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On the Semiotics of Space in the Study of Religions: Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Challenges

1 Introduction

The study of space as social category provides central ideas to investigate religious practice, as it opens up fundamental questions about how we can situate ritual action, when places start to be considered as sacred and why, and what kind of role the environment plays in the religious construction of cultural life. Some scholars have even talked about a “spatial turn” in social sciences and humanities, and study of religions more specifically (Knott 2010; Tweed 2006; Rots 2017; Blair 2015; see also Smith 1987; Grapard 2016; Ambros 2008; Moerman 2005; Kawano 2005; Thal 2005). The work of Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space* (1991) has undoubtedly played an influential role in reassessing social studies of space, as it is evident in many of these publications, and in those scholars who have been associated with the aforementioned “spatial turn” in cultural theory and study of religions (Knott 2005; Warf and Arias 2009; Soja 1996). Lefebvre in fact provided a formidable critical analysis of space in late capitalist societies, by looking at its construction through the creation and preservation of social relations and ideological values. Through the way we *perceive, conceive* and *live* space, he says, we tend to reproduce hegemonic assumptions about political power and a modern Cartesian division between human subjects and reality. However, the semiotic approach here presented will tend to diverge from Lefebvre’s (1991, 45) representational view of reality, which—despite his attempts to show interrelation between physical, mental and social fields (11, 29–31, 38–39, 73–74)—still betrays a strong divide between “language” and “real nature” (29–31, 70–71). A major point of departure will be the fact that, from a *material semiotic* perspective, space is not only constructed, but also endowed with agency.

By adopting such perspective, in the first part of this chapter, we will explore the possibility to investigate space from a semiotic point of view examining the theoretical potentials of this approach and the methodological issues involved. After a discussion of different theoretical scenarios, in the second part we will then move to a case study in central Japan, namely a contemporary Shugen 修験 community of Shinto-Buddhist ascetic practice, the Tsukasakō 司講 lay

group affiliated to the Tenpōrinji 転法輪寺 temple on Mount Kongō 金剛山, connected to the revival of the pilgrimage to the “sutra mounds of the twenty-eight lodges of Katsuragi” (*Katsuragