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## Land of the Gods Beyond the Boundary Ritual Landtaking and the Horizontal World View\*\*

### 1. Introduction

The idea that land to be taken into possession for dwelling or agriculture is already inhabited by beings of another kind may be one of the oldest beliefs that in the course of history have conditioned religious attitudes towards space. Where the raising of a building, the founding of a settlement or city, or the clearing of a wilderness for cultivation was accompanied by ritual, one of the ritual acts usually was the exorcising of local beings supposed to have been dwelling there before.

It is often assumed that this particular ritual act served the sole purpose of driving the local spirits out of the new human domain. Consequently, the result of the ritual performance is commonly believed to have been a situation where the castaways were thought to carry on beyond the land's boundary, in an outer space that would surround the occupied land as a kind of "chaos." Mircea Eliade has expressed this idea as follows:

One of the characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition they take for granted between the territory they inhabit and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. Their territory is the "world" (more precisely, "our world"), the cosmos; the rest is no longer cosmos but a kind of "other world," a foreign, chaotic space inhabited by ghosts, demons, and "foreigners" (who are assimilated to the demons and the souls of the dead). (Eliade 1987: 29)

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\*\* Translated by Dr. Detlef Köhn (Kyoto) and the author. This translation is published with permission of iudicium verlag, München. The author thanks the editor, Prof. Dr. Martin Repp, for having proposed to publish this English translation and Dr. Roxana Waterson for English corrections. The original version appeared in 1988 under the title: "Das Götterland jenseits der Grenze. Interpretation einer altjapanischen Landnahmelegende." In: Elisabeth Gössmann and Günter Zobel (eds.), *Das Gold im Wachs. Festschrift für Thomas Immoos zum 70. Geburtstag*, iudicium verlag, München, pp. 61-80. Minor changes have been made to clarify the meaning, but generally the translation follows the German original rather closely. No attempt has been made to update the bibliography, except for two new titles mentioned in Note 4. A more recent work by the author, which partly elaborates on related topics, is G. Domenig, "Sacred groves in modern Japan; Notes on the variety and history of Shinto shrine forests," *Asiatische Studien / Etudes Asiatiques*, Vol. 51 (1997): 91-121.

Although it is understandable that, on first thoughts, one might tend to characterize the said opposition in this way, it is strange that researchers generally remained fixed on this view, as if there were no sources that clearly contradict it. In Eliade's case, it would seem that the reason for clinging to the idea of a settlement surrounded on all sides by chaos was related to the thesis that the performance of landtaking rituals implies a symbolic repetition of cosmogony.<sup>1</sup> Since we are used to imagining the structure of the world described in cosmogonic myths as a macro-system developed along a vertical axis, this thesis implies for Eliade that, in taking possession of land, the space taken out of wilderness symbolizes the "earth" as part of this well-known "vertical" world system. Accordingly, Eliade postulates that as an image of the cosmic earth the settled space is connected to a vertically distant "heaven" by means of a world axis (*axis mundi*) located in the "center" and symbolized by some kind of a ritual marker or cult building.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, horizontally, this "earth" would be bordered by a chaos remaining all around.

The idea of a human world surrounded by chaos has proved so convincing to other researchers that it has been dominating the interpretation of old landtaking stories and foundation legends ever since, and is still commonly referred to today. Instead of devoting comparative studies to the landtaking motif as it plays a part in numerous myths and legends, scholars tacitly and uncritically accepted the speculative thesis that landtaking rites were naturally concerned with the ideal of a centered space and therefore related to center and periphery.<sup>3</sup> Under such circumstances most scholars have usually been content to interpret the sources *ad hoc* in line with this generalizing view. In-depth studies of the subject, however, were hardly undertaken, so that one might almost say that, generally, landtaking rites have been interpreted before their forms were sufficiently known.

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1. "[R]itual taking possession must always repeat the cosmogony." (Eliade 1987: 32) Some of Eliade's ideas were anticipated by Coomaraswamy (1935a), who in this context referred to the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, the classic collection of stories on landtaking in not yet settled regions (originally compiled in the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Schröder (1938: 205) has independently interpreted a landtaking legend of Gotland as a cosmogonic myth. – Note that the German term "Landnahme," which is here translated as "landtaking," derives from Old Icelandic *landnám* in the sense of "taking possession of land."
  2. Eliade (1987: 37) calls this "the system of the world" prevalent in traditional societies [...]," from which "[m]any different myths, rites, and beliefs are derived [...]."
  3. The common interpretation of Germanic sources regarding landtaking is typical for this understanding. It is usually based on the presumption that the rite of walking round the boundaries was a symbolic repetition of the act of taking possession. Cf. Erler and Kaufmann (1971-1998, Bd 1: Sp. 1805) and Trier's (1940: 86) catchy definition "Landnahme ist Landumschreiten" (Landtaking is walking around the land). Huth (1943: 146) connected this doubtful concept with the speculative image of the land's center as a supremely holy place: "At the founding of a settlement, a holy fire is lit in the center, or the boundaries are circumambulated. The area that has been walked around with the fire of the holy center is its circle of protection, the region in which the fire reigns and which it sanctifies" (translated from German).

