The Grammar of a Rite in Shintō

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Preface

A colleague of mine has been working in recent years on a study of Wittgenstein, and some of the insights he has taken from Wittgenstein have prompted me to look at some old data in a new way. The data come from a field project I did during the years 1965 and 1966, in Tokyo: a study of the calendar and yearly round of rites and festivals celebrated at a neighborhood (as against a national, or imperial) Shinto shrine. In particular, I find myself re-examining the semi-annual "year-end" rites of purification that take place at the shrine at the end of December and in early January, and again at the end of June and the beginning of July.[1]

As for Wittgenstein, I can claim no expertise. I am no philosopher, and much of what I know of Wittgenstein comes to me second-hand. I shall try therefore to sum up, in a paragraph, what I understand Wittgenstein to have said, in the "Notes on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*"[2] and other works, and go on from there. If I misrepresent him, it is perhaps not too grievous a sin; I wish only to sketch in the broad context of his thought on religion and rites, in order to point up one or two motifs, one or two clues I have used as points of departure in this analytic review of the specifically Shinto rites of the Japanese New Year.

I think the sentence that most immediately caught my eye in Wittgenstein's reflections on that complex of phenomena we call religious

1. I published my field report on this phase of my study in an article titled "Of Talismans and Shadow Bodies: Annual Purification Rites at a Tokyo Shrine," in *Contemporary Religions in Japan* (now the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*), vol. 9, nos. 3 & 4 (1970), pp. 181–222. The dual New Year rites are described there in much greater detail than here, but of course in unsystematic fashion.

2. *Synthese*, vol. 17 (1967), pp. 233–253.

was this one: "I can quite well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrines and hence nothing is said." The perception behind that statement is that belief is somehow not fundamental to religion; that ideas and concepts are not basic; that speech itself is not central to religion. That so-called primitive man often accomplishes by gesture what others might do with spoken words, and that gestures are in fact primary, not in some evolutionary/historical sense, but because the language of gesture has a grammar of its own which is far simpler, more elemental, than the grammar of speech. Thus ritual is what is basic to religion, and ritual constitutes instinctive action that requires no further historical explanation. It is impossible to attempt to explain rituals the way Frazer does, because the explanation is already present within the ritual itself. The meaning of the rite therefore may lie in the grammar of the rite.[3] That, put very simply, is my point of departure.

Definition of Terms

Before turning directly to the expulsion rituals of the Japanese New Year, it may be useful to introduce at this point some rather specialized vocabulary, which should aid us in sorting out the relationship between the Form of the ritual and its various "meanings":

1—The *Form* of the ritual is, to put it simply, what is done. And what is done may carry with it some very rudimentary notions as to why it is so done: it may suggest some immediate purpose of the rite.

2—The *Axiom* of the ritual will prove to be some self-evident truth that is presupposed by the Form of the rite.

3—The *Corollary* is a mythic account of the prototype of the Form, and tells how the rite was first done, in the Dream Time, or, as in this case, in the Age of the Gods. (I was at first tempted to call this "the Model", in accordance with the mythic claim itself. But, as I shall try to demonstrate, the truly archetypical pattern behind the rite seems to me less directly and less obviously tied to the Form of the rite than this "Corollary" to the rite. In any case, it seems to me sound procedure to put the somewhat artificial question of primacy to one side, and simply say that the Form and the Corollary are in some sense parallel actions.)

These three terms, then—Form, Axiom and Corollary—will be the working concepts in my analysis of the rite. When I began my study, I

3. I have tried to develop this notion, but in somewhat different terms, in a much earlier essay, titled "The Form and Meaning of the Festival," *Asian Folklore Studies* (formerly *Folklore Studies*), XXVIII, no. 1 (1969), pp. 1–16.

thought they might be sufficient. But, as I have hinted, my analysis began to suggest that underlying the ritual (or, rather, the complex of rituals), there resides a truly archetypal principle or theme, which I shall call:

4—The *Matrix*. The Matrix is nothing less than the worldview that lies beneath the whole ritual cycle, and indeed beneath all the rituals that are done within this sacred tradition, if I am not mistaken.

And, for the sake of completeness, I might add to my vocabulary list:

5—The *Meaning*; a term I shall use loosely to embrace all that lies behind the Form of the rite: Axiom, Corollary, and Matrix. It is a term I hope to use quite unpretentiously. In its stead, one might use any one of a number of colloquial terms: the significance of the rite, the sense of the rite, the import of the rite, the purport of the rite.

The Rites, and Their Grammar

Finally we come to the rituals themselves. They constitute, actually, two complete cycles of rites. The first is performed between December 20th (roughly) and January 7th or 14th; the second is done between June 20th (roughly) and July 2nd. Both are, in the true sense of the word, New Year's rites: rites that mark the end of one year and the beginning of another. The one rite mirrors the other, and hints at a bisected calendar, with two equal seasons of six months' duration, each season in a sense a year complete unto itself, initiated by the January or July year-beginning rites, and closing with the June or December year-ending rites.

I do not mean to suggest that the two New Years are exactly alike. There are significant differences. For example, the agent of transformation in January is fire; in July, it is water. Further, the June preparations include a reed hoop (*chi-no-wa*) through which the parishioners must step, but the December rites do not; the January rites end with a ceremonial brewing of holy water over a fire of ritual rice ropes, which is sprinkled in the four corners of the universe, and then sprinkled on the assembled virgins of the shrine parish (*miko*), and then on all of the parishioners (*ujiko*). But basic to both cycles, winter and summer, is a sequence of three ritual actions, which I shall now attempt to examine in some detail.

Ritual Action #1: Breathing on the Shadow Body.

This is done between December 20 and 31, and again between June

20 and 30, at the convenience of the parishioner.

He takes a paper cut-out, in the shape of a freshly laundered kimono, and

1—he writes his name and age on it (and his sex, if the cut-out does not already indicate sex, by its shape and color);

2—he breathes on it, rather forcefully;

3—and he may rub it on his body: specifically, he may rub it on parts of his body that are afflicted with pain or disease.

The paper cut-out is called *katashiro* (*kata*, form or shape; *shiro*, substitute, something that takes the place of). By placing his name and age, and by indicating sex, on the *katashiro*, the parishioner has in effect 'adopted' it as a kind of shadow of himself, a two-dimensional form intend to substitute for him.

The action of breathing-on forcefully is an act of expulsion, and is similar to spitting; the parishioner is ejecting something from himself onto the shadow form.

Similarly, the act of rubbing suggests contagion: something of the diseased body is being passed into the shadow form.

4—Finally, the parishioner takes the shadow-form to the grounds of his neighborhood or village shrine, and deposits it in a special box, slotted like a ballot box, intended for the purpose. Now the shadow form is out of his hands (and all that has been rubbed or blown onto it), and in the hands of the shrine and its priest. This completes what I call the 'Form' of the Ritual: the actions or gestures that constitute the ritual, and the clear and obvious suggestions contained within the gestures themselves, suggesting what is in fact going on when the gestures are done. (This is already the first level of meaning. The paper cut-out is recognized as a "form that substitutes," and the rubbing or breathing-on are almost automatically recognized as acts of transference or expulsion.)

With further inquiry, we discover that the common understanding is that what has been transferred or communicated to the form that substitutes is what is called *tsumi:* (Aston[4]: "uncleanness, sin or crime, and calamity") a term that encompasses both impurity (corruption, disease, etc.) and guilt. The purpose of the year-end rites is the removal of *tsumi*, the disposal of all guilt and impurities, so that the new year can be begun afresh. It is the *Axiom* of this rite that impurities accumulate in the course of the half-year or year, so that by year's end they become a cumulative threat to life and health, and must be ritually flushed away,

4. W. G. Aston, *Shinto* (*The Way of the Gods*) (London, 1905), p. 248.

driven off, expelled. The suggestion is that life and good health are natural to the world, but that without periodic ritual cleansing they may be threatened and overwhelmed by disease, misfortune and guilt, which together constitute a sort of negative force opposing the life force.

The *Corollary* of the expulsion rite may be found in chapters 9, 10 & 11 of the Kojiki.[5] Izanagi, father of the world, has followed his dead wife Izanami to the land of Yomi (the land of the dead), and lights a light to look upon her. "At this time, maggots were squirming and roaring (in her corpse).... Izanagi, seeing this, was afraid, and he turned and fled." He is pursued by a flock of hags (in the stage presentation, Izanami herself, wearing the mask of *hannya*), but delays them by throwing down, in their path, grapes, then bamboo shoots, and finally peaches. He makes it to the Even Pass of Yomi (the mouth of this cavernous realm, where you move from the land of the living to the land of the dead), and: "Then he pulled a tremendous boulder and closed (the pass) ... with it." Finally he says: "I have been to a most unpleasant land, a horrible, unclean land. Therefore I shall purify myself." And so, at the mouth of the river there, "he purified and exorcised himself."

The Corollary seems to me to confirm the Axiom: Izanagi, the father of all life and lands, here inaugurates the general institution of purification rites after viewing the corruptions of the flesh, and after narrowly escaping being swallowed up by the forces of darkness and death himself. And, note well, he repels the forces of anti-life with grapes, bamboo shoots, and peaches: he uses the fruits of the earth (living, growing things) to halt, or at least slow down, the demonic force that opposes life.

(Note: The exact prototype of the *katashiro* rite is to be found in the Engi-Shiki, not the Kojiki, and will be discussed later. My intention here was not an exact matching of myth and ritual, but rather a probing of the axiomatic theme through a corollary text.) (One other corollary, also taken from the Kojiki, will be discussed in the next section. It is almost a prototype of the *katashiro* rite.)

Ritual Action #2: Expulsion of the Shadow Bodies.

The *Form* of this ritual action depends upon the season. In winter, the *katashiro* are usually burned (on January 7, in an old tree stump, and

5. The reader is referred to the superb new translation of the *Kojiki* (the first, so far as I know, since the Basil Hall Chamberlain translation of 1882) by Donald L. Philippi (Princeton and Tokyo, 1968), from which all my quotations are taken.

as a preliminary rite to the sacramental blessing of the four corners of the earth). The *Axiom*, in this case, would probably be the presupposition that fire, by transforming paper into smoke and ash, conveys the unwanted properties of the shadow forms—i.e., the *tsumi*—from this world to another, i.e., the world of Yomi, the subterranean world of shadow. As *Corollaries,* we might mention that Izanami herself was transported from this world to the land of Yomi by fire: she dies in childbirth, just as the god of fire is being born (in chapter 7 of the Kojiki), and we find her next (in ch. 9) in Yomi. And if it seems strange that ascending smoke should find its way to the subterranean world, we might recall that when Amaterasu, the Queen of Heaven, sees fit to flee from the violence and obscenities of her brother Susano-o (in chapter 17), she enters a cave, and all is plunged into darkness. Also: this whole episode of the cave is prompted by Susano-o's announcement, in chapter 13, of his intention to visit his mother (Izanami) in the "remote subterranean corner land"; he does not descend from earth, however, he ascends to the high plain of heaven. So we are being told that there is a certain ambiguity between the remote subterranean corner land and the high plain of heaven: perhaps that the one is the shadow of the other, and they are therefore in a certain sense interchangeable.

But the summer *Form* of the rite is generally taken to be its basic form. Here, the shrine priest prepares the deck of a small boat with offerings (fruits of the earth, mainly, arranged on offeratory trays), carries the box of *katashiro* (representing all the *tsumi* of his entire parish) to the boat, and disembarks, rowing himself into the middle of a flowing river, or the mouth of a river or bay. He then stops the boat, performs *o-harai* (purification with a sacred branch or similar device—the rite that Izanagi performed after leaving Hades), recites a brief standardized prayer of purification, then dumps all the *katashiro* into the flowing water, and rows back to port.

The *Form* of the rite suggests that the flowing water has carried the pollution away from the land: that the accumulations of forces that would negate life have been placed into nature's disposal system, from whence they may not return.

Axiom: Tsumi-power suffers from territorial limitation. *Tsumi* may therefore be placed beyond a certain boundary, and after that it need no longer be feared. (Cp. certain expulsion rites in rural Japan where the *tsumi* are ceremonially marched to the edge of town and left there, only to be carried by the people of the next village, in another procession, to the outer reaches of their town, and so on.)

And: The waters of earth flow between this world and the remote subterranean world, which serves as a repository for all shadow-beings and all residues of impurity.

Corollary: (1) Izanagi repelled the harpies of Yomi, the demons of the anti-life, with fruits of the earth.

(2) Izanagi closed the entrance to Yomi with a great bolder, which permits entry, but bars exit; once the *tsumi* are inside the cavernous regions, they cannot escape (Abandom hope, all ye who enter here).

(3) Izanagi, after fleeing the pollutions of Yomi, stops at the mouth of a river to cleanse himself of *tsumi*, and water serves as the cleansing agent.

(4) Thus far, in dealing with the mythic material, I have emphasized the death of the mother of us all (Izanami) as the time when pollution and ugliness first entered the world (this moment in a sense represents the expulsion from the garden, for Japanese culture). But there is one incident that occurs earlier in the mythic narrative. The first child born to the divine parents (ch. 4, Kojiki) is deformed, possibly without arms and legs (he is called in the text the 'leech' child). There is no elaborate discussion of what is to be done with this freak of nature; the text simply says: "They placed this child into a boat made of reeds and floated it away." I.e., it was disposed of, as *katashiro* are today disposed of (in some parts of rural Japan, I believe, the *katashiro* is actually a doll which is placed on a tiny boat made of reeds).

