

“THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD” OF THE TRADITIONAL LIVING SPACES IN JAPAN: COMPARING TO THE ONE OF THE DESERT CIVILIZATIONS

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Introduction

This thesis is intended to clarify the characteristics of the Japanese traditional living spaces by comparing to the ones of the four major civilizations; those are the desert civilizations and their descendants. I believe that the content of “the image of the world”, which people are holding, makes the differences of the characteristics of the living spaces in fundamental way.

“The image of the world”, found in the traditional Japanese living spaces, seems to be entirely different from “the image of the world” of the other major civilizations. To clarify what are the differences and why are they caused by is the theme of this thesis. As a result of this kind of research we can expect to find more precisely the unique characteristics of the traditional Japanese living spaces. The following is a short summary of a part of the thesis^[1].

When we try to understand and analyze living spaces of human settlements, such characteristics as “Closure of the Domains”, “Center of the spaces” and “Connection toward outsides” among others would have to be necessary to be discussed. “Closure of the domains” concerns how are the living spaces enclosed and separated from the outside world, composing their own territory. It relates to the feeling of safety for the residents inside, physically as well as psychologically, guarded in their own territory. “Center of the spaces” concerns spatial structure of the domains. It especially relates to the location and direction of the otherworld and the site of the main facilities such as churches, shrines and palaces of the rulers. “Connection toward outside” concerns the relationship to the outer world through paths and entrances. Characters of the entrance of the domains and relations to the outside world through paths would establish characters of the living spaces to the outer world. In this thesis the above characteristics are to be discussed in the followings.

Other characteristics such as “Inside structure of the path and network” should also be another field to be discussed. It relates to the relationship between elements of the spaces, which may show the inner structure of the space. The time concept should also be discussed. However they would not be included here, since we do not have enough space in this thesis.

“The Image of the World” in the Traditional Japan as the Forest Civilization

The climate of Japan is humid and rather hot in summer, somewhat like subtropical. It is cold in winter but not too severe. Such climate with rather high precipitation and temperature in summer fosters rapid and vigorous growth of trees and forests. It has cultivated and developed a forest civilization since the beginning of the history. The topographical features

of Japan forced the people to live in the valley areas or the basins, making their villages and towns there from the beginning of the history. These living spaces, therefore, had always been surrounded by green mountains and forests. People had felt safe and intimate in the enclosed domains by green hedges of mountains and forests as their own territory.

Closure of the Living Spaces

“The image of the world” for the traditional Japanese, thus, would have been the place surrounded by green mountains and forests. My point, furthermore, is that the image had prevailed on all levels of living spaces in the traditional Japan, from the levels of regions, capitals, great kings’ palaces, shrines and sacred spaces, villages and houses to rooms.

At first we are going to see at the regional level: An important and famous poem on the ancient capital region Yamato (today’s Nara) in the “Nihonshoki 日本書紀”, the first official chronological history book of the Nation, shows the image of the area among the ancient Japanese. It praises the land for the topography of the basin surrounded by the green mountains. The poem written in Japanese is; “倭は 国のまほらま 疊づく青垣 山籠れる 倭し麗し” The English translation of the poem is; “Yamato is the real basin of the country. It is surrounded by the overlapping mountains like green hedges. Yamato stayed inside of mountains is beautiful.” This poem was sung by the great king (the Emperor) standing at the top of the hill overlooking the land at the important magical ceremony called “Kunimi 国見” (seeing the land) in order to award magical power of green leaves, trees and mountains on the land to bring great harvests and fortunes. He sung the poem praising the land for being surrounded by mountains like green hedges. The name “Yamato” itself means the place surrounded by mountains. These facts mean that there must have been an understanding that such topography was appreciated supremely at that time. Many other poems and articles praising such places with the similar topography are found in the Nihonshoki and other ancient writings such as the “Manyosyu 万葉集”, the first official anthology of poems.

At the capital level; the same recognition on the image of the spaces was also seen. The second official history book “Syoku-Nihongi 続日本紀” mentions that the site of the first nation’s grid-iron style capital city Fujiwara-kyo was selected on the reason that it was surrounded by important and beautiful mountains. The capital and its palace are also praised highly for its location surrounded by mountains in a poem in the Manyoshu. The capitals of Nara and Kyoto were selected on the same process and recognition. Actual topography of Nara and Kyoto, as all you know, is same as these poems and articles praise and describe.



Fig. 1: The Image of the world in the forest Civilization



Fig. 2: Cross section of villages in the forest civilization

At the level of the Great Kings’ palaces; the names of the palaces in ancient time are given in the Nihonshoki and another old history book, the “Kojiki 古事記”. They are mostly related to green hedges such as “磯城瑞垣宮”, “卷向玉垣宮”, “丹比柴垣宮”, “泊瀬列城宮” etc., all of which mean having green hedges around the palaces. These green hedges must be the boundaries of the palaces which are the sacred areas. Other names of the palaces have names of trees like “磐余稚桜宮”, “磐余甕栗宮”, “樟葉宮”, “磐余池邊双槻宮”. These facts show that

these palaces had been surrounded by green hedges and trees, some of which must be considered as the sacred trees on which the gods descended to guard the palaces.

Another poem about a great king's palace is sung in the Kojiki as follows; “纏向の 日代の宮は……竹の根の 根垂る宮 木の根の 根蔓う宮……新嘗屋に 生い立てる 百足る 槻が枝は 上つ枝は 天を覆へり 中つ枝は東を覆へり 下つ枝は 鄙を覆へり……” The translation in English is; “the Hishiro Palace in Makimuku is …… the palace with deep roots of bamboos, with expanding and crawling roots of trees……the upper parts of the hundreds branches of the huge zelkova tree, standing nearby the ceremonial house, cover the Imperial regions; the middle parts of the branches cover the eastern regions; and the lower parts of branches cover the western regions of Japan ……”.

From this poem we can see the palace of the great king is surrounded by thick bushes of bamboos and other huge trees. And there grew a huge zelkova tree standing by the ceremonial house to protect the palace, from which the country was ruled. It must be considered that the ancestor gods were coming down on the tree. This poem also shows very vividly how the palace is surrounded by trees and woods.

At the level of the shrines and sacred spaces; the Shinto shrines in Japan are either at the foot of mountains or surrounded by woods and forest on the flat lands. The original locations of the Shinto shrines had been in the mountains and forests near of the settlements without any building. The physical or geometric centers of the Japanese living spaces are only void. Central qualities are in the physical and geometrical peripheries of mountains and forests.

The “Utaki 御嶽” in Okinawa, which is considered to be the original form of the Shinto shrine, consists of a void in the center, which is used for the ceremony space, and surrounding sacred bushes. It would be the prototype of the image of the world in Japan.

At the level of villages and houses; in ancient time and the medieval period, whole villages were surrounded by trees, woods and mountains. Some villages were divided into parts, and each part was enclosed by woods. In case of the villages where scattered individual houses were prevailing, composing scattered villages, most houses had rather large lots and had been surrounded by woods called “yashiki-rin 屋敷林 woods around a residence”.

At the level of rooms; all Japanese houses have always had a reception room called “zashiki 座敷”, which is considered most important room of the house. Buddhist temples also have the ceremony room called “hojo 方丈”, which is also used for receiving guests. These rooms always have gardens in front, since it is considered to be very important to show guests the best spaces of the buildings surrounded by mountains, woods, trees, rocks and water. The Japanese had thought that they should receive guests in the room where the image of the world be seen. You will see many such gardens of the Buddhist temples in Kyoto or everywhere in Japan.

Thus almost all levels of the traditional living spaces in Japan had been surrounded by green trees, woods, forests and mountains. Thus the people in the traditional Japan have come to conceive such image of the world, reflecting topography and their own living spaces.

A researcher^[2] made a hypothesis that the ancient Japanese had considered such topography of Yamato as a womb of mother, inside of which they felt to be perfectly guarded safely. There actually were some other evidences that archaeological remains of the houses in the Jyomon period (BC.10,000~BC.3000), which were pit dwellings with thatched roof, were considered as wombs of the Great Mother by the people of the time.