Without further elaborating on the history of research, I wish to use in this article an example from early Japan to show which conclusions may be arrived at when, unburdened by established modes of interpretation, we ponder about the implications of a particularly revealing landtaking legend.

## 2. *The foundation and dissolution of a sacred place.*

The story I am mainly concerned with is found, together with a sequel that is set at a later time, in the *Hitachi fudoki*, the ancient land-book of the former Province of Hitachi in northeastern Japan.<sup>4</sup> The *fudoki* are books of a special kind that were compiled by the provincial governments in response to an edict issued in 713. According to this edict, the provinces were requested to report on various topics, including the origin of place names and stories told by old people. The section from the *Hitachi fudoki* to be discussed here responds to the order by telling two related stories to explain the name of an irrigation pond. My translation will subdivide the text into three sections, titled *Story of Matachi*, *The Story of Maro*, and *Gloss*.

Matachi and Maro are the respective main actors in the two stories. Matachi, presumably the leader of a group of settlers comprising several families,<sup>5</sup> is said to have opened up land during the era of emperor Keitai, in the first half of the sixth century. Maro, on the other hand, the protagonist of the second story, was a government official who came to the place a century later. In 653 he was governor (*kuni no miyatsuko* 國造) of Ubaraki and as such participated in the establishment of the new district of Namekata. (NKBT 2: 50 f) In our second story he acts at the time of Emperor Kōtoku (645–654), probably before 653 when the place was still a part of Ubaraki, but after the beginning of the year 646 when the Taika reforms were proclaimed. Whereas Matachi in the first story opens up land and founds a sanctuary on his own initiative, Maro later abolishes that sanctuary in the name of the new government, referring to the new conditions that require the building of an irrigation pond for extending the cultivated land.

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4. Compiled not long before the year 718. (Akimoto 1958: 27) The complete title is *Hitachi no kuni fudoki* 常陸國風土記 (*Fudoki of the Province of Hitachi*). For my translation and the analysis of the parts discussed here, I have used the edition in the Nihon koten bungaku taikei (NKBT) series. (Akimoto 1958) English translations of the complete *Hitachi fudoki* are contained in Kōno (1940) and in the journal *Tradition*, vol.1, 1976-1977, no.2, pp. 23-47, and no.3, pp. 55-78. For a (rather free) translation of all the five extant “old” *fudoki*, including the *Hitachi fudoki*, see Aoki 1997.
  5. According to our text, Matachi opened up 10 *chō* of rice fields, approximately 10 hectares at the time. This roughly corresponds to ten times the area of 1,13 hectares, the area which the agricultural regulations (*denryō* 田令) transmitted in the *Ryō no gige* 令義解 (833 CE) would have allotted, for example, to a nuclear family of three male and three female persons (children under the age of five not counted). We can therefore guess that Matachi was thought to have opened up land for about ten such families.

In the original text the gloss is inserted in small characters after the sentence that first mentions the name Yatsu no Kami. As it was probably based on a different informant and spoils the flow of the narrative, it is here added separately at the end.

### The story of Matachi

The elders say: In the era of the sovereign who ruled the country from the Tamaho palace at Iware [Emperor Keitai], there was a man, Matachi of the Yahazu clan, who in a valley in the west of the district dedicated<sup>6</sup> a reed plain, opened up, and made new rice fields. At that time Yatsu no Kami, the deity of the dale,<sup>7</sup> summoned his/her followers, and they all came forth, caused problems here and there, and did not allow the fields to be cultivated. Now Matachi flew into a rage, put on his armor, grasped the spear with his own hands, and striking deadly blows he drove them ahead. Thus arriving at the mountain entrance (*yama no kuchi* 山口), he set up his sign-staff at the boundary ditch, and addressing the deity of the dale, he spoke:

From here upwards I grant god-land (*kami no tokoro* 神地),  
 From here downwards I must make fields (*bito no ta* 人田).  
 From now on I shall serve the *kami*,  
 And worship respectfully for ever.  
 I beseech you:  
 No revenge, no grief!

And he founded a sanctuary (*yashiro* 社) and worshipped for the first time.<sup>8</sup> He then opened up 10 *chō* 町 of field land. The descendants of Matachi took over and continued to celebrate the cult feasts (*matsuri* 祭) until the present day. [NKBT 2: 54-55]

