

Representations of the World Axis in the Japanese and the Romanian Culture

Renata Maria RUSU

Japan Foundation Fellow 2009 – 2010

Handa City, Japan

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to briefly present some of the forms the world axis takes in Japanese and Romanian cultures through the ages, namely, to show how a mythological concept – the axis mundi – has outlived its mythological existence and has survived up to modern days. We do not intend to concentrate on similarities or differences, but simply present some of the many culture-specific representations of this universal mythological concept: world axis representations in modern Japanese festivals (of which we have chosen three, to represent “*pillar torches*”: “*the Sakaki sacred tree*”, “*the sacred mountain*”, and “*the sacred pillar*”) and some world axis representations in Romanian culture, such as the fir tree, symbols related to dendrolatry, wooden crosses placed at crossroads, the ritual of climbing mountains, etc.

Keywords: axis mundi, myth, representation, culture

0. Introduction

The concept of *axis mundi* is one of the mythological concepts that can be found in virtually all cultures in the world. It has many representations which depend on culture, such as *the tree, the mountain, the pillar, the tower, the obelisk, the cross, the liana, the stars, the nail, the bridge, the stair*, etc. What is also striking about this concept is that it managed to outlive its mythological representations and survive up to modern days – a very powerful metaphor that transcends time.

In this paper, we shall take a brief look at some of the forms the world axis takes in Japanese and Romanian cultures through the ages. We do not intend to emphasise similarities or differences, but simply present the culture-specific representations of this universal mythological concept.

1.0 World axis representations in modern Japanese festivals

We have previously presented and analysed the shapes *axis mundi* takes in Japanese myths.²⁶ Let us now see how this concept survived and what forms it takes in present-day Japanese culture.

Japanese mythology has one important characteristic that makes it quite special: it is still ‘alive’, in the sense that Shinto and its principles have not undergone significant alterations throughout history. The representations of the world axis are no exception. Although there are many such representations in modern Japanese culture, the first connection that comes to mind when we think about the world axis as it appears in Japanese myths on the one hand and about modern Japan on the other hand is the fact that this mythological image is constantly being brought to life through festivals in modern Japan.

To name just a few of the shapes it assumes, we can list representations such as “*pillar torch*”, “*Sakaki sacred tree*”, “*sacred mountain*”, “*sacred pillar*”, etc. All these representations are of vital importance in the understanding of Japanese myths as well as in the understanding of Shinto rites – both being the very cornerstone of Japanese culture as a whole.

We shall now briefly introduce only three of the many Japanese festivals that exemplify the above representations.

1.1 Hashira Matsuri as an exemplification of “*pillar torches*”

The *Hashira Matsuri* (or Pillar Festival) is held in July²⁷ at Sekiyama Shrine in Myōkō Village, Niigata Prefecture.

²⁶ See our previous papers on this subject, including *Axis Mundi in Kojiki and Nihonshoki*.

²⁷ We attended this festival on July 18-19, 2009 as part of our research project founded by the Japan Foundation.

On the first day of the festival, two “pillar torches” (*hashira matsu*) are positioned to the right and the left of the shrine grounds, with their lower ends buried in the ground. These “pillar torches” are nothing else but representations of the *axis mundi*, as attested by their name and function in the present festival.

As part of the festival, six young men²⁸ form two groups of three and compete to light the torches. The competition consists, first of all, in executing a sort of symbolic fight in front of the community. In this fight, all movements are performed in slow motion, with extra attention to the beauty of the form and the position of the body, rather than the “fight” itself. After this “fight” is over, the two teams go to the pillar torches and set them on fire. The team that manages to start the fire first is the winner. Originally, ascetics who lived on Myōkō Mountain, in the villages located to the south and to the north of the mountain, used to set the pine-branch torches on fire using flints. This was a sort of divination ritual, as the team that managed to start the fire first would be the one representing the village that would have the richest harvest that year.

On the second day of the festival, the young men join the progression that accompanies the *mikoshi* (portable shrine) through town. Such progressions are part of virtually all Japanese festivals and their meaning is that of taking the divinity out of the shrine and through the town or village affiliated to it.

1.2 Yomisashi Matsuri and the sacred *Sakaki* tree

Traditionally, *Yomisashi Matsuri* used to be celebrated on October 6 every year – on the day of the new moon²⁹. This

²⁸ The young men are selected based on very strict criteria: each of them has to be from a village affiliated to the shrine, their parents must be in good health, they must be the oldest sons in the family, and they must also be single.

²⁹ Due to modern-day constraints, such as attending work and school, the festival is presently held on the first Saturday in October. Ironically, when

happened for a very good reason: as part of this festival, *Sakaki* sacred branches – the representation of *kami* (Shinto divinities), are carried through the village, but they should not be seen by anyone, so complete darkness is required to go through with this festival.

It is a common practice in Shinto to set up *Sakaki* sacred trees – the sacred tree mentioned by **Kojiki** and **Nihonshoki** – prior to a festival. This rite, known as *yomisashi*, gives the name of this festival held at miya Shrine in Iwade Town, Wakayama Prefecture. *Yomisashi* means

“entry into the sacred period of a festival and [it is] also the rite of marking the spatial range of a festival by setting up purified *Sakaki* branches at important places, such as the village border”³⁰.

As people are not supposed to see the *kami* (*Sakaki* tree branches), the festival is held at midnight, when all the lights are out. Young men start from the shrine after having undergone a purification rite and run to the temporary shrines located to the East and West, where they set up a large *Sakaki*. Originally, this yearly ritual was meant to enforce the boundaries of the land to which the shrine extended its influence, the *Sakaki* branches thus having the role of delimiting the territory, a role often fulfilled by the world axis.

For those accustomed to Japanese festivals being a huge agglomeration of people, it is interesting to see that nobody is actually at the shrine, but rather the entire community is waiting at the temporary shrines, feasting, and when the *Sakaki*

we attended the festival, on October 3, 2009, it was a full moon, sort of defeating the purpose of the festival.

³⁰ Mogi Sakae, *Encyclopedia of Shinto*,

<http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=1003>

branches arrive, they all rush to grab them, as *Sakaki* leaves are believed to cure all illnesses.

1.3 *Sh reisaï* and the ascent of Amaterasu to heaven

*Sh reisaï*³¹ is a ritual held at midnight on December 31, at Idewa Mitsuyama Shrine in Haguro Town, Yamagata Prefecture. The ritual focuses on purification rituals undertaken by two ascetics called *matsuhijiri* (pine saints), *Ij* and *Sendo*, who have apparently refrained from eating for one hundred days before the festival, and spent this time in a sacred building on top of Mt. Haguro. A complex conglomeration of rituals which we shall briefly describe takes place.

At the end of the purification period, on December 30, a large torch is built in front of the main shrine. On the afternoon of the next day, a ritual known as The Rope Shredding Ceremony is held: the rope holding the torch is cut and pulled apart, and the participants grab the pieces and take them home³². The festival continues in the evening; at eleven o'clock, in front of a person dressed as a sacred rabbit, the two people representing *Ij* and *Sendo* have a contest of mystical abilities.

Then, two groups of naked young men representing the two *matsuhijiri* pull the torch with a large rope and throw it in the snow. Furthermore, around midnight, another ceremony known as the Land Dividing Ritual takes place. It is a ritual

³¹ As we have not yet attended this festival which will be held in December, our account is based on its description by Mogi Sakae in the *Encyclopaedia of Shinto*

(<http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=856>) and on Atsuhiko Yoshida's paper entitled *Le renouveau de la vie du Soleil dans la fête Sh reisaï du Mont Haguro* presented at *Soleil et Lune. Mort et Résurrection, Colloque de Mythologie Comparée*, Hanazono University et GRMC, Kyoto, 2005.