Centers of the Spaces

Another character of the image of the world is how are the central matters located.

The first capital area of ancient Japan in Yamato were created at the foot of the mountain, The god of the area, "Oomononushi, 大物主神", had been enshrined in the Mount Miwayama, where the god had protected the area as a whole. He had also guarded the area at the both entrances from the east and west of the basin against entering evils from outsides. See fig.1.

In the traditional Japan the dead persons had usually been buried in the woods of the mountains behind the villages, becoming ancestor gods to guard the villagers who are the descendants. The people in the traditional Japan have considered that the mountains behind the villages were the sacred places where their ancestor gods dwell, and the mountains had special power, a kind of mana, to revitalize everything and to produce blessings and fortunes.

Oomononushi in Yamato is one of the most important figures of such ancestor gods. The ancestor gods in the mountains behind the villages, after staying there for some time, go to the otherworld of upper grade in far distant place over the sea called "Tokoyo 常世", which is called "Niraikanai" in Okinawa. Thus the otherworld of Japan had double structure. The one is in the mountains behind the villages and the second is in far distant over the sea.

Both are in the almost horizontal direction, as against the vertical direction of the Heaven and Underworld in the desert civilizations. So the direction which the people had consciously or unconsciously perceived as main structure of the world is horizontal in case of Japan rather than vertical as in the desert civilizations.

The locations of the otherworld such as the cemetery and the Shinto shrines are in the outer edge or out of boundary of the actual living spaces, not like in the center of the living spaces connecting to the Heaven like in the desert civilizations.

We can see the locations of the Shinto shrines at the foot of mountains throughout the times and places in Japan. Most Shinto shrines of villages are always in forests at the outer edge of their boundaries. One of the most important Utaki in the Kutakashima-island, Okinawa, is in the bush far distant from the village. The location of other central functions such as the palace or castle of the ruler is also usually at the outer edge of the living spaces.

The area of the otherworld here is rather large and its boundary is vague, since they are in mountains or over the sea. There is not any clear mark or boundary which demarcate inside from outside. The shape of the living space is vague and amorphous. In case of the desert civilizations the boundary of the city is very clearly marked and distinguished by the city walls which protect inside from evil outside. The shape of the living space is geometrically clear.

Connection toward Outside

Usually a main trunk road goes through in the Japanese villages, towns and cities. It is protected from various evils of outside world by the ancestor god at the both entrances of the road. The outsides of the entrances are the unknown evil world. In Yamato, the first capital area of ancient Japan, the ancient highway no.1, called Yoko-ouji which means lateral highway that goes through east-west direction of the Nara-basin. Oomononushi, the god of the area, is also enshrined at the both entrances to the basin at Sumisaka on the east entrance and Osaka on the west. Therefore the image of Yamato (Nara) is like the figure 1.

The Image of the World in the Desert Civilizations

Now, how “the image of the world” in the other major civilizations, namely the desert civilizations and their descendants, would be?

In the desert man is surrounded by only sand all around him. He is in the center of the world. All he can see are only the horizon surrounding him except full of sand, and the scorching sun above his head high in the sky. Surrounding desert is considered as evil or chaos bringing him many troubles. Thus in the desert areas their world consists of man himself in the center, the horizon surrounding him, and the sun above him. Thus the image of the world is a circle of the horizon, where two crossing lines are inside; the one as the locus of the equator of the sun and the other as the axis of rotation of the sun, dividing the circle into four parts.

There are some proofs of such image of the world in the Desert Civilizations. They are the Templum of the Earth and the Templum of the Sky in the Roman period, which were used for augury for selecting the location or direction of the city or buildings in the ancient Roman period. It would be possible to say that the ancient Roman imaged the world like the figures below. Some engravings and drawings show that not only ancient Roman but also the Medieval Europeans consider Rome and Jerusalem circles.

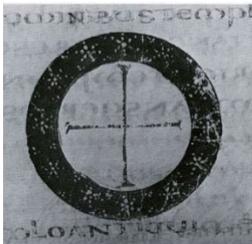


Fig. 3: Roman Templum of the sky^[3]



Fig. 4: Roman Templum of the earth^[4]



Fig. 5: Egyptian hieroglyph meaning “city”^[5]

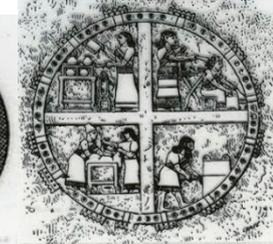


Fig. 6: Assyrian relief showing city life^[6]

These desert civilizations are urban societies. They invented the cities for their living places. The living spaces here were always surrounded by solid and strong city walls, which guarded the inside and separated it from the outer chaotic desert. To live in a city is their inevitable choice to survive in the desert, since it is safe inside of the city walls in the chaotic environment of the deserts. According to Mircea Eliade the city is always a copy of “the image of the world” in the ancient time and everywhere in the world.^[7] Thus the image of a city is identical to the image of the world in its composition. The hieroglyph of the word “city” in the ancient Egypt is shown in the fig.5 above. The bas relief on the orthostat, showing the Assyrian city life, gives another proof, which is shown as two crossing roads inside a fortified circle like the fig.6 above. They are identical to the image of the world of the figure 3 and 4.

Since this figure is considered as the image of the world in Assyria, in Egypt and in Rome, we can say that it would be so throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean region. Their domains are enclosed by the rigid city walls in order to protect their living spaces from the attacks of enemies and other evils from the surrounding deserts.

In the image of the world the God is supposed to be in the Heaven vertically upward of the crossing. In the center of the crossing, man is standing facing the

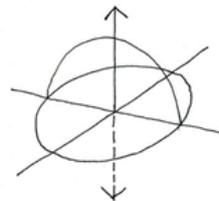


Fig. 7: The Image of the world in the desert civilizations



Fig. 8: Cross section of the city in the desert civilizations

God up in the Heaven. It is also considered the Underworld vertically down beneath the earth. Thus the vertical direction into the sky and the underworld is perceived by the people there as the direction to the God and the otherworld.

Almost all the houses in the desert civilizations are the courtyard type, surrounded with thick exterior walls without any opening except an entrance. These walls around the houses are identical to the fortified city walls. The central courtyard connects outside only to the sky where the God is. So the image of the house is almost identical to the image of the city. The house copies also the image of the world.

Other examples of the spaces which are connected to vertically upward direction of the Heaven is the great Nave of the Hagia Sophia, the nave of the Gothic cathedrals and the Naos of the Parthenon, where light from the Heaven come down from the top of the rooms, whose walls are enclosed by thick walls.

The degree of separation of inside from outside is very clear and rigid in both cases of cities and houses. Both in case of the cities and houses, isolation and separation of the inside seems to be more conspicuous and complete than the connection to the outer world. The ceremony of the creation of the city of Rome which is described in Plutarch^[8] seems to show the separation from the outside were thoroughgoing protected by the human sacrifice.

It is true that actual city forms in ancient desert civilizations are often rectangular, not the circle as the image of the world shows. Roman planned towns, which were originated from military camps, have also grid-iron square forms. The necessity as military camps made the plan. Babylon and Assyrian towns have also rectangular shapes. But the image of the people about the towns would have been circle as shown in the slides.

Conclusions

The author has shown in this thesis what “the image of the world” of the traditional Japan is like, and that it is almost opposite in structure to the one of the desert civilizations. This can explain the unique characteristics of the Japanese traditional living spaces. The Japanese people had been keeping such image of the world before the modern period began. It had become the basis for making their living spaces consciously or unconsciously..

This can explain the horizontal character of the Japanese living spaces in their expression, and their lack of the image for vertical direction. It can also explain the taste to make the living spaces to be penetrated into the surrounding nature through wide openings toward gardens. It seems obvious that such character comes from the fact that the image of the world in the traditional Japan is horizontal and surrounded by woods, forests and mountains.

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