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Mura-Zakai—The Japanese Village Boundary and its Symbolic Interpretation

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PREFACE

Scholars in several fields have recently attempted to elucidate the spatial composition of the traditional Japanese folk village by examining the often unstated and informal expressions of boundaries. For example, human geographers have explored the notions of "folk direction" and symbolic space as they are perceived by the villagers (Sasaki 1981, 20–21).¹ Nevertheless, for most geographers, the concept of boundary has almost always been identical with the concept of a political border; the existence of a symbolic boundary has not been acknowledged in their conventional theoretical or empirical literature.²

Studies in Cultural Anthropology and Japanese Folklore have recorded and analysed many important details of custom and ritual life within the traditional village and have identified some of the symbolic icons and markers that denote boundaries. For example, many folklorists have described how the ritual procession of the mushi-okuri 虫送り (a rite for sending away mushi or noxious insects of the paddy fields) moves with bells and drums to the end of the village—the murazakai 村境 (village boundary)3—which is frequently at the foot of a bridge. Elsewhere village boundaries might be marked by an image of Dōso-jin 道祖神, the deified guardian of the road and travelers. Neither location conforms to the conventional administrative border but rather marks space through a landmark laden with symbolic meaning.

There is, in fact, considerable regional variety in the specific deities and other symbolic devices that have been adopted to mark the boundary of village space. Harada Toshiaki notes that *Dōso-jin* is common in the Kantō and Chūbu districts while *Yama-no-kami* 山の神 (a moun-

tain deity) is prominent in the Kinki district and Sarutahiko 猿田彦 (an indigenous god) in Kyūshū. Stone figures of Jizō 地蔵⁴—one of the Buddhist saints—lanterns of various kinds, such as those used at the shrines of Atago 愛宕, Akiba 秋葉 and Dai-jingū 大神宮,⁵ a sacred straw rope (shime-nawa 注連繩) stretched across the road (michi-kiri-nawa 道切繩), a straw sandal and other charms hung on trees, and finally a pole put up by the roadside, all these are used to serve as symbols of village boundaries (Harada Toshiaki 1957, 23–24).

While these symbolic markers have been noted, no systematic attempt has yet been made to analyse them with respect to the actual spatial layout of the village. Nor has anyone attempted to consider the diversity of special spaces and places, including the symbolic village boundary, within the larger framework of cultural symbols and the overall cosmology of the people. This paper will attempt to begin that process of integration, and in so doing will draw on work done in the related disciplines of Japanese Folklore, Sociology, Religious Studies, and Cultural Anthropology. The analysis will consist of three parts: types of boundary markers, the geography of village boundaries and the cosmology of belief, and a review of classificatory schemes.

Types of Boundary Markers

Early in this century Yanagita Kunio wrote three monumental studies: Nochi no kari-kotoba no ki 後籽詞記 (Notes on Traditional Hunting Lore) [1909], Ishi-gami mondō 石神問答 (Discussions on Stone Deities) [(1910) 1963], and Tōno monogatari 遠野物語 (Tōno Tales) [1910]. Besides being the first real studies in Japanese Folklore, one of these works—Ishi-gami mondō also provides the first study of the related deities of Dōso-jin and Sae-no-kami 塞/神.6 Yanagita asserts that the second syllable 'so'祖 of Dōso 道祖, which generally means ancestor, implies in this case another 'so' 阻 which means 'prevention,' and he considers this deity as having served to protect the village from evil spirits. For this reason it was always placed at the boundary of the village. Other protective deities that can be identified in a similar fashion are: Shaguji 社宫司, Yama-no-kami, Kōjin 荒神, Misaki 御崎, and Goryō 御霊' (Yanagita 1963a, 73-74, 145-146).

Another scholar, Misawa Katsue, who was a strong advocate of local geographical knowledge and field observation, made a detailed study of the places sacred to Dōso-jin in many villages located in the Suwa and Ina areas of Nagano Prefecture. According to his list, sixty-eight of the seventy-six villages studied had such a sacred place located in the vicinity of the entrance to the village. He used the expression "around the entrance" instead of the term "boundary" or "end" in

order to express more accurately that the sacred place was located on a road side, and as such, was often at some distance from the exact boundary which might lie several houses beyond the marker, depending upon the size of the village (Misawa 1939, 17–29).