³² It is said that hanging the rope fibres from the eaves of a house prevents fires and ensures its prosperity.

dividing the various surrounding areas. This is followed by a ritual held at one in the morning, to change the impure flames that burned the torch in the *Hinouchikae* (Renewal of Fire) – and this is the ritual that most interests us. For this ritual, two people whose faces are covered with white powder and whose lips are painted in a strong red color, called *hiuchi* (fire starters), carry flints and circle the *Kagami taimatsu* (Mirror torch) or *Hashira taimatsu* (Pillar torch) three times, and then transfer the flame to gunpowder placed on a plate. The one who starts the fire first is naturally the winner.

Atsuhiko Yoshida believes there is a connection between the *sacred pillar* mentioned by the *Nihonshoki* in the myth that tells about the ascent of *Amaterasu* to heaven³³ and this *torch* resembling a *pillar*. He says:

“...il me paraît nettement que cette torche représente dans le rituel l’axis mundi qui donne accès au ciel au feu sacré nouvellement produit. Le Hiuchi, l’exécutant déguisé ostensiblement en femme, qui fait surgir ce nouveau feu sacré me paraît jouer un rôle tout à fait comparable à celui joué par la mère du soleil Izanami dans le mythe. Et le Matsuhijiri, enfin, qui, de la cabane éloignée, influe sur le Hiuchi de la manière que celui-ci devient effectivement l’auteur de feu nouveau me fait penser au dieu Izanagi qui féconde Izanami dans le mythe de façon à faire maître le Soleil de son sein.”³⁴

2.0 World axis representations in Romanian culture

Although the world axis has been seen very differently by Romanians as compared to the Japanese, this mythological concept has also survived and evolved in Romanian culture.

³³ For a detailed description of this myth, see our previous papers on this subject, including *Axis Mundi in Kojiki and Nihonshoki*.

³⁴ Atsuhiko Yoshida, *op. cit.*, pages not specified.

Among its representations, we count the fir tree as the primordial sacred tree, symbols related to dendrolatry, which can be found on Romanian traditional folk costumes, wooden crosses placed at crossroads, or even more recent representations such as **Constantin Brancusi's** "*The Endless Column*". Also, we shall briefly mention the ritual of climbing mountains as a symbol of ascension to the sky.

2.1 The fir tree

The fir tree was the Dacians' primordial sacred tree. Its sacred function was that of a means of communication between the earth and the sky, between the below and the above.

As attested by **Romulus Vulc nescu**, the wonderful fir tree "symbolises the ascendant movement of the bio-spiritual immanent in cosmos"³⁵. Having its roots deep in ground, its trunk piercing through the skies, and its branches going beyond the skies, into cosmos, the fir tree becomes an ideogram, a symbol used to represent the idea of a thing. An ideogram is an image, a representative image of a mythological thinking, of a culture.³⁶ As **Mircea Eliade** has often observed, to the primitive religious mind, nature and symbol are inseparable, and myths talk through symbols and images.

An ideative derivate of the cosmic fir tree is the sky column, a tree which has lost its branches but has kept its magic-religious powers. Among the transformations the tree has undergone, **Romulus Vulc nescu** mentions the calendar

³⁵ Romulus Vulc nescu, *Mitologie român (Romanian Mythology)*, p. 359

³⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the world tree as ideogram see our paper *Ideogramer – Eller Sentrale Bilder I Norrøn og Japansk Kultur (Ideograms – Significant Images in Pagan Norse and in Japanese Culture)*, in , pp. 175 – 180.

cycle poles, life cycle poles, funerary poles, crosses, and *troita* – wooden crosses placed at crossroads.³⁷

2.2 Dendrolatry symbols on Romanian folk costumes

The aforementioned sacred tree has often been represented in Romanian culture and especially on doublets in Transylvania as the cosmic tree.