Ritual Action #3: The Connective Rite (The Night Prayer).

Here I return to Wittgenstein's suggestion that speech is not central to religion, and his remark that he could "imagine a religion in which there are no doctrines and hence nothing is said. . . ." I think shrine Shinto comes fairly close to that "religion with no doctrines"; and surely very little has been said in the two sequences of ritual action we have described thus far: the meaning of the rites has been in their doing. But these two sequences are incomplete without a connecting link. In Ritual Action #1, the laity breathed their impurities onto paper substitute-forms; in Action #2, the shrine priest saw to it that the impurities and their vehicles would be ritually (I might say magically) transported to the divine disposal bin. But neither Action will be *effective* unless the priest performs Ritual Action #3 *in between:* he must take the box of shadow-forms and place it before the holy of holies of the shrine, and invoke the *kami*, and invoke all the Corollary themes. Without this action, the other two are meaningless and fruitless. This is the *connective*

action between the other two, and the action which breathes the spark of life into the whole ritual process. *And it is almost all words.* Yes, there will be offeratory trays there, filled with the fruits of the earth; and the priest will again use the purifying branch or wand. But above all, this is a rite that is performed in an empty, darkened hall, on New Year's Eve, by the priest (*kannushi*, or *kami-nushi*, master of the gods) alone. It is done in darkness, but it illuminates the whole ritual cycle. So the relatively wordless actions of the last week of the old year and the first week of the new are *bridged* by a solitary rite that is almost all *words*.

The *Axiom* is that without the sacred presence of the gods (indeed, both of two classes of gods: celestial deities and earth gods), the ritual would be merely the disposal of so much waste paper. To put it less whimsically: Without the sacred presence of the gods, mortal men cannot presume to approach the boundaries that separate the world of the living from the world of shadows, for they are in a sense perilously close to the boundaries of time, which separate chronological time from the dream time, the age of men from the age of the gods.

The *Form* of this connective rite lies mainly in the words of the prayer or *norito*.[6] The prayer itself is more narrative than petitionary and is filled with Corollary language. It begins with a reference to the last major event in the Age of Gods, when the celestial queen decides to send her grandson to earth, to establish imperial rule there. Her rationale is that the earth is under misrule during the Age of the Gods, and needs to be placed in order. The earth gods are in fact referred to as "the unruly deities in the land," and she resolves to end their dominion. (The text mentions parenthetically that the coming of celestial order also meant the silencing "to the last leaf, the rocks and the stumps of trees, which had been able to speak.") The prayer then gives an *Urzeit* recipe for the purification of the *tsumi* "perpetrated and committed by the heavenly ever-increasing people to come into existence in this land": the priests are to cut "narrow pieces of wood, and place them in abundance on a thousand tables," they are to "pronounce the heavenly ritual, the solemn ritual words," whereupon the celestial deities will descend through the clouds, and the earth gods will ascend through the mists to the mountain peaks, and both will attend upon the liturgy.

6. A translation of this prayer, approximately in the form in which it is used in Shinto shrines today, may be found on pages 45–49 of Donald L. Philippi's *Norito: A New Translation of the Ancient Japanese Ritual Prayers* (Tokyo, 1959), under the title "Great Exorcism of the Last Day of the Sixth Month."

With their hearing of the ritual prayer, "each and every impurity will be gone." Then, a "large ship anchored in the spacious port is untied at the prow and untied at the stern, and pushed out into the great ocean"; and the *tsumi* of the people "will be taken into the great ocean by the goddess . . . who dwells in the rapids of the rapid-running rivers" that plunge down out of the mountains; then they will be "swallowed with a gulp" by the goddess of the briny currents, then blown away by the god who dwells at the "breath blowing entrance" to the nether world; finally a deity who lives in that dark realm will take the people's impurities "and wander off with them and lose them."

Previously, we have been introduced to the dual theme of life and anti-life. Now the connective rite, almost entirely verbal, has introduced two new dual themes: order and disorder (the latter represented by the Ur-condition of earth, when leaves talked), and celestial gods (who are orderly) and earth gods (who are unruly). We now turn to the *Corollary* material to explore these two dualities. And as the gods spoken of thus far have been essentially heavenly deities, I shall here concentrate on earth deities.

Earth gods can be quite friendly and helpful (though their nature is often whimsical and ambivalent), and they are known to have all sorts of magical powers, including the power of healing. (In this I suppose they are akin to the *kappa* of Japanese folk legends, and perhaps the leprechauns and gnomes and little men of other cultures.) The classic example is perhaps O-Kuni-Nushi's healing of the sacred white rabbit of Inaba, in chapter 21 of the Kojiki.

