

# Ties of Blood and Earth in Japan

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Inhabitants of a land that their ancient myths proclaimed to be the creation of divinities, the Japanese have peopled their archipelago with numerous earth gods: giants trees, simple pebbles concealed either in an oratory, a corner of a garden or deep inside a thicket; crossroads stoneposts, steles in the middle of a plot or next to a rice field, tombstones, and rocks that are worshipped on home altars. The imposing presence of these divine proprietors of the provinces and of sites that were once urban settlements, villages, or private residences is still visible in the tall buildings of Tokyo and Osaka. These protean spirits, found on roof tops in the form of stone foxes or redwood porticos, bear witness, even in the heart of the city, to a latent belief: the forces of the earth are still at work in the world, keeping watch over human activities. Although there are very few people left who believe, as the ancients stories tell, that the citizens of Japan are descendants of the gods of the earth and sky, there nevertheless remain many who accept the notion that a single telluric energy inhabits the world of the living, the dead, things, and the gods.

Analyzing ancient tales and contemporary practices, we will try here to follow how an intrinsic confusion in the very conception of the Japanese earth god – a confusion between territoriality and the fertility of the soil – gave rise to a constant imbrication between ties of blood and earth that endures until today. Described variously as territorial gods, ancestors who cleared the land, purified forms of ancestors, evil spirits, or as gods of agriculture and other chthonic forces, these local gods have become part of a single community of men and earth that has certainly strengthened feelings of local identity.

## The Mythology of the Eighth Century

Looking over the list of gods who qualified as earth gods in the ancient texts<sup>1</sup> of the indigenous Shinto religion, we can immediately see that there existed four distinct conceptions of these supernatural entities. They are either chthonic gods who oppose the celestial gods, occupants of the national territory prior to the establishment of the power of the celestial gods on earth; gods who begat the soil, or finally certain gods of the ocean.

These myths, recast for current taste by premodern and modern Shinto exegesis, call these earth gods *chijin* and describe them as comprising the five direct ascendants of the first human emperor, Jimmu, who is said to have taken the throne in 660 B.C. As earth gods, they are in opposition to the *tenjin*, or celestial gods; in other words, to the first seven generations of gods who embody the logical and physical processes that created the world. These imperial ancestors, however, who like their descendants succeeded in a direct line as rulers of the country from the creation of the world (this, at least, was what was taught in Japanese schools until 1945), are also called “celestial gods.” Popular knowledge in fact rejects the differentiation that the Sino-Japanese terms *tenjin* and *chijin* introduced into the chronology of the world’s creation. It is more interested in the confrontation between *kuni tsu gami* (“gods of the country” [of the archipelago and its provinces]) and the *ama tsu gami* (“the celestial gods”).<sup>2</sup>

Part of a dualistic pantheon, these territorial gods contrast with the celestial divinities who are cast as the principal progenitors and legitimate sovereigns of the islands. Nevertheless, according to Japanese cosmogony, some of the earth gods were born in the heavens. These divinities, as representatives of the lower world in the empyrean, thus appear to be able to maintain special ties – of protection and ancestry – with gods who are more authentically terrestrial. As for the latter, they seem to arise out of the earth itself, although on occasion they are capable of begetting islands in the manner of the celestial gods, or at least building and consolidating them. The local gods, incarnating earthly vitality and untamed nature, thus governed the Japanese lands before the arrival of the celestial powers.

The pacification of the country by the legitimate celestial gods is described as taking place in various ways: through war or marriage with the earth gods, or by the establishment of a ritual alliance with them; and none of these modes of submission excludes the other. In the absence of restrictive rules of succession (all descendants of the agnatic line for five generations or more could be a candidate for office), the support of an influential terrestrial father-in-law often proved to be decisive in quarrels between celestial cousins. Moreover, the ritual alliance, whose form was a cult that the living celestial sovereigns offered to their chthonic ancestors forced into the other world, transformed these rivals not into affines but ancestors: adopted as sons-in-law, the celestial gods inherited the terrestrial sovereigns who preceded them. In any case, and as was emphasized by the Japanese scholars of the premodern nationalist school known as "National Studies," local and celestial gods were related. Beginning in Antiquity, the increase in alliances of marriage between celestial and local gods had "obligatorily" established ties of consanguinity between the two categories of gods. What's more, as gods of the islands begotten by the cosmogonic gods of the heavens, the local gods were in some sense the descendants of the celestial gods, which did not prevent some of them from passing themselves off as *ubusuna-gami*, "progenitor gods of the earth," as well.