Folk customs designed to prevent disaster from invading the village, or on the contrary, those designed to drive away a calamity which had occurred, invariably involve some form of public prayer (Seki 1938). The rite of michi-kiri-nawa (michi-kiri 道切 means road block; nawa 繩 means rope) is a device that fulfilled a function comparable to that of Dōso-jin. Similarly the ceremony of kanjō-zuri 勧請吊り or kanjō-kake 勧請掛け (both zuri and kake mean hanging) sought to prevent disaster by stretching a sacred straw rope (shime-nawa) across the road. These rites can be found over a large area in central Japan from Kinki to Hokuriku districts, and are most evident in Ōmi (present-day Shiga Prefecture) and Yamato (present-day Nara Prefecture), but they are also found in Iga (present-day Mie prefecture) and Wakasa (present-day Fukui Prefecture) (Harada Toshimaru 1983, 364–365).

There is no detailed research on the specific location within the village where the sacred straw rope is used, other than that of Misawa, but it is often pointed out that it was used around the entrance or end of the village. According to a report on Yamato Heights in Nara Prefecture written by Hosen Jungō, fifteen out of thirty-three cases of shime-nawa usage involved placement of the rope on the road leading to the village (Hosen 1958, 33–34). Similar evidence was found for Shiga Prefecture by Harada Toshimaru, who also pointed out that many of the kanjō-nawa, which for some reason had been moved into the precinct of the Uji-gami 氏神 (a tutelary deity) shrine where it is hung at the present time, had long been placed around the entrance of the village (Harada Toshimaru 1983, 366–371). Similar relocations were detected by other scholars (Hashimoto 1967, 15–16; also Tsuneoka 1975, 15).

Moreover, the indication is that in many cases even though new houses had later been built beyond the original gateway to the village, the point where the sacred rope was hung remained fixed. This is implied by Misawa's work and his use of the term "around the entrance" to the village. In this way it can be concluded that while villagers were conscious of the need to include all village residents within the protective space defined by the ceremony, they were able to adjust the boundary only as far as the customary entrance or gateway. Because the road entrance to the village was symbolically and practically the way of entering or exiting the village, it was the logical point for the placement of the protective deity or of a symbolic device.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF VILLAGE BOUNDARIES AND THE COSMOLOGY OF BELIEF

Yanagita has noted that the sacred place of Doso-jin typically corresponded to a natural physical control point such as a mountain pass, a river bank, or a bridging point on a river (Yanagita 1963b, 226). Ishizuka arrived at a similar finding in relation to the deity Sae-no-kami, noting that it was usually placed at the bottom of an ascending slope or at the highest point on a mountain road in the case of upland villages. In lowland areas there are fewer natural landmarks; in these situations, the division between fields worked by neighboring villages, or the junction of footpaths, might serve to distinguish territoriality. Ishizuka further stressed that additional layers of folk custom were often associated with these points, viz., ekijin-okuri 疫神送り (a rite designed to drive away ekijin, the god of plague) and tsuji-kiri 辻切り (the rite of blocking crossroads equivalent to mich-kiri. Ishizuka 1940, 55-59). But the equation of topographical feature and boundary function oversimplifies the selection of these locations as significant points. Villages have evidently exerted great care in defining the location of certain points because of their significance for the practice of rituals. That is to say, it seems that topographic points of control are not a sufficient determinant of boundary definition.

Certain rituals, in order to be properly performed, require special locational features. For example, the custom of the road block occurs at a three forked junction or a corner. This is also the location for a form of Shōryō-mukae 精霊迎え in which villagers burn a small sheaf of raw straw to receive their ancestors or shoryo (Kondo 1954, 119). The expulsion of an invisible and terrible calamity by ekijin-okuri, and such practices as amakaze-okuri 雨風送り (a rite for driving away amakaze, rain and wind), mushi-okuri, shōryō-okuri (a rite for sending off the ancestor spirit) and nebuta-nagashi ねぶた流し (a rite for removing nebuta or sleepy spells) are all focused on the gateway to the village, on a corner of the village, on the foot of a bridge, or on the boundary with the neighboring village (Ishizuka 1940: 58). Shōryō-mukae may also be connected to a special place like the top of the hill where people pick Bon flowers (Bon-bana 盆花) to take home for the Bon 盆8 festival (Hayakawa 1929, 14, and Ikegami 1937, 106-107). There are also many cases where curing ceremonies are performed or where charms against illness are located in vicinity to the village boundary.