At first, it attested to the primordial connection between man and divinity. Then, as culture evolved towards a sedentary one, the wild fir tree became an apple tree, able not only to fulfil its function as a sacred tree, but also to be closer to man (i.e., in his yard or garden) and to feed man. Later on, the live sacred trees in the middle of the village were replaced by columns or poles. Also, it is interesting to notice that in the imaginary of southeast European (and implicitly Romanian) peasants, the rhombus is a geometrical form symbolising life and fertility and associated with the sky column.³⁸ **Constantin Brancusi** also uses the rhombus for his “*The Endless Column*”, using the funeral poles for inspiration. As mentioned above, funeral poles are a simulacrum of the sky column; the soul of the dead takes the form of a bird and rests on top of the sky pole until it is ready to fly to the other world.³⁹

But since we mentioned the rhombus and its symbolism of life and fertility, let us mention one more image of *the axis mundi*, which we think was one of the most powerful ones in the early stages of history. It is the representation of *the goddess* – often in the form of a rhombus or a v-shape. **Marija Gimbutas**’s extensive research on *the mother goddess*, which

³⁷ Romulus Vulc nescu, *op. cit.*, p. 359

³⁸ Lucian Com a, *Evolu ia simbolisticii arborelui sacru pe costumul popular din Com na, Judetul Bra ov*, p. 142

³⁹ Romulus Vulc nescu, *ibid*, p. 360

dominated the period between 7000 – 3500 B.C., before the Indo-European invasion, shows among others a 6000 B.C. representation of *the goddess* in southeast Europe, a *goddess* with *a towering neck – the world axis*.⁴⁰ *The goddess* herself was probably a sort of *axis mundi* at the time.

Mircea Eliade also mentions *the Great-Goddess*, whose presence “beside a plant symbol confirms one meaning that the tree possesses in archaic iconography and mythology: that of being an *inexhaustible source of cosmic fertility*”⁴¹. The association between *the Great Goddess* and *the Tree of Life* is a very widespread motif, appearing in cultures such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, etc. According to **Mircea Eliade**, the common point of these appearances, which are by no means accidental, is that:

“...here is a ‘centre of the world’ [...] here is the source of life, youth and immortality. The trees signify the universe in endless regeneration; but at the heart of the universe, there is always a tree – the tree of eternal life or of knowledge. The Great Goddess personifies the inexhaustible source of creation, the ultimate basis of all reality. She is simply the expression, in myth, of this primeval intuition that sacredness, life and immortality are situated in a ‘centre’.”⁴²

2.3 The *troita* - a wooden cross placed at crossroads

Wooden crosses placed at crossroads are to be found everywhere in Romania, although they may be known under different names, such as *troita*, crosses and crossroads or simply crosses, icons, etc.

⁴⁰ Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500 – 3500 BC, Myths and Cult Images*, p. 120.

⁴¹ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 280.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Regardless of what they are called, they are derived from the concept of the sky column or the sky pole, and are considered to be a synthesis of pre-Christian and Christian ideas. Generally placed at cross roads (which were believed to be places haunted by dark spirits, which could cause all sorts of problems for people) or near a well, they are made of wood or stone, and are generally decorated with colourful paintings, sculptures, or inscriptions (including short poems), adorned with hand-made clothes, being a synthesis of different artistic manifestations. The troita is also often mentioned by the literary folklore (for example, in spells), as well as in more recent novels and poetic creations.

2.4 The ritual of climbing mountains

Rituals of mountain climbing, as a symbol of ascension to the sky, have been recorded all across the Carpathians. According to an account of such a climbing ritual made by **Romulus Vulc nescu**, such rituals were performed on August 15.

On the morning of the previous day, four alpenhorn players climb the mountain with their alpenhorns and gather dry fir tree branches to make four large piles on the four cardinal points. Then, as the sun goes down, they simultaneously set the four piles on fire, to let the community know that they can start climbing the mountain. They also start playing their alpenhorns. When this signal reaches the community, they all start climbing the mountain, separated into four groups on the four sides of the mountain. The groups are led by old men, and everyone climbs in complete silence, carrying food and alcohol for the feast to be held upon arrival. The ritual implied arriving on the top before midnight.