In any case, the local gods are generally considered to be the original proprietors of the earth. And because territorial appropriation and cultural development are intertwined here, their pacification justifies the clearing of the land and the establishment of human communities. The ancient myths tell of how the gods were confined to uncultivated regions, either in the mountains above water sources or even in the other world; and of how some of them – snakes, dragons, or fish – accepted or decided to remain in areas hostile to man as long as they were worshipped in an appropriate manner. Once the earth gods were subdued, the trees and rocks ceased to drone like flies and to complain by keeping their voices constantly raised. Henceforth, only the sovereign's word would be heard above the silence – a word embodied in a form of ritual speech perfectly effective in matters of governance. The ancient tales also tell of how one of these gods, who had an ape-

like appearance, remained with the sovereign in order to marry the celestial ancestor of a group of ape-keeping acrobats who are presented as the distant founders of the No theater; as a result, the descendants of some of the local gods, talented actors who can imitate men, the dead, and the gods, are still walking the earth.<sup>3</sup>

### Genealogy and Hierarchy

The ancient genealogical texts testify to the fact that the Japanese aristocracy liked to claim for itself a more or less divine origin: in a court where status was assessed simultaneously in terms of wealth and antiquity, the hierarchy of the nobility was reflected in one's proximity to the imperial line, which was the most celestial of all. However, because the vagaries of fortune sometimes resulted in the violation of the rule of lines of celestial origin over those of local provenance, genealogical tables often had to be revised in order to maintain the veracity of the principle on which the State was founded. Also, for a long time, aristocrats demanded that promotion within the bureaucracy be tied to one's birth rank.<sup>4</sup>

It should be emphasized here that although the ancient texts make use of the word *kuni*, which designates a territory and its borders; and of the word *ubusuna*, which expresses the vitality of the processes associated with begetting; and of the Sino-Japanese lexeme *chi*, which means earth, the Japanese acceptance of this same character, *tsuchi*, does not seem to be commonly used in this context. This is probably because *tsuchi*, the only one of these terms – along with *kuni* – that is immediately understandable to all Japanese speakers, has a very negative connotation. For instance, the earth taboo, the forbidding of walking on the ground during certain rituals, is called “standing apart from *tsuchi*.” Metaphorically, the color of earth stands for ugliness and coarseness. Finally, lower-ranking bureaucrats, who do not have the right to enter the inner sanctum of the Royal Palace, are called “earthen,” *tsuchi*. The earth gods, even though lower ranking than the celestial spirits, are themselves marked by a profound ambivalence. Associated with the other world, they share the ambiguous position of the dead, seen both as protective and threatening.

## Contemporary Names for the Earth Gods

Although one almost never meets with the term “local god,” both the Japanese countryside and the streets of its cities are peopled with earth gods. Called “earth gods” (*chijin*, *chi no kami*, or *ji-gami*), “proprietary gods of the soil” (*jinushi-gami*), or even “the god of the inhabited area” (*yashiki-gami*), they are of a complex nature. The multiple glosses associated with the names of these minor gods – often no more than a pebble inside an oratory or an indentation on a piece of white paper – bear witness to this complexity. In some cases their names are linked to other, more generic terms, such as *uchi-gami* (house god), *uji-gami* (lineage god), *ubusuna-gami* (birthplace god), *wakamiya* (unfortunate dead), *yama no kami* (mountain god), and others. In still other cases they conceal more individuated divinities, who are not characterized as earth gods and are instead associated with regional sanctuaries well known throughout the country: Inari, Gion, Kumano, Tenno, Hakusan, Atago, Akiba, Hachiman, etc. Some of these famous names, however, are in reality toponyms, i.e. contemporary names for renowned sanctuaries at which a multiplicity of divinities, along with their innumerable variants (all of which are listed in the great texts of Buddhism and Shintoism), are worshipped.