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6. Following Akimoto's emendation (截 for 献, NKBT 2: 54) one would have to translate here "cleared" instead of "dedicated." However, the character 献, which is used in all extant manuscripts, can in Old Japanese be read *tatematsuru* and mean "to present" or "to dedicate." In the context of this particular story this other meaning can make sense as well. True, the idea of dedicating a reedy area is unusual, but unusual is also the fact that the text tells of the consecration of a "land of the gods" in the reed-grown bottom of a valley.
  7. Yatsu no Kami 夜刀神. I shall write this name with capitals when the focus is on the single chief deity, but without capitals when in a vague sense this deity together with its followers or messengers is meant. Traditionally, the characters 夜刀 (used phonetically) have usually been read *yato*. I follow Akimoto (1958: 55) and others who now read *yatsu*. Valley-like depressions in the area are actually still called *yatsu*. In the valley shown in Figure 1, for example, one part is locally called Ubagayatsu and another one Tonagiyatsu (information received on a visit to the place in 1974). The dialect word *yatsu* apparently refers particularly to parts in the bottom of such valleys
  8. *Yashiro* 社. According to the usual interpretation, Old Japanese *yashiro* originally signified the place (*shiro*) where at the time of a cult feast a hut (*ya* 屋) was temporarily set up for receiving the deity. On the other hand it is usually assumed, and with good reason, that in protohistoric Japan the deities of local cults used to be received on an open-air cult seat, rather than in a house-like shrine. The *Izumo fudoki* (NKBT 2: 236 f.) has a story that explains the village name Yashiro 屋代 by referring to a target at which arrows (*ya* 矢) were shot, saying that the name was originally written 矢代. This indicates that one

### The story of Maro

Later, in the era of the sovereign who ruled the empire from the palace of Nagara no Toyosaki at Naniwa [Emperor Kōtoku], Mibu no Muraji Maro first occupied (*shimete* 占) this valley and had a dike for a pond constructed. At that time the gods of the dale (*yatsu no kami*) were assembled in an oak tree (*shii no ki* 椎株) which they had climbed by the pond, and though time had passed they had not withdrawn. Now Maro raised his voice, speaking up:

“The construction of this pond is planned for the benefit of the people.

Who are the heavenly gods, the earthly gods, who refuse to submit to the new wind?”

Then he gave orders to the laborers and spoke:

“The various things seen with the eyes, fish, insects and the like, without fear or hesitation kill them all!”<sup>9</sup>

As soon as he had thus spoken the divine snakes (*ayashiki bemi* 神蛇) left and hid themselves.

The said pond is called Oakwell Pond (*shii-i no ike* 椎井池). By the pond there is an oak tree (*shii no ki* 椎株). Since water is running out, the pond is named after the well. [NKBT 2: 54-57]

### The gloss

The locals say: What are called snakes, are *yatsu no kami*. These have the body of a snake, and horns on the head. If someone sees them when fleeing disaster ...,<sup>10</sup> his household will be ruined, his descendants will die out. On the plains near the seat of the district government<sup>11</sup> they always dwell in great numbers. [NKBT 2: 54-55]

### 3. The location of the narrative

The site of the two stories was near a village whose name the *Hitachi fudoki* gives as Sone. According to the context, this Sone must have been in the area of present-day Tamazukuri-machi on the eastern banks of Lake Kasumi ga Ura in present-

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of the meanings of *yashiro* was “mark” or “sign.” As I have shown elsewhere (Domenig 1976), on Hirado Island in Nagasaki Prefecture shrines called *tohi-yashiro* can take the form of either a straw hut or a cult sign in the form of a stone topped with a straw hood (*tohi*). As I am going to suggest below, Matachi’s *yashiro* might have been a sacred tree to which a straw snake was attached.

9. This is possibly a stereotyped ritual formula that was used when abolishing old sanctuaries in other places as well. Meaning “insects and the like” (in the sense of creatures of all sorts), it was here addressed to the *yatsu no kami* as “divine snakes” (*ayashiki bemi* 神蛇).
10. The extant manuscripts have here the characters 率紀, which I have not translated because without emendation they make no sense.
11. *Kōri* 郡, “district.” In *fudoki* usage *kōri* often means, not the district, but the seat of the district government; cf. NKBT 2: 55, note 16. The district government of Namekata was located in a different valley to the southeast of the valley where Matachi opened up land. The gloss was presumably supplied by an informant from that other area.

day Ibaraki Prefecture. Geologically, the region is characterized by numerous depressions forming branching valleys that much resemble one another. Incised rather abruptly into the dominating plateau to a depth of about 20 to 30 meters and an average length of about two kilometers, these shallow valleys open below into a plain extending along the coast. Today, the steep slopes bounding these valleys are mostly covered with trees, so that their flat bottom parts often present the aspect of clearly defined landscape units covered with rice fields. Each of these small valleys holds at least one irrigation pond, situated either in the uppermost part or in one of its lateral branches.

Several hypotheses have been advanced as to which valley should be identified as the scene where Matachi was said to have cleared land. This question does not have to concern us here, however; it is sufficient to get a general image of the scenery based on the topography of the larger area. For this purpose we may follow here the most likely theory which locates the action in a valley situated about four kilometers southeast of Tamazukuri Station in today's Namegata City, Ibaraki Prefecture (Fig. 1).

Two things, however, are important for forming an appropriate image of the spatial context of Matachi's actions. First, all these valleys are of such a size that Matachi's 10 *chō* (about 10 hectares) could not even have completely covered the lower half of one of them. And second, the pond must of course have occupied a part in the flat bottom of the valley; nowhere on the steep lateral slopes was there space for making a pond. Adding up these two points resulting from the study of the topography, we understand that only if the boundary ditch mentioned in the story ran across a part of the valley can it have separated off an upper "land of the gods" in such a way that later an irrigation pond could be accommodated in it. Consequently, if the legend localizes the boundary ditch at the "entrance to the mountain" (*yama no kuchi*), we must not conclude from this that the ditch was running along the foot of the lateral slopes so that Matachi would have banished the

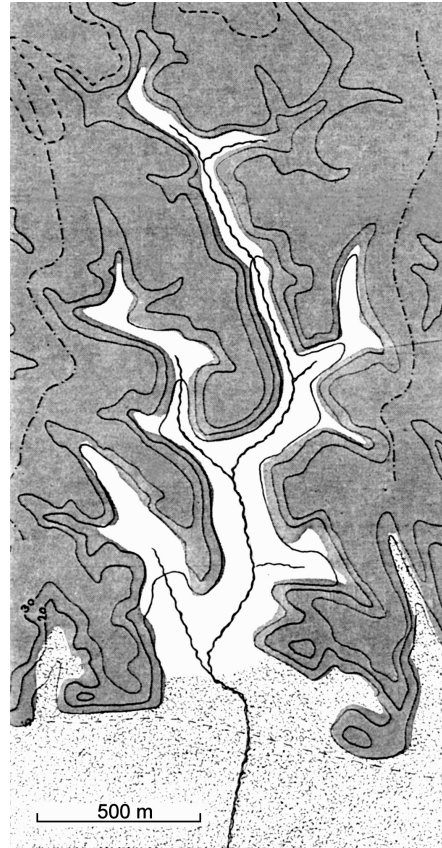


Fig. 1: The scene of the two stories identified according to the most likely traditional theory. Dotted: a section of the coastal plain. In white: the bottom parts of the valley. Note that in the lower part of the second branch valley to the left there is now an irrigation pond (not indicated).

*kami* into these. Quite to the contrary, we are dealing here no doubt with the old term *yama no kuchi* or *yamaguchi* in the sense of a place that is crossed in the longitudinal axis of a valley.<sup>12</sup>

Once we have recognized this, we arrive at the following image: Matachi, when driving away the obstructive *kami*, is moving upwards in the valley, and when he reaches the spot up to which he is going to cultivate the land, he plants a staff, thereby determining not only the “entrance to the mountain” but simultaneously also the position of the “border ditch.” The ditch will later mark the boundary between the cultivated lower part of the valley and the remaining upper part which is dedicated as god-land (*kami no tokoro* 神地).

True, our text describes the scene somewhat differently; it does not say that Matachi planted his staff where he wanted to have the “mountain entrance” and the “border ditch.” Instead, to locate the action in space the story anticipates the later names of the respective places, as is often seen in landtaking stories. The Maro story does so, too, when it locates the oak tree with the divine snakes at a pond which could be made only after the snakes had withdrawn from there.

#### 4. A host of wild spirits and a community of gods

Similarly, our text probably anticipates a later situation when it allows a deity with followers to get into Matachi’s way. This image too does not correspond to what we should expect, judging from the context. As a man subduing wilderness before founding a sanctuary, Matachi should first face a leaderless multitude of “wild spirits,” a vague host of *araburu kami*, as the ancient texts often call hostile supernatural beings.<sup>13</sup> *Yatsu no Kami*, on the other hand, is formally the name of a cult deity,<sup>14</sup> comparable to *Yama no Kami*, “mountain god.” As a god of the valley who leads his/her followers, *Yatsu no Kami* is rather a manifestation presupposing that the local cult has already been founded.<sup>15</sup>

12. Mishina (1974: 102) even interprets here the word *yamaguchi* 山口 in the sense of “entrance to a valley” (*tani no iriguchi*), perhaps meaning the entrance to an upper (interior) part of the valley or to a side valley. For the old place name *Yamaguchi*, see Yanagita (1963: 494 and 502).

13. In the ancient texts the expression *araburu kami* (written 荒布留神, for example) is often also used disparagingly for the cult gods of enemies. By contrast, the *aramitama* 荒御魂 or “wild spirit” of a deity was, apparently, the positively valued wild aspect of one’s own worshipped deity turned against an enemy.

14. I use the expression “cult deity” to designate what in Shrine Shinto is called *saijin* 祭神, that is, the deity actually worshipped at a cult place. Not all gods of Japanese mythology were cult deities.

15. Later on, in cases of disaster (bad harvest, epidemics, etc.), the cult deity was presumably supposed to have broken out of the god-land. It is conceivable that on such occasions the landtaking ritual used to be repeated and that it was actually the scene of such a repetition that was in the narrator’s mind when he located the action of the story in regard to already established names.

I think therefore that Matachi, as a land-taker, and in contrast to what the text says, should have exorcised a leaderless host of *araburu kami*, of “wildly behaving spirits,” and that it was only when he established the sanctuary that this host of wild spirits assumed the form of an organized community of gods. Seen from this perspective, the founding of the cult implied the elevation of a multitude of wild spirits to a plurality of worshipped gods, while at the same time the nature of that plurality changed as well: A wild host turned into an organized community, which in the cult was represented by a single main deity that could be addressed by name.

The name Yatsu no Kami can be understood both as a singular and a plural. As a singular it apparently designated specifically this single representative deity, while as a plural it may have meant a vague plurality of dependent gods or divine “messengers” (see below).

The gloss presents a local tradition according to which these gods used to become manifest as horned snakes. Considering that in many parts of Japan horned straw snakes are traditionally still used in religious contexts, often fixed to trees that mark the boundaries of ritual space (see Fig. 2),<sup>16</sup> it seems quite likely that this idea was inspired by a material snake image made of straw. We may imagine, therefore, that on Matachi’s cult place Yatsu no Kami was represented by a straw snake hanging in the branches of a tree that had been chosen as the temporary seat where the deity would be addressed in ritual. This snake image could have been periodically renewed by the additive method; that is, each time a newly made straw snake could have been added without removing the old one – a procedure that is still now occasionally practised in Japan. If this was done, over the years a number of “divine snakes” of different age and weathering would have accumulated on the tree, and it would have been an assembly of sacred straw snakes that Maro’s workers had to remove. If the text says that the snakes “had climbed” the tree and later “left and hid themselves” this is but a way of expressing what the affixing and removal of the snake-images really meant.

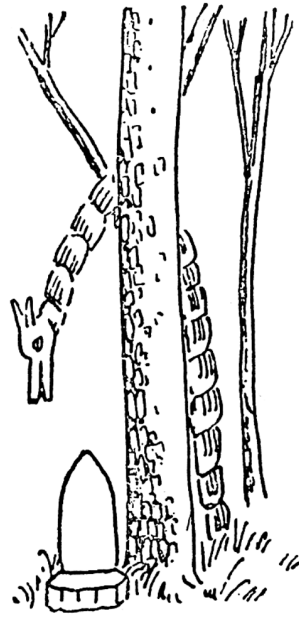


Fig. 2: Straw snake hung on a tree at the ceremonial *mushiokuri* (sending away the “insects”) according to a custom of Tsugaru (Aomori Prefecture). After Miyamoto 1968: 261.

16. Note the remarkable resemblance between the 20<sup>th</sup> century straw snake shown in Fig. 2 (after Miyamoto 1968: 261) and the snake of Fig. 3, which was represented on a wall in a 6<sup>th</sup> century (late Kofun period) burial cave (after Saito 1968: 236, figure 23). The horns and the segmented body suggest that the ancient drawing, too, might represent a snake image made of straw.

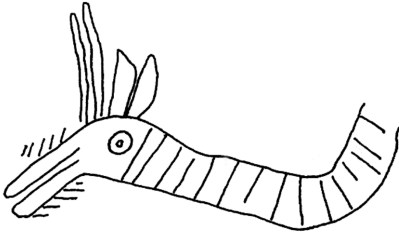


Fig. 3: Representation of a horned snake on a wall in one of the ancient burial caves at Hata in Hitachi-Ōta City (Ibaraki Prefecture). Late Kofun period. After Saito 1968: 236.

### 5. The power of the local deity

Having gained a plausible idea of the visible representation of the local deity at the sanctuary, we must raise the question of what kind of power was ascribed to such a deity. According to the quoted texts, Yatsu no Kami was imagined as a snake with followers who under certain conditions (violation of a taboo) might bring disaster, causing the ruin of a household and the decline of a family. More information about the nature and power of such local deities can be gleaned from the famous story of Yamatotakeru and the deity of Mount Ibuki, which appears both in the *Kojiki* (compiled 712) and *Nihon shoki* (720). In substance, the story goes as follows:<sup>17</sup>

Returning from his expedition to the eastern lands where he has conquered the gods of two mountain passes, both appearing in the form of a “white stag,” Yamatotakeru comes to Mt. Ibuki, where he meets a “great snake” – in the *Kojiki* version it is “a white boar as large as a cow.” Thinking to be faced with a mere messenger of the deity, Yamatotakeru says so and simply strides over the snake. Suddenly a violent storm with icy rain comes upon him; he almost faints, gets lost in the rising mist, and it is only with great trouble and finding himself struck down by illness that he eventually finds his way out of the area. His physical condition worsens, yet moving south he manages to reach Ise Province; but there his last strength fails. At the young age of thirty, he breathes his last on a lonely moor.

To assume that the tragic death of the hero was due to the wrath of a deity’s messenger would be quite wrong, however. The texts ascribe the reason of the disaster to the fact that Yamatotakeru offended a “master deity,” which he had mistaken for a mere “messenger.” According to the *Nihon shoki*, the snake was actually the mountain god, and a note in the *Kojiki* version, given in small print, explains the hero’s error thus: “What had been transformed into a white boar was not the messenger of the deity (*kami no tsukai* 神之使者); it was the deity’s main body (*kami no muzane* 神之正身). He was dazed because of his open speech (*kotoage* 言擧).”<sup>18</sup>

There is no need for a long argument to make it understood that we are dealing here with an image of a deity that can be classified with the type “Master or Mistress of

17. The following paragraph summarizes the *Nihon shoki* version (NKBT 67: 307-309; Aston 1956, I: 208-210). For the *Kojiki* account, see NKBT 1: 214-219 and Philippi 1968: 242-247.

18. NKBT 1: 218; Philippi 1968: 246.

Animals.” The fateful misunderstanding was apparently possible because in different local cults the “master deity” could be thought to assume different animal form. What in one place was a white stag was in another one a white boar, and in a third one a big snake. In any case, however, the master deity would hold sway not just over the animals of his or her own kind but, presumably, over the entire local fauna.<sup>19</sup>

Another insight that can be gained from this story is that the deity of a mountain or mountain pass was ascribed a power that went far beyond the immediate concerns of the animal world and the terrestrial “land of the gods.” All kinds of disaster were apparently attributed to the local deity, including sickness and death – even bad luck hitting the people and their land from the sky above. This is not to say that a local deity, being held responsible for the weather, would have been regarded as a sky deity – at least not in the sense that people would have imagined the deity’s dwelling place in the distant sky. Rather, local deities were thought to exert their power from their terrestrial dwelling space, controlling everything that might benefit or harm the worshippers in their small world, including the weather.

All this also regards Yatsu no Kami who as a deity dwelling beyond the “mountain entrance” is likewise a mountain god of the theriomorphic kind. When Maro exorcises this deity, he only re-enacts in the way of a government official of a later time<sup>20</sup> what the legendary Yamatotakeru was said to have achieved by throwing a garlic plant (*hiru*) into the eyes of the two mountain gods he encountered first. Both, the legendary hero and the government official, “removed” an old cult deity whose tabooed land had become an obstacle to the further opening up of the land.

However – and this is the important message of the Matachi story – before such a deity could be ritually removed and dispossessed of his/her land, the deity had first to be elevated to the status of a cult deity by performing the landtaking ritual. Yet what was it, actually, that invested Matachi with the right to banish the *kami* of the wilderness into a “mountain” land and to push them into the role of cult deities? The answer is found when we also pay attention to the obligatory prelude which used to initiate a proper act of landtaking.

### 6. *The prelude: divination and occupation*

When Matachi is driving the spirits of the wilderness higher up into the valley, he is moving not only towards the point up to where he intends to take the land; he

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19. In Shrine Shintō of later times the old idea of the theriomorphic cult deity has usually given way to anthropomorphic images of gods such as featured in mythology. On the other hand, many shrines traditionally assign to their main deity a certain species of animals as “messengers” (*kami no tsukai* 神の使 or *tsukawashime*) and some even keep in their precinct live animals of the respective kind. Cf. Kōno 1974: 42-47 and Herbert 1966: 102-106.

20. Another ancient story tells of an official who exorcized a deity from a sacred tree whose timber was needed for ship building. In that case the deity first responded by sending a thunder storm. See *Nihon shoki*, entry for the year Suiko 26 (618? CE), NKBT 68: 202 f; Aston 1956 II: 147.

is also moving away from another spot which he must have determined previously as the starting point of his landtaking. This other spot is the lower counterpart to the upper mountain entrance: the “gate” to Matachi’s own land, as it were; the base point from which he plans to build up his space. Or, to employ another metaphor from architecture: it is the foundation stone, whereas the mountain entrance corresponds to the ridge beam whose ceremonial raising signals that the framework of a house is built up to the very top.

How did Matachi find this basis, how did he set this foundation stone? The text leaves this question open, but there can be only one answer: He must have found it by divining, by a ritual act intended to find out whether or not his planned enterprise will be successful.

Whereas the Matachi story does not give us any hint as to this preliminary act of divination, the sequel says that Maro first occupied 占 the valley. The Chinese character 占 is here usually read as *shimu*, “to claim, to occupy,” but in the old texts it can also stand for *uranau*, “to divine,” which indicates that the two concepts were intimately connected. We should, therefore, interpret the text in the sense that Maro first divined regarding his plan of building a dike and that, based on the positive outcome of his divining, he formally announced occupation by placing a claim marker.<sup>21</sup>

As a settler still committed to the rites and beliefs of an earlier age, Matachi can be assumed to have divined by a method that differed from that employed by a seventh century government official. He might have performed divination by an act of throwing or shooting, for example,<sup>22</sup> and in case of a positive outcome the missile might have served him as a provisional claim marker. But whatever method he may have used, the important point is that he would have interpreted successful divination as a proof that the local nature spirits had tacitly accepted him as a landtaker, on condition, of course, that he would dedicate a local cult to them. The claim marker, set up as a sign of successful divination, would thus symbolize Matachi’s right to take possession. This now answers the question as to why Matachi was permitted to push the *kami* into the role of cult gods: by allowing the divination to be successful the *kami* themselves had authorized him to do so.

Divination is essentially a rite that should take place “before” the thing it is asking about, not only temporally but also spatially. Also is it a known fact about claim

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21. Space does not allow elaborating here on this point. May it suffice to note that not only can the Chinese character 占 in Old Japanese stand for both *shimu* (“to occupy”) and *urafu* (“to divine”), as noted; but Old Japanese *shimu* could also be written with the character 標 in which case it means “to make a sign.”

