RESEARCH MATERIAL

Torii—Japanese Shrine Gates A Call for Cooperation

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Every visitor to Japan has seen the stylized gates called *torii* 鳥居 that give entrance to Shinto temples, but searching the English scholarly literature for the meaning of torii would end in disappointment (Aston 1900; Chamberlain 1905; Fujishima 1942; Tuke 1900; Asahi Shinbunsha 1970: 9th p. from front cover). Some years ago, with this problem in mind, I undertook to study the subject. The study was interrupted when I lost my notes, sources, and other documents (including personal records), in a burglary. Subsequently I was unable to continue the project, but it had already yielded sufficient results that I should like to pass them on, that a future scholar might be able to pick up my leads.

I was inspired by the mention of birds in a passage from Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders* (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 170); it related to the Akar-Bale tribe living in Ritchie's Archipelago:

> When a man or woman dies, the spirit first of all goes southward to the country of the *Aka-Bea* [tribe], and then returns to *Gudnal'ar-bon* in *Kuaico-bur* (in the *Akar-Bale* country). It then goes to *Jila-buaro* in *Jila* (East Island) and from there to *Kere-tuaur*. The inhabitants of the last-named place [which, like Havelock Island, symbolizes the local elysion] are warned of the approach of the spirit by the cries of the birds *tao* (*Eudynamis honorata*, Indian koel or brain-fever bird) and *bil* (Australian goggle-eyed plover).[1]

The Andamanese ethnographic data are less than complete, but the culture does seem to have points in common with Japanese culture, myths in particular; the Akar-Bale sun-hiding myth shows a structual resemblance to that of the Japanese (save only the displaced aetiology about how the yam, a staple food, was found in the jungle). Upon reading

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the above passage I immediately thought of the *naga-naki tori* 長鳴鳥 (' ever-crying birds ' of the elysion, *Tokoyo* 常世) in the Japanese sun-hiding myth, but something else gave me pause. Having been in a jungle environment, I knew that birds of the jungle are particularly noisy at two times: at dawn, and when a stranger approaches their vicinity (ever notice how a myna bird likes to greet strangers?). Setting aside the " dawn chorus " theme long-known to mythologists, I became interested in what all this meant for otherworld geography.

The Shintō temple represents in thisworld the sacred otherworld. At its entrance stands the torii, whose name means something like ' where the birds are.' Indeed, the torii resembles a god-sized perch for birds. Might the passage in Radcliffe-Brown have something to do with this? I recalled seeing a terracotta model of a well-crib surmounted by a torii in the New York Metropolitan Museum; it was brought from southern China. How widely was the torii distributed?

By the time of the burglary I had garnered examples from among the Goldi, Manchurians, Koreans, Okinawans, Chinese, Thai, Cambodians, Sri Lankans, and Indians (Tuke 1900; Ling: plates 220–222, 225–226, 243, 280, 285; Akamatsu and Akiba 1941: 31–32, illust. 58–61; Oldham 1905: illust. facing p. 62; Fergusson 1868: plates 2, 4–9, 98; p. 120).[2] In the other direction, I had found an example among the Chumash of California (Blackburn 1975: 100). Excepting the Chumash example, these all show an East Asian pattern of two pillars connected by lintels which are often linked to form an entablature. In Japan the torii comes in many distinct and distinctive styles (Okada 1977: 24–27). The most elaborate I have seen is the outer gate to Shuri Castle on Okinawa, which derives from precedents in southern China and has been sturdy enough to withstand onslaughts of the strongest southern typhoons. A development of the Miwa 三輪 style (in which three torii are integrated in a trinity structure), it has gained depth and structural stability from multiple rows of pillars, and the lintels have become slender, hipped roofs, so that it scarcely resembles a torii anymore. In fact, if it were enclosed left and right by curtain walls it would begin to look like the gate of a Buddhist temple (cf. Tuke 1900: 95–96; figs. 7–8).

Surprisingly, West Asian and European torii also exist. These show less visual conformity than the East Asian ones do, but on the other hand they can be more explicit. To appreciate the Western examples, it is necessary to have a definition of what they are ideally: paired pillars or posts or stumps or trees, associated with birds, that stand at the entrance to the otherworld (or the temple).

West Asian depictions of the sun-spirit rising between twin, stylized trees go back to Sumerian cylinder seals, but the oldest clear exam-

ple of the torii I have found is in a mural painting on an outer wall of the throne room at an Assyrian palace (Lloyd 1978: 166, illust. 113). It shows the king receiving his investiture from the goddess Ishtar in a cosmic setting flanked by trees and griffins[3]—just as today we find the entrances of Shinto temples flanked by the pillars of torii and the sometimes-winged ' lion-dogs ' (*shishi* 獅子, or *kara-inu* 唐犬). The top of one tree in the painting has been obliterated by the ravages of time, but the other has a bird rising from its crown. A Greek example is given by Pausanias (Pausanias 8.38.6; translation quoted after Frazer by Cook 1904: 87; et vide Cook 1903: 272, Fig. 2 and n. 2; 407 Fig. 3; 416, Fig. 10).

> There is a precinct of Lycaean Zeus on [Mount Lycaeus in Arcadia] and people are not allowed to enter it; but if any one disregards the rule and enters, he cannot possibly live more than a year. It is also said that inside the precinct all creatures, whether man or beast, cast no shadows . . . On the topmost peak of the mountain there is an altar of Lycaean Zeus in the shape of a mound of earth . . . In front of the altar, on the east, stand two pillars, on which there used formerly to be guilded eagles.

Torii were also depicted on classical craters and coins. Believe it or not, the torii appears even in Christian art. An old painting shows Christ teaching in paradise, at the entrance to which stand twin trees; in one tree a bird roosts (Wensinck 1921: 41). A diffuse image of the torii appears in a Norwegian folktale, where it is just a log with birds on it floating at the approach to a magical isle, which no doubt corresponds to the Andamanese isle (Christiansen 1964).[4] The image can become even more diffuse in European art, but one thing stands out here that is less obvious in East Asia: the dichotomy between the two sides of the torii.[5] The bird on one side might be black and the other white, one might point its wing downward while the other points upward, they might simply face opposite directions, or one might be airborne above its tree while

the other is perched on its. Often, as in the Christian example, the one bird might be present and the other absent. Even when both birds are absent, as with the twin trees in Eden, the dichotomy is upheld. The dichotomy seems to have been understood by A. J. Wensinck and J.R.R. Tolkien (Wensinck 1921: 11–15, 18–21; Tolkien 1985: 69–73; the latter, despite his fame for fantasy, was after all a serious folklorist), but I have not combed the European literature to determine who else might have understood. This is clear: Asianists and Europeanists could mutually profit if they sat down to a cup of tea.

NOTES

1. The final leg of the journey to Kere-tuaur is toward the sub-cardinal northeast direction, which was sacred (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 201). Generally, cf. Malinowski 1948: 154–160.

2. The Sri Lankan evidence such as it is comes from a Tamil informant who proved unreliable. Okinawan evidence is from first-hand observation; in deep rural areas Okinawan torii tend to be among the simplest I have seen.

3. The location and theme of the painting make me think of the doctor displaying his diploma.

4. That the cormorants transformed into otherworldly anthropomorphs is no cause for alarm. Throughout the world spirits of humans have been represented as birds; also in Japan, as witness the death and metamorphosis of Yamato Takeru in the *Kojiki* 古事記. The relationship of this symbolism to the torii would make a fascinating topic for a research paper.

5. Sometimes a trichotomy is represented.

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