In brief, the name of one god always conceals other gods. As indispensable as the earth gods as such are, almost any divinity, or group of divinities, can fill their role. Also, all the gods, whether of earth or not, have a local character because they are all currently designated by their place of residence. As a result, Inari and Hachiman, the most venerated of all Japan’s gods, are often worshipped as earth gods, because the number of sanctuaries, small and large, dedicated to their memory numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Everyone knows that they are respectively the god of rice or commerce and the god of war. Some have been told that Hachiman is in reality Ojin, the fifteenth emperor of the archipelago. But almost no one knows that other gods are concealed behind their names. For instance, the scholarly glosses of Shintoism notably identify Inari with the goddess of food whose corpse, according to the ancient myths, is the source of cultivated plants

and domesticated animals. The Buddhist monks, on the other hand, see in her the Japanese form of Dakini, a goddess of Indian origin: she is the creature who, knowing the death of individuals six months in advance, waits for the day of their death in order to devour their hearts. First she was converted to Buddhism; then, as she was represented as riding on a fox, the Japanese associated her with Inari, a god whose messenger is a fox. As for Hachiman, he includes not only Ojin but Ojin's mother, the Empress Jingu, as well as a great anonymous goddess for whom the emperor Chuai, Ojin's father, is sometimes substituted.

A single earth god can be worshipped by all the houses of a village, independent of the local or ancestral connotation of the word used to designate it. However, only the ancestral houses themselves are permitted to celebrate their own earth god, with one exception: when the divinity is worshipped collectively by its *dozoku* (i.e. a "hierarchical grouping of related houses"). Some Japanese ethnologists, and in particular the founder of Japanese ethnology, K. Yanagita, believe that the local gods, whom the most ancient texts identified as ancestral in nature, were honored by the ancestral homes of the *dozoku* alone. When, over time, it became more and more difficult to maintain the integrity of hierarchies based on family age, first all the houses composing these hierarchically grouped entities and, later, literally all the inhabitants of the local communities, began to worship this divinity. Thus, under the influence of local conditions, the earth god progressively lost its ancestral quality.<sup>5</sup> However, this historicist conception of the evolution of the earth gods must be rejected because, although the cult of the earth gods exists throughout Japan, the *dozoku* are only found in the eastern provinces of the archipelago. Thus the imbrication of ties of blood and earth would seem to be not a historical development but present from the beginning.

### The Earth God as Ancestral Divinity

There are in Japan many traditions that identify the earth god with the deified form of either the founding ancestor of a group of related houses or village, or even with the ancestor who acquired



the land on which the ancestral home was originally built. In any case, the Japanese language always calls these spirits “land-clearer ancestors.” At the same time, there are other local interpretations that say that the earth god is the totality of all the deceased ancestors of a single lineage. Nevertheless, the term *uji-gami*, lineage god, is not in all cases linked to the attribution of an ancestral nature to this local divinity. Indeed this ancestral quality of the earth god is sometimes utterly denied. In other cases, the ancestral characteristic is revealed to its descendants only much later, by means of an oracle. For instance, when a particular family, neighborhood or village is hit with a series of misfortunes, it is often necessary to turn to a medium in order to discover the cause. Through the medium it is then learned that the local god that has been worshipped for such a long time under the name of “lineage god” is in fact, as his name indicates, an ancestor.

On the other hand, the fact that an ancestral divinity is called, for example, Inari, like the renowned rice god whose home is in the town of Fushimi Inari, to the south of Kyoto, does not necessarily imply a desire to establish ties of filiation with this famous god. Rather, it can be quite reasonably asserted that the local Inari possesses an ancestral nature without thereby including Inari of Fushimi among its ancestors; and yet at the same time the two entities called Inari need not be considered as different. The divine ancestors called Inari are in fact thought of as local embodiments of the original Inari, but the existence and function of these local gods precede their association with the rice god. Instead, their association with him provides them with an additional quality.