22. Zeissberg (1868: 401-444) has already discussed the motif of throwing or shooting, as featured in numerous foundation legends of Europe. Such stories usually say that someone threw or shot off some object, vowing to found a church or settlement wherever the object will fall down. This may give the impression that the intention was to find an unknown place, but as far as the story motif had a basis in a ritual practice we may better imagine that the throw or shot was actually aimed and that the hit was interpreted as an auspicious sign. In Japan, the throwing or shooting motif appears in many *fudoki* legends, often in the shortened form which only mentions the “falling down” of an object.

markers that they do not properly belong in the interior of an occupied area, but are to be located at places of access and at front borders where an approaching person can easily see them.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore most likely that a historical Matachi would have chosen the space in front of the desired stretch of land as the scene for the divinatory prelude and that he might have performed the divining act in relation to the lower boundary of his future land

Having briefly also considered the necessary prelude (which is not mentioned in the story), we arrive at the understanding that Matachi performs the landtaking ritual as a two-act drama, relating the two acts to two different locations of his reed-covered site. In the divinatory prelude he is concerned with finding the right to take possession and with deciding the lower boundary of his land. Starting from this legal and spatial basis, he exerts in the second act his right of taking possession, in the narrow sense, by pushing the wild spirits upwards and deciding the land's upper boundary beyond which he will worship the spirits as being represented by a local cult deity.

### 7. *The resulting spatial order*

According to this reconstruction of the full landtaking ritual, the remarkable thing is – apart from the fact that wild spirits are transformed into cult gods<sup>24</sup> – that in the course of action a particular order is inscribed into space. Whereas researchers usually believed that landtaking rituals ideally relate to territories organized as centered spaces, and particularly to their center and/or periphery, the Matachi legend clearly alludes to a ritual that creates a type of spatial organization that emphasizes direction, a goal-oriented space, as we might call it, stretching between two “polar” border points of special significance.

Let us take a closer look at the structure of his goal-oriented space and at the possibility of interpreting it in terms of cosmology. Down in the valley we must imagine a special marker that indicates the entrance, the “gate” to Matachi’s field land, while higher up in the valley we find the “mountain entrance” which opens into the highest part where the valley bottom is counted as mountain land and dedicated to the gods. The two gates (symbolic or real) correspond thus with two zones, one of

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23 For example, the symbolic straw rope *shimenarwa* (literally, “occupation rope”) is typically fastened to the *torii* at the entrance of a shrine precinct.

24. Some authors, for instance Tsukushi (1972: 40 f.), regard this as atypical, but quite a few see in the described change the characteristic “birth” of a cult deity in analogy to the transformation of chaos into cosmos or nature into culture. See, for example, Mishina 1974: 102 ff; Mitani 1974: 32 f; and Sakurai 1976: 9 f. It seems to me, however, that the importance of this issue is usually not fully recognized. For India, Kuiper (1975: 107-120, esp. 112-115) has argued that the interpretation of Vedic ontology crucially depends on whether or not one takes into consideration that in the *Rig Veda* there is mention of *asuras* (“demons”) that have become *devas* (“gods, deities”). On this subject see also Coomaraswamy (1935a: 35, note 40), who long ago wrote “that the Devas are Asuras and Serpents sacrificially transformed or ‘turned about’.” Coomaraswamy has also authored a separate study on this subject (1935b: 373-419; not mentioned by Kuiper).

which is the human land lying between the poles, while the other one is the god-land extending outside beyond the upper pole.

Interpreting this situation in terms of cosmology, we can view Matachi as a founder who by performing the landtaking ritual inscribes an ordered microcosm into a chaotic sea of reeds. In this microcosm, the world of the gods is a cosmic region lying *horizontally above* (that is, *behind*) the human world, and the human world is, consequently, not everywhere surrounded by chaos. To the contrary, on the side of the cult place it borders directly on the terrestrial god-land, with which it is connected by a mere “gate” or something else marking the entrance.<sup>25</sup> This spot, symbolically the highest place in the human world, is situated in the middle of the terrestrial microcosm, but it is not a center of the kind we usually have in mind when speaking of the center of the world, meaning by “world” the human world. The upper “gate,” the “mountain entrance,” does not mark the center of one single space but the middle point between two different worlds that border on one another, somewhat like the intersection between the upper and lower loop of the number 8. We are thus faced with a “center” that is situated at the boundary, where it marks simultaneously an end and a beginning – the end of a human world and the beginning of a realm of the gods.

To prevent misunderstanding I hasten to add that, in principle, the two cosmic regions of Matachi’s world are, of course, not equally determined like the two loops of the figure 8. Primarily, only the human world extends between two boundary poles, and only the outer borders of this world might eventually also be marked all around. The world of the gods, however, has primarily just one border pole, the one which connects it with the human world. Apart from that it is not further determined. In Matachi’s case this god-land is in the upper parts of the valley where the lateral slopes might seem to limit it, but in a free and open landscape it might have been a tabooed zone without visible boundaries, extending behind the cult place in approximate proportion to the taken land.