After arriving on top, they gather around the four piles and keep the fires burning until morning, while eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. At sunrise, they all stand up facing the sky and raising their hands towards the sun, thanking

the sky for having had the chance to take part in the ritual once more. Then they continue their feast until lunchtime, leaving the mountain in time to go back to the village before sunset, as it is believed that nobody should be on the mountain at sunset.

Apparently, this ritual was later on assimilated by the Christian church upon celebrating St. Mary's Day. Priests and teachers would participate, and a morning mess would be held on the mountain. The ritual of sun worship would naturally be included in celebrating a Christian event.⁴³

3. Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of the present paper, we did not intend to compare, that is, to identify similarities or differences between the forms and representations assumed by the world axis as it outlived its mythological existence. Nor do we pretend to have exhausted the analysis of these essential and universal elements, standing at the very basis of creation in all mythologies. The end is therefore open to further additions and interpretations. However, it is worth noticing that although we deal with two very different and distant cultures, which have evolved in their specific ways and under their specific influences and conditions, the universal concepts are present and take culture-specific shapes.

SELECTIVE REFERENCES:

- ASTON, W.G. (trans.) (1972): *Nihongi. Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A. D. 697*, Boston, Tuttle Publishing
BAUER, Helen and CARLQUIST, Sherwin (1977): *Japanese Festivals*, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Company

⁴³ Romulus Vulc nescu, *ibid.*, pp. 360 – 361

- BIEDERMANN, Hans (1994): *Dictionary of Symbolism. Cultural Icons & the Meanings Behind Them*, Translated by James Hulbert, New York, Meridian
- CHAMBERLAIN, Basil Hall. (trans.) (1981): *The Kojiki, Records of Ancient Matters*, Boston, Tuttle Publishing
- COM A, Lucian (2003): “Evolu ia simbolisticii arborelui sacru pe costumul popular din Com na, Judetul Bra ov”, in *ara Barsei, Serie nou* , Nr. 2, 2003, pp. 141 – 146
- ELIADE, Mircea.(1996): *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Translated by Rosemary Sheed, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press
- HERBERT, Jean (1977): *La Cosmogonie Japonaise*, Paris, Dervy – Livres
- HONDRU, Angela (2001): *Festivaluri japoneze. În spiritul tradi iei (Japanese Festivals. In the Spirit of Tradition)*, Sibiu-Constan a, T. C. Sen
- LURKER, Manfred (1994): *Shinboru toshite no jyumoku. (The Symbolic Tree)*, Translated by Hayashi Shou, Tokyo, Heibunsha
- NICULI -VORONCA, Elena (2008): *Datinile i credin ele poporului roman - Adunate i a ezate în ordine mitologic (The Customs and Beliefs of the Romanian People – Gathered and Organized in Mythological Order)*, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O.
- RUSU, Renata Maria (2004): “Ideogramer – Eller Sentrale Bilder i Norrøn og Japansk Kultur (Ideograms – Significant Images in Pagan Norse and in Japanese Culture)” in , Cluj, Echinox, p. 175 – 180
- RUSU, Renata Maria (2007): *Axis Mundi in Kojiki and Nihonshoki*, International Conference on Comparative Literature, Contrastive Linguistics, Translation and Cross-cultural Studies (I), Editura Universitatii Stefan cel Mare Suceava, p. 187-198
- VULCANESCU, Romulus (1987): *Mitologie român (Romanian Mythology)*, Bucharest, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România
- YAMAMOTO, Takashi (1989): *Shinwa no mori (The Mythological Forest)*, Tokyo, Taishukanshoten
- YOSHIDA, Atsuhiko (2005): “Le renouveau de la vie du Soleil dans la fête Shōreisai du Mont Haguro” presented at *Soleil et Lune. Mort et Résurrection, Colloque de Mythologie Comparée*, Hanazono University et GRMC, Kyoto