The designation of an ancestral god as an earth god rarely gives rise to a real genealogical working-out, establishing the exact relation between a god and its name. As an example of this, let us take a look at an extreme case, i.e., that of five groups of hierarchically arranged houses, located in the county of Yamanashi (Kita Koma canton, Sudama district), all of whom bear the famous last name Fujiwara, a family that once played a leading role at the Heian Court.<sup>6</sup> These five *dozoku*, who make a vague claim of being descendants of the great Fujiwaras, gather to worship a large round stone, called Onogoro, which is kept inside a small chapel constructed of rocks and located in the middle of a field belonging

to the ancestral house of the one among them whom they consider the eldest. The name Onogoro is written with the help of an ideogram for the word "ax," which evokes the clearing of land, and with the characters signifying "fifth son." Onogoro is supposed to be the first name of an ancestor who was a land-clearer peasant, which seems to conflict with the idea of his aristocratic heritage. However, Onogoro is also the name of the very first Japanese island, which "took solid form by itself" after the sea had been churned up by the progenitor deities. However, the written form adopted by the families conceals the homophony that links the local phenomenon to the originary island. These farmers make reference to paragons of courtly refinement, to ancient cosmology and modern means of land clearing, without establishing any kind of link among the different origins.

### The Earth God and Unfortunate Death

The earth gods who let their anger be known by oracle are not always related to those whom they threaten. Indeed, the earth gods often appear as manifestations of "bad deaths," beings deceased in acts of violence, to whom no cult was offered and whose unquenched passion for life attaches them too strongly to this world. Sometimes they are ancestors who died in tragic circumstances and who are simply dissatisfied with the way their descendants are worshipping them. Most often, however, they are warriors, members of the famous Heike clan of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that was wiped out by the Minamotos. In the twelfth century, fugitive Heikes were cut down throughout the Japanese provinces, tricked by their hosts of an evening or murdered in cowardly fashion by the pursuing Minamotos. There are also women of long ago, high aristocrats, who died in distant provinces. Now, centuries later, these "bad deaths," these evil spirits, reappear, recounting their torments through the intermediary of an exorcist or a medium who has been consulted by people interested in knowing the causes of their own life difficulties.

Independent of whether real ties of filiation exist, all these dead are treated as family members. The spirits, as a result of the peri-



odic offerings they receive, gradually lose their savage nature to become tutelary gods, and in fact some of them are officially adopted by communities of worshippers. The leader of this community then has the monks in the local monastery make a funerary slab, which he buries next to the earth god's chapel oratory. Nevertheless, all these spirits retain an inner violence – much greater, it is said, than that of other divinities – which incites them to inflict punishments on those who either neglect their ritual duties or provide the god with unsuitable offerings. These gods, called *araburu-gami* (“the dreadful god”), *ubusuna Kojin* (“Kojin who begets the soil”), or *heso no o Kojin* (“Kojin of the Navel”), sometimes demand that all who have been born on the lands ruled by him return home to celebrate the rituals of the god of their birthplace. They share the strength and anger of *Fudo myoo*, the king of Fudo wisdom, known as the Immobile One (Sanskrit *Acalanatha*). Also known as *wakamiya* (“young masters”), these gods also manifest the irritability of the recently deceased.

These savage gods reveal the importance of places of birth and death much more clearly than do the gods normally inserted into ancestral lineages. Indeed their importance is so great that no one would dare move an earth god, irrespective of whether it possessed an ancestral nature or not. In fact, in times past, many epidemics, fires, and other catastrophes were set off by gods who had been moved in this way; and the terrors continued until the gods were returned to their place of origin. Prudence thus demands that humans wait until an oracle has clearly expressed the necessity of moving them to a new place of residence.

Everyone knows that the earth gods are jealous by nature and not to be trusted. For instance, in a certain family group, it was customary that only the heads of household of the ancestral house dedicated a cult to the earth god Kojin; but then Kojin demanded that all the houses of the area participate in his worship. It was then decided that the organizing of Kojin's annual celebration would fall on each house in turn. Yet at the same time, the soil god only allowed the members of the eldest house to cut the wood in the forest from which his sanctuary was to be constructed. Any transgression on the part of the younger families would provoke his anger. Thus this is a god capable of being unjust. Perhaps his

actions bear witness to the fact that the most reliable relations combine ties of blood and earth simultaneously.

### Earth Gods and the Life Cycle

According to widely held beliefs, the final commemoration of the death of a deceased coincides with this deceased's reaching the status of a god. Thirty-three, fifty, or even a hundred years after death, the deceased finally escapes the jurisdiction of the funerary religion, Buddhism, to become *kami*, a god of the Shinto religion, or at least to merge with a divine entity who is simultaneously ancestral and tutelary. In some cases, he will henceforth bear the name of the soil god *chi no kami*. This final ceremony, devoted to the deceased as an individual, often gives rise to a special ceremony: the head of the lineage group plants the branch of a young cryptomeria tree in front of the soil god's oratory. Then, playing on the homonymy between "cryptomeria," *sugi*, and the verb "to pass," *sugu*, he declares that the time of death has passed (*sugimashita*). In other cases, he buries under the oratory's awning the funerary slab prepared at the Buddhist monastery to celebrate this final commemoration. In any case, the simplest way to assure that the deceased has successfully attained the status of a god is to plant a camellia branch on his tomb or next to the soil god. If this perennial plant takes root and flowers at the beginning of spring, then everyone knows that the transformation of the deceased into a god has been completed.

This affinity with death also marks the portrayals of the earth gods. Often represented by a stone, the earth god's presence is also symbolized by a five-story Buddhist tower, often seen in cemeteries, as well as in the small statue of the *bodhisattva* Jizo (Sanskrit *Ksitigarba*), which the Japanese worship as one of the intercessor spirits with the world of infernal deities. Its "divine body" is made up of fragments of a Buddhist tower randomly collected during the clearing of fields or of bones found during construction activity in the settlement: although these materials are sometimes claimed to be relics of a founding ancestor, the actual transmission of such ancient relics rarely takes place.

The spirit of the god can also reside in that large and several-hundred-year-old tree, which everyone admires and which is located near a group of several moss-covered tombs making up an old cemetery adjacent to an ancestral house which itself is located at the foot of the mountain where gods and the dead live. It is said that only the founding ancestors lie in this plot; their descendants are buried in the municipal cemetery. Some of the soil gods have demanded that a stele, engraved with the name of the violent god Kojin, be erected for them in a corner of this private cemetery. The other gods are concealed in a mound that faces in a north-easterly direction, which Chinese landscape science (geomancy) considers to be extremely dangerous because this is the direction in which the "demons' door" is located. From this border area separating the realms of man and mountain, the spirits keep watch over the destiny of their descendants. Still other gods, who are more fearful of contact with impure things, ask to be placed in the north-east corner of the residence, because it is from this direction – again according to Chinese tradition – that ancestors periodically return. They live there, at the far end of an oratory. Some have taken up residence on roadsides or, more officially, in an enclosure of the sanctuary that the village community has dedicated to *uji-gami*, the lineage god with whom these spirits are sometimes identified. However, they are also worshipped on mounds, in the middle of plots, or at the edge of rice fields, all of which are taken to be the sepulchers of founding ancestors. The living bring offerings here not only in spring and autumn, as is done for all the village gods, but sometimes also during the festival of the *bon*, which occurs at the end of the summer and celebrates the return of the dead to the village.

