, or, at a higher stage of evolution, the circular hut of Samoa), as that it was a gabled box like the Izumo sanctuary.
- 1) *Kojiki*, p. 20; *Nihongi*, I, 12, 14
- 2) Mitsuo Inoue. 1985. *Space in Japanese Architecture*. John Weatherhill. p. 8
- 3) *Ibid*, p. 8
- 4) *Ibid*, p. 8
- 5) *Ibid*, p. 8
- 6) *Ibid*, p. 10
- 7) *Ibid*, p. 10
- 8) *Ibid*, p. 10, *Zo Ise nisho datjingu hoki hongu*, p. 34. *Ise nisho kotaijin gochinza denki -Shinto gobusho* (the basic Shinto scriptures of Ise), pp. 8-9
- 9) Hiroshi Kashiwagi. "Seeing the Unseen." 1991. In *Hashira -The Japanese and Their Homes*. Living Design Center. p. 9
- 10) <http://www.stupa.org.nz/stupa/intro.html>
- 11) Kakichi Suzuki. Interview, 1991. *Hashira -The Japanese and Their Homes*. Living Design Center. p. 31
- 12) The To-ji Temple Pagoda is constructed of wood joints with no nails and because of this the structural joints act like pin joints which allows for the rotation or dancing of the building during earthquakes. The central column acts as a damper to the swinging motion during the shocks and assists in its stabilization.
- 13) Mitsuo Inoue, 1985. *Space in Japanese Architecture*. John Weatherhill. p. 11
- 14) 1991. *Hashira -The Japanese and Their Homes*. Living Design Center. p. 13
- 15) Baha'u'llah, 1993. *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, Translated by Shoghi Effendi. Baha'i Publications Australia. p. 220 #128
- 16) Shoghi Effendi, 1970, *God Passes By*. Baha'i Publishing Trust. p. 94
- 17) Baha'u'llah, 1993, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, Translated by Shoghi Effendi, Baha'i Publications Australia. p. 236 #164
- 18) Baha'u'llah, 1970, *Hidden Words*. Persian #77, Baha'i Publishing Trust, p. 49
- 19) Baha'u'llah, 1993, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi, Baha'i Publications Australia. p. 220 #128
- 20) Baha'u'llah, 1988, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Baha'i Publishing Trust. p. 84
- 21) <http://www.aist.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/k/kawaramuneage.html>

Figures:

- 1) 1991. *Hashira-The Japanese and their Homes*. Living Design Center Co., LTD. p. 73
- 2) Gunter Nitschke. 1993. *From Shinto to Ando*. Academy Group LTD. p. 17
- 3) 1991. *Hashira-The Japanese and their Homes*. Living Design Center Co., LTD. p. 31