Village boundaries are further significant as locations where mysterious and evil events occur. For example: such spiritual beings as *Jiki-tori* ジキトリ, *Gaki-botoke* ガキボトケ, *Okuyo-sama* オクョ様, *Oshiori-sama* オシオリ様, *Shibagami-sama* 柴神様, *Ashigaru-sama* 足軽様 and

Hidaru-gami ヒダル神 are said to haunt mountain passes and crossroads. They are termed Tsukigami-sama 憑神様 or possessing spirits which sometimes beset tired travelers and solicit them for offerings (Sakurai 1966: 108–121). It is also believed that divine revelations can occur in divinations at a crossroad (tsuji-ura 辻占) or on a bridge (hashi-ura 橋占), making a crossroad (tsuji) or bridge (hashi) the chosen spot for anyone wanting to have his fortune told (Miyata 1982, 161–163).

Yanagita, quoting many examples of hashi-hime 橋姫 (the princess of the bridge), also tells about the spirit and the mystery told of certain bridges and slopes (Yanagita 1962, 214–229). Folklore pertaining to old women (uba 姥) is often related to the geographical boundary of the village. And Kamata reports that places at the water's edge, e.g., the point of a cape, the mouth of a bay, or the saddle of a mountain, the foot of a bridge, a pond or a well are also significant (Kamata 1975: 7). As with roads, the point where two rivers meet is regarded as a special place. Kawasuso-sama カワスソ様, which has a close relationship to women, seems to be venerated at places of this kind (Nishioka 1976, 33).

There may, moreover, be a locality which is considered to be the entrance leading to the other world. This is the place where communication with the spirit world is made through the intermediary of a rice bowl lent by the guardian spirit, or it is the spot leading to the <code>kakure-zato</code> 隱丸里 (hidden paradise) (Yanagita 1962, 230–258). Kitami Toshio found the idea of this mysterious land to be common in legends of <code>wan-kashi</code> 椀貸し (lending a rice bowl) told among people living in the area from Kantō to Chūbu districts and in western Japan. In these areas a pool in a river, a pond, a marsh, a well, a waterfall, a hole in a mound, and a cave is regarded as the stage for this legend (Kitami 1954, 112–113). As Miyata Noboru (1977, 361) points out, these can all be seen as holes in the ground and as such they lead to and are connected with <code>Jizō-jōdo</code> 地蔵浄土 (the paradise of <code>Jizō</code>) or <code>nezumi-no-jōdo</code> 鼠の浄土 (the paradise of rats).

Thus, far from being simply a stage for everyday economic and social life, the land and landscape of the village coincides with a wonder world of supernatural reality which has traditionally had great significance for the residents. In this hidden world, the boundary places, both man induced—such as roadways,—and natural topographic "edges" play an especially important part. What is needed is some mechanism for adequately integrating the two worlds so that the ordering of space will acknowledge the greater meaning of this complex and multi-dimensional perceptual realm.

THE CONCEPT OF ANOMALY IN REFERENCE TO SPACE

All people have found it helpful to engage in some form of classification of the parts of their universe—the external world—in order that it can be understood and recognized (Needham 1963, vii–xi). It has been shown so far that boundary places in Japanese villages carry a rich symbolic value that transcends the normal division and recognition of space in the real world. Not surprisingly, conventional classifications of space have not provided an appropriate place to account for symbolic or metaphysical spatial relationships. Attention turns now to finding an appropriate way of defining and classifying this "extraordinary" spatial reality.

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, a cultural anthroplogist, has used the term "structural inversion" to describe those situations that do not fit easily into conventional classification structures. According to her, a structural inversion is

a state in which a culturally defined classificatory structure is inverted, reversed, contradicted, abrogated, nullified, or, in general, not in accord with the given structural principles.

Symbolic expression falls into this category and is thus described as an anomaly (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981a, 119).