At one time K. Yanagita believed that the dead, who lived in the mountain, gradually began to be identified with this, so to speak, earthly beyond, and that the god of the mountain was transformed, as soon as the work season began, into the god of the fields. Finally, when autumn returned, the field god returned to the mountain, where he was once more metamorphosed into the god of the mountain. Thus the spring and autumn festivals celebrated both the return of the ancestors and the alternation of the god of the fields with the god of the mountain.<sup>7</sup>

## The Earth God and the Agrarian Gods

This is the same earth god whom the village children, imitating the call of the fox hunters, name *kon kon*, because this ancestral god or dissatisfied deceased also has an agricultural nature: he is the messenger fox of the rice god Inari, or perhaps the god himself, or even *ta no kami*, the god of rice fields and *yama no kami*, god of the mountain, which is the winter aspect of the agricultural gods. This is why the festivals dedicated to this earth god are initially concentrated at the beginning of the agricultural season and continue until the vernal equinox. Since it is at this time of year that the sun sets directly in the west, the ancestors living in the Pure Land of the West of the Buddha Amida (Sanskrit *Amitabha*) return from the other shore (*higan* or *nirvana*) to be with the living. Identical rituals are celebrated in the autumn, season of first fruits and thanksgiving. Also at the autumnal equinox, the ancestors return once more from the other shore. Offerings of crushed rice cakes, *mochi*, *sake*, distilled water, or raw rice and live branches are also part of these rituals, which are celebrated in rapid fashion by the head of household alone or by his eldest son; even, on occasion, and with great solemnity, by the entire village community. In spring the children, accompanied by the village elders, collect flowering branches from the nearby hillsides. Ojichan and Obachan, Grandfather and Grandmother, grasp these branches tightly as they descend onto the plain to receive the offerings which are presented to them either near the earth god's oratory or at the altar dedicated to the dead, which is located inside the home. When fall arrives, grim-faced farmers, using sickles, chop down the *higan-bana* ("equinoxal flowers"), those enormous red flowers that grow in wild profusion at the edges of fields and in cemeteries; these absurd plants, which flower before their leaves grow and whose leaves die in the month of March, are massacred because they are believed to belong more in the other world than in this one. Rather than these flowers of the beyond, the ancestors prefer the *suzuki*, the wild grasses that wave in the autumn wind along mountain paths, resembling stalks of rice. In the Noto peninsula, following the harvest, the rice god and his wife, symbolized by two handfuls of rice stalks, are invited into the house

and offered something to eat. Then they are placed next to the earth god, who is installed behind the house at the foot of the mountain, where they remain until spring.<sup>8</sup>

While the ancient Japanese earth gods were presented as proprietors who, willingly or by force, provided the celestial gods with the authorization to clear the land and domesticate nature, today's earth gods of the Japanese countryside not only provide the authorization to clear, cultivate, construct or destroy nature and land; they also take on the divine forms of the settlers themselves and, even more importantly, become indistinguishable from the products of the earth. Ancestors of soil and place, these gods retain the anger that they inherited from untamed nature and that makes them similar to evil spirits. Thus, as everyone knows, Kojin, especially in the form of the earth and ancestor god, has a bad temper, and his sullen mood is often the cause of a poor harvest. To win his favor, he must be periodically offered a straw rope in the shape of a snake, which symbolizes his body and represents his true nature.<sup>9</sup>

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The personality of these gods thus expresses the imbrication of ties of blood and earth characteristic of the organization of modern Japanese society. The houses described in this paper included not only agnatic lines of descent but also all those who worked toward the preservation of the local heritage. Anyone who wanted to become a member of the village was required to establish ties of fictive kinship with one of the dominant houses and thereby become one of its branches; so much so that the terms *aiji* and *jirui* ("they who share the same land") in fact designated related persons.

The conversion of local gods into soil gods is not only, however, the result of the functional adaptation of an ancient belief to a new form of social organization. Its roots lie rather in the ancient texts, which describe how the earth gods, vanquished by the celestial deities, were forced into the other world where they were designated as ancestors. They cannot be the divinities of a prior dynasty either, because the celestial deities are the only ones who

have ever held legitimate power; ultimately, their lineage merges with the divine genealogy, because they either spring from lands begotten by the celestial divinities or are worshipped for having provided wives for the celestial divinities through a system of succession based on the adoption of a son-in-law. Clearly, it is not only the ritual pact but also a shared essence between the settler and the settled that permits the settling to take place.