But the earth gods are also doers of black magic. For example, when the celestial gods descend to bring order to their lands, the earth gods resort to all sorts of spectacular tricks: Takeminakata enters the scene casually balancing a huge boulder on his finger tip, and suggests a contest of strength (ch. 36); Kotoshironushi overturns his fishing boat by stamping his foot, then claps his hands backwards (reverse magic: the gods are invoked by 'forward' clapping) and transforms it into a green bamboo fence, and then disappears into the fence! (ch. 35).

The earth gods also seem to have had a reputation as lechers and scoundrels. For example, when the celestial grandchild descends to earth to establish his orderly regime, he meets a lovely maiden, and marries her. Later, the text says (and it can't have been much later), she "came forth and said, 'I am with child, and now the time of my delivery is near.' " The heavenly bridegroom says in surprise, " 'Can (she) have become pregnant after only one night? This is not my child; surely it

must the child of an earthly deity.' "

Matrix and Meaning

I think we are now in a position to probe beyond axiom and corollary, and discuss what I have called the *Matrix* of the rite: that is to say, the basic worldview that this ritual presupposes, and which is indeed presupposed by all rites within this sacred tradition. I use the word Matrix because I think there is a conception of the world and of life here out of which both the mythology and the ritual processes have in some sense *been born.* This 'matrix' is their *womb.*

The classic statement of this Matrix is to be found, not surprisingly, in the creation narratives of ancient times, and perhaps in its clearest form in the Nihongi: "Of old, Heaven and Earth were not yet separated. . . . They formed a chaotic mass like an egg which was of obscurely defined limits and contained germs. The purer and clearer part was thinly drawn out, and formed Heaven, while the heavier and grosser element settled down and became Earth. The finer element easily became a united body, but the consolidation of the heavy and gross element was accomplished with difficulty. Heaven was therefore formed first, and Earth was established subsequently. . . ."[7] Thus the earth gods represent that heavier and grosser element in human nature, while the celestial deities embody the purer and clearer element, which in turn lends itself more easily to order, that is to say civilization. For civilization rests on "the finer elements" in our nature, which more willingly lend themselves to "becoming a unified body" (ie a functioning society) than the "grosser elements."

The Kojiki text is somewhat different, but also points to a primeval dualism: ". . . when the land was young, resembling floating oil and drifting like a jellyfish, there sprouted forth something like reed-shoots. From these came into existence the deities. . . ." Here the drifting mass, resembling a jellyfish, takes the place of the "grosser element," and the "reed-shoot" suggests the emergence of the celestial theme, which rises out of the oil and goo as the Buddhist lotus rises out of the mire of samsara. (And we are reminded of the reed boat that carried off the first manifestation of *tsumi* in the world, the leech child—basic corollary of the whole *katashiro* ritual cycle—and we are reminded of the ring of

7. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, tr. W. G. Aston (London, 1956), pp. 1–2.

reeds—*chi-no-wa*—through which the *ujiko* step to deliver their *katashiro* in the June expiation rites).

As I have reviewed these few simple ritual forms, the reader will no doubt have been aware of all the dual themes hinted at throughout: the duality of male and female, of earth and Yomi, of life and anti-life, of heaven and earth, of spring and autumn (which are separated by these dual New Year purification rites, hinting at a very complex and thoroughgoing dual calendar, in which all rites of spring, for example blossom festivals, have their autumnal counterparts as harvest festivals). But behind all the dual systems, it seems to me, is this fundamental dualism of the Gross Element and the Pure, Celestial Element. This dualism lies at the heart of the Earth God/Heaven God dualism which *must be invoked if the year-end expiations are to be ritually effective.* It therefore constitutes the *Matrix* of this dual ritual cycle, and, I think, is in fact the Matrix of Japanese culture. It represents the deepest level of the *Meaning* of the rite, and has in fact shaped the whole "grammar" of the rite.

All of which brings me back to Wittgenstein. In the Notes on Frazer, W. suggests that a rite is a reverential acknowledgement of man's separation (through the awakening of the intellect) from his original source. That would seem indeed to be the implication of the Matrix of the Japanese rite: that through ritual, man looks back through all the dualities of his existence, to a single duality that he experiences as primal; and then he looks back beyond even that duality, to a mythic time when there was no division of reality and matter at all: to a time at the beginning of time when all matter was formed into a "chaotic mass like an egg, which was of obscurely defined limits," and resembled "floating oil, drifting like a jellyfish."

The first wrench comes when heaven and earth separate. The second wrench comes when Heaven finds it necessary to silence the leaves.

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