The interest in structural inversion began with attempts to deal with various forms of taboo and with the idea of pollution. Leach, Turner, Douglas, and others have searched for more effective forms of classification by introducing the notion of ambiguity and liminality as well as the concept of anomaly. Arising from this has come a typology of anomaly, which is described by Ohnuki-Tierney as follows:

- 1) having properties of more than one set, e.g., a dragon.
- 2) being out of place and in another set, e.g., an apple among bananas.
- 3) being between sets, like viscosity which is between a liquid and a solid.
- 4) lacking a few of the attributes that define the set, e.g., a wingless bird.
- 5) lacking any identity, like formless matter or dirt, unable to be fitted to any set.

In short, she argues that any cognitive dimension that is unclassifiable by conventional means is an anomaly (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981a, 120–123).

In an attempt to resolve the problem, Ohnuki-Tierney has devised a progression of developmental phases in the process of perception, conception, and symbolization which clearly recognizes that there are different levels of abstraction implicit in the classification exercise. A taxonomic anomaly is said to be generated at the first or perceptual phase of the process when the phenomenon is not always given a special meaning. On the other hand, upon more abstract phases an anomaly acquires symbolic meaning with an "analogy code" which relates it to the world view of the cultural group (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981b, 461–462).

At one level the boundary places discussed in this study have a real world reality and lexeme: for example, a crossroad (tsuji 社), a bridge (hashi 橋), a mountain pass (tōge 時) and a hole in a mound (tsuka-ana 塚穴). In these instances those names derive from practical considerations relating to daily life. Viewed from this perspective alone they are not taxonomic anomalies. But because the positions they refer to cannot be classified in a binary opposition when it is asked whether they are "here" or "there," or when asked where they belong on a higher level of abstraction, they would be ambiguous anomalies. Therefore, there are multiple layers of symbolic meaning attached to them, and indeed they become for the villagers the object of worship and the embodiment of holiness. Viewed from this perspective there is a clear need for a method of integrating these unseen dimensions into the ordering of theseplaces.

Understanding the Boundary Place and its Symbolism

The anomalous nature of boundary places forces us to look carefully at their symbolic meaning and to reconcile this meaning with the more worldly conventions of space. Several scholars have stressed the importance of village selfidentity in reference to boundaries. It is argued that the villagers share a selfconsciousness about their membership in a community, and that often the location of the boundary place serves to give expression to the social space by drawing members together for public prayer or ritual at a critical location which reinforces the extent of village territoriality. 10 In this regard, the consciousness of the village or the concept of the village is concentrated on a point rather than a line (Orikuchi 1976, 332). Making the same argument in a slightly different way, Harada Toshiaki sees the boundary as the place where residents discriminate between what is inside and what is outside the village (1957, 163). In a similar way, Torigoe Hiroyuki uses the term "social boundary" to emphasize the role of the boundary (Torigoe 1976, 62-63) in mediating between members of the community. Under such circumstances the possibility exists for the size of the village or the membership of the group to be relative rather than absolute (Yoshida 1977, 401).

We have already seen that boundary places carry a rich and com-

plex set of ritualistic and metaphysical significances. It is possible perhaps to employ the distinction between inside and outside implied by the notion of social space by characterizing the area inside the village as the mundane world—a stage for secular life—while the outside world is the divine domain (Sakurada 1958, 30). Yet others have reversed this dichotomy, making the inside of the village the sacred realm and the outside the profane (Harada Toshiaki 1959, 29). This contradiction is not to be attributed to the confusion of scholars, because it results from the nature of boundary places themselves, i.e., their ambiguity and multivocality.¹¹

As previously mentioned, the boundary places could have various meanings and functions which may even be in conflict with each other. For example, they are the places where people drive away the harmful spirits as well as the sacred places where people venerate spirits. They are not only the places where people perceive the power of spirits but also where they are attacked by the ghosts. These are the places from where disasters or epidemics intrude. On the other hand they are the gates leading to the blessed other world. What is clear is that the boundary place probably has less significance as a signal or marker of real world territoriality, and functions more as a mysterious place or a place of contact with the metaphysical world.

The point we must pay attention to first is that the boundary place is a stage essential to the appearance of a deity or a spirit. The distinction between deity and spirit is not in reality. What we call Tsukigami 憑き神 (possessing spirit) does people harm, while at the same time it becomes the object for offering as the traveler's guardian. It is unnamed but nevertheless holds spiritual power; it becomes a deity if deified, and is but a spirit if not deified (Harada Toshiaki 1959, 294 and Komatsu 1982, 216–218). Hashi-hime also has an ambiguous character (Yamaguchi 1975, 80); she takes people's lives when offended, and gives rare treasures to people when delighted (Yanagita 1962, 228). In these cases, the boundary places are experienced as mysterious places where people happen to meet spirits or dare to receive divine revelations as in the case of tsuji-ura or hashi-ura. These boundary places are unstable or nebulous places in this world for lack of a clear image of the

Table 1
Basic Levels of Boundary Places

Secular Level		Inside / Outside
Supernatural Level	Sub-level A	Ambiguous and Nebulous Place
Devel	Sub-level B	This World / The Other World

other world beyond. (See Table 1) It is interesting to note further that the funeral or wedding procession is not permitted to contact the boundary place, nor is singing permitted at this point (Yanagita 1969, 366–367). Conducting a procession or singing is generally considered to provoke liminality (Tuan 1978, 85) and implies a mysterious power which achieves and mediates the shift from this world to the one beyond. Instability arises because of the structural void that is implied by the lack of form of the other world in spite of the mediating power. It becomes necessary then to take great care in directing funeral processions from the village (this world) to the graveyard (the other world) and candles are placed at each corner to prevent the coffin from getting lost, and a gong is rung at each bridge to prevent the hungry ghosts from attacking the dead.¹²

In other cases, the boundary places emphasize the distinction of this world from the other world. Indeed, in some instances the rigidness of the structural contrasts between these two worlds makes it difficult to reach the opposite world beyond the boundary place. A person without special power can only reach the opposite world when one happens to wander into it against one's will or is led there by a small animal such as a rat (Miyata 1984, 323–334). The role of the mediator is seen to be essential, especially in welcoming or sending off an ancestor spirit. Through the medium of the welcoming fire (mukae-bi 迎之火) at the crossroad, or the Bon flowers picked at the mountain pass, the spirit can move from the other world to this world. In the other direction, the sending off fire (okuri-bi 送り火) and the boat bearing the ancestral spirits (shōryō-bune 精霊船) are necessary to allow the spirit to return to the other world.¹³

The boundary place in the legend of wan-kashi exhibits an intermediate feature between the equivocal place and the dividing point of the two worlds. In the legend the boundary place emerges as a location of indirect communication between the spirits and the people through the medium of utensils as a rice bowl. Beyond the boundary place there is another world deep in the water, and this is often expressed by the image of ryūgū 龍宮, the water god's palace, which is a paradise deep under water. Its extent and depth, however, is more limited than that of the hidden paradise, the kakure-zato. People can rarely reach it and the lender of the rice bowl, portrayed in the image of the dragon king or a spirit of the serpent, does not show itself in principle (Yanagita 1969, 313). Even though the lender proves to be ambiguous when beneficiaries betray it, and cuts off contact in anger, it is generally a being that brings good things to the people (Yanagita 1962, 235).

The boundary place, which is clearly given a location in the struc-

ture of a dyadic world is not only the point through which wealth is brought and the ancestor spirit comes and goes in the Bon Festival, but is also the place where evil such as disease and calamities are cut off from the world. As the similarity between customs of shōryō-okuri and mushi-okuri or yamai-okuri 病送り (a rite for dispatching sickness) is repeatedly referred to in the Saiji shūzoku goi (Yanagita, ed. 1975, 524–531), the symbolic structure of the two can be seen to have the same features.

It is the sending off of spirits rather than the welcoming of them that takes the central place in the Bon Festival (Hori 1953, 403–409). Furthermore, the idea that spirit possession is the cause of a disease is widely held in Japanese folk pathology (Nagaoka 1959, 317). Among healing rites, the basic type usually involves the process of transferring the plague to the boundary place where it is left or expelled. Plague and pest spirits, which can attempt to invade this world without a mediator, are both seen to be able to do this as the result of their "antistructural" character. Mushi-okuri, yamai-okuri or michi-kiri are all regarded as magic rituals which resolve this disorder by specifically highlighting or intensifying the dualistic order of this world and that beyond. In this sense there is a powerful need to emphasize the boundary place as an insuperable boundary.

Because of the great significance of the boundary place both as a symbolic and ritualistic focus, there is a need to erect some physical manifestation at this location. The device varies from place to place; it might be a piece of stone left by nature which is designated as an object of faith, or it might be a small shrine or a stone image erected by the villagers. Indeed it appears that some attempt is made to portray the ambiguous spirit and the real world, and more often than not, images and names for each of them are produced, e.g., both the dragon king and the evil spirit may be embodied and deified in a stone image. Once the object of faith is embodied and iconized, the last stage of symbolization has been reached.

The iconized spirit, however, does not exist as a nebulous or abstract idea anymore, rather it becomes perceptible to all who view it (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981b, 455–458). At this point in the development the icon becomes more than simply a marker indicating the boundary place. Rather as the very object of faith for the villagers it is surrounded by layers of meaning and mystery that extend well beyond the sum of its parts. For this reason it is the boundary place; the theoretical entrance to the village becomes fixed in space if not in time. Because the weight of symbolic meaning is so heavy, villagers find it very difficult to move or relocate the "gateway" to their settlement in spite of

any subsequent expansion of the real world geography of the village.

Conclusion

The occupied expanse of territory or administrative space making up the traditional Japanese village rarely coincides with the spatial bounds acknowledged by the villagers. It is probable that the boundaries between the lands devoted to residences, to paddy land, and to the gathering of resources, such as firewood, would be perceived (Fukuta 1980), but they would seldom be given special meaning. As it is argued here, there are many other boundaries produced by the villager's perception of space which are not connected with such territoriality. They are locations subjectively experienced, and related to and defined by the ritualistic life of the community. Only by recognizing the ambiguity or the complex dualistic structure of anomalous symbolic space can the village be understood. Moreover, it has been emphasized that only by probing the many dimensions of religious and folk mythology and custom can the complex strands of actual boundary designation be appreciated.

NOTES

- * This is an English version of my paper "Mura-zakai no shōchōron-teki imi" 村境 の象徴論的意味, Jinbun ronkyū 人文論究 Vol. 34 No. 3, 1984. My thanks go to Professor Itō Mikiharu of the National Museum of Ethnology, Suita, for his critical comments on the first Japanese draft. Professor Peter Ennals of Mount Allison University who was teaching in Japan as Visiting Professor at Kwansei Gakuin University, Nishinomiya, carefully read and revised an earlier English translation. I am deeply grateful to him for his time, effort, and invaluable comments. I am also much indebted to my colleague Professor Segawa Shinpei for his valuable advice.
- 1. For other studies of the same area, see *Chiri no shisō* edited by the Geography Department of Kyoto University (1982).
- 2. Under such circumstances, however, Senda Minoru's work (1982), which deals with boundaries and classification, is worth attention.
 - 3. Mura means village, and zakai (sakai when used alone) means boundary.
 - 4. Jizō is regarded as a guardian of the entrance to the other world.
- 5. Deities of the shrines mentioned here are considered to manage the hearth in the house.
 - 6. Sae-no-kami is a deity of boundary or defence in the literal sense.
- 7. These are all natural stone or stone carved deities. In spite of their different names, Yanagita discovered common characteristics among them.
- 8. During the period of *Bon*, one of the most important annual functions held in midsummer, people worship their ancestral spirits who have come home to visit for several days.
- 9. The term "place" is used for a space which is subjectively experienced and filled with meanings; see Tuan (1974) and Relph (1976).
 - 10. Such a viewpoint is shared by Tsuboi (1966, 46), Suzuki (1968, 424-427),

and Kawamoto (1972, 152).

- 11. The term "multivocality," well developed by anthropologists, is defined as one of the essential features of a symbol which simultaneously bears various contradictory meanings and functions.
- 12. We find many reports of funeral practice in a special issue on birth and funeral rites of *Tabi to densetsu* 旅と伝説 Vol 6 No. 7, 1933.
 - 13. Seki (1938), Kondō (1954), and Tanaka (1954) report some pertinent cases.

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