The belief that beings and the land on which they live are consubstantial is reinforced by the teachings of the Buddhist monks. It was they who spread throughout Japan the knowledge of the earth god Jishin, which is the Japanese form of Prthivi, lord of the gods and demons living on and under the earth, under trees, and in the vast stretches of wild and deserted land. This god, they say, revealed its submission to Buddhist law by incarnating itself in the lotus flowers that sprung up at the moment of Sakyamuni's birth. Having been converted to Buddhism, Jishin, who is also known by the name Jiten, the earth goddess who protects the law, symbolizes the fertility of the earth. As Mother Earth, Jishin promotes human longevity through its plant and also provides innumerable other benefits.

In the foundation rituals of the schools of esoteric Buddhist thought, Jishin, along with Kojin, is associated with Fudo, the Immobile One, king of wisdom. Before the earth god's sutra can be read, one must first visualize A and Om and recite its mantra. Next, the mandala of Kongokai (Sanskrit *Vajradhatu*), which corresponds to the "Diamond World," i.e. the world of outer phenomena in which the earth god lives, is drawn on the main beam of the master of the house's rooms. In this way he will assure the prosperity and security of the house as well as of the State. The ritual thus asserts that the earth god will watch over those yet to be born on this piece of soil whose strength he incarnates. In the past, when the fear of a difficult delivery was almost universal among Japanese women, it was customary for them to go, before giving birth, to the earth god's sanctuary and take a bit of soil. They then carefully placed it by their bedside in order to strengthen the spirit in their body.

As everyone knows, the fertility of the soil and the fecundity of women constitute a single phenomenon. We are not speaking here



of a simple analogy between the agricultural cycle and the life cycle. The multiplicity of qualities attributed to the soil god – simultaneously wild and settler earth god, ancestor, deceased without issue and the lord of births to come – underlies the belief in the ultimate unity of the beings and things residing in a single place. To give birth or be born, to be cleared or to clear, to be dead or an ancestor: these are but diverse modes of activity in a space governed by a vital energy whose singularity strictly forbids thinking in terms of alterity. This is why the question of the ultimate nature of the earth god has no meaning: simultaneously a place, an ancestor, and a cereal, the earth god is the very substance of those who live and die there, and who are necessarily related.

### Notes

1. We are referring here to *Kojiki* or *The Tale of Ancient Facts* of A.D. 712; *Nihon-shoki* or *The Japanese Annals* of A.D. 720; and *Fudoki* or *The Collection of Morals and Customs*, compiled between the eighth and twelfth centuries, especially the *Fudoki Yamashiro* and *Hitachi*. Our interpretation of dogma is based on the *Shinti Daijiten* (*The Great Dictionary of Shinto*), 3 vols., Tokyo, 1974.
2. See on the subject, M. Abe, *Nihon no kami-sama o shiru* (*To Know the Gods of Japan*), Tokyo, 1989. This book is something of a catechism, describing the origins and virtues of the seventy most representative Japanese divinities.
3. Zeami, *Kadensho* (XVth Century).
4. F. Héraïl, *Fonctions et fonctionnaires japonais au début du XIe siècle*, 2 vols., Paris, 1977, Vol. 2, p. 739.
5. K. Yanagita, *Minzoku-gaku jiten* (*A Dictionary of Folklore*), Tokyo, 1973, pp. 634-36.
6. The Fujiwara clan, which reached the zenith of its power in the tenth and eleventh centuries, offered several of their daughters to the imperial line. They also provided the Court with numerous ministers and high-ranking officials. For a time, they appeared to be the true rulers of the country.
7. K. Yanagita (note 5 above), pp. 357-60.
8. The best source of ethnographic information on this subject remains H. Naoe, *Yashiki-gami no kenkyu* (*Studies of the House God*), Tokyo, 1972.
9. S. Mauclair, "The sacrifice du serpent," in: *Cahiers de Littérature Orale*, Vol. 26 (1989), pp. 83-115.