It is, therefore, not necessary for a terrain to be predefined by natural features in order to allow that the landtaking ritual can create in it a microcosm of the kind described. Although Matachi inscribes his small world into a valley that naturally corresponds to the directional character of the ritually established space, directionality as such is a property that characterizes bipolar spaces even when they are inscribed into directionally neutral topographies. If Matachi’s god-land seems to have natural boundaries on the surrounding slopes this is, cosmologically speaking, a rather weak point because, in principal, the gods should be ascribed an unbounded beyond that

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25. This situation is impressively preserved in the old precinct of the Ōmiwa Shrine 大神神社 near Sakurai, south of Nara. There the precinct in the narrow sense ends at a most holy gate which usually remains closed. Immediately behind that gate is a strictly tabooed area (*kimsokuchi* 禁足地) in the form of a valley-like zone bounded by two descending spurs of the mountain. This most sacred zone – at the shrine it is called Ōmiya-tani, “Shrine valley” – is part of a much wider wooded area that is also considered sacred, though less so, and extends up to the very summit of the mountain. See the plan of this shrine and its sacred mountain land in Nakayama (1971: 65).

is subject to spatial limitation only where it communicates with the human world. In other words, their land should be “infinite” in the sense of being without marked outer boundaries, and yet, as a counter-world of the human world, it should not be disproportionately wide.

### 8. Conclusion

If we compare Matachi’s microcosmic system with the macrocosmic system that is always in Eliade’s mind when he discusses the subject of sacred space, it is evident that the two systems have one thing in common: in either of them two different cosmic regions are connected with one another. What differs in the two systems is the relative spatial position of the two regions and the way they are connected.

In Matachi’s system, one region lies horizontally behind the other and, sharing a common border at at least one point, both are connected by a point-like axis in the etymologically older sense according to which “axis” meant the end of a cart’s axle, the pivot on which the wheel revolves. In the vertical world system as defined by Eliade this is quite different. There the two cosmic regions are “heaven” and “earth,” and heaven is positioned vertically above the earth. The two regions are separated by an empty space and connected by a linear “world axis” which rises vertically from the center of the terrestrial world and can be represented, symbolically, by a concrete sign or building. And since heaven as an extra-terrestrial world of the gods is vertically far removed, the human world borders horizontally on outer areas which nowhere belong to the cosmic world, but are excluded from it as a sort of “strange, chaotic space.”

With Eliade many of us believed we recognized in the vertical world system the timeless model of sacred space, as it were. And yet, could it not be that we have fallen victim to an illusion? Is the vertical world system, as a form of putting the general principle into concrete terms, not *over-defined*? Does it not suffice to postulate that the human world is *in some way* connected with the world of the gods? Why require that the connection be specifically a vertical and a linear one?

On the other hand, looking at the problem diachronically, we may wonder if the small scale horizontal world system, in its simplicity and local nature, might not represent an earlier type of a world system than that in which the world of the gods is vertically removed in the far sky. This is not to say that, quite generally, thinking in terms of horizontal space orders might have deeper roots in history. However, it is conceivable that humankind initially practised vertical space ordering on a small scale, as for instance in house building, and that it was the horizontal extension of the earth that first offered the possibility to also inscribe analogically ordered spaces into the wider expanses of a landscape. Had a settler like Matachi later continued opening up more land in his valley, pushing the land of the gods further and further upwards, he might perhaps have been ready eventually to project the divine realm into the visible sky above the horizon. In such a case it might have been enough to draw inspiration from the vertical spatial structure of a cult building in order to finally arrive at the speculative image of a world system of the kind Eliade used to describe so well.

The ancient texts of Japan know of this vertically structured macro-world, and Japanese mythology, in many respects a product of the seventh and early eighth centuries, presupposes it in quite a few episodes. Beside that, however, many of the extant ancient sources contain passages that do not presuppose the knowledge of a vertical world system. This is particularly true for the various *fudoki*, and among the *fudoki* stories the tale of Matachi and Yatsu no Kami holds a special status. Japanese scholars have actually long noticed the extraordinary character of this story, which they frequently quote when dealing with the early cults of Japan. Nevertheless, I think that the true value of this unique source is not fully realized as long as we do not draw from it inspiration for critically reconsidering the traditional theories regarding the early world view of *homo religiosus*.

### Abbreviations

NKBT 1: Kurano Kenji 倉野憲司 and Takeda Yūkichi 武田祐吉 (eds.), *Kojiki* 古事記, *Norito* 祝詞. (Nihon koten bungaku taikai Vol. 1).

NKBT 2: Akimoto Kichirō 秋本吉郎 (ed.), *Fudoki* 風土記. (Nihon koten bungaku taikai Vol. 2).

NKBT 67 and 68: Sakamoto Tarō 坂本太郎 et al. (ed.), *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 Vol. I and II. (Nihon koten bungaku taikai Vols. 67 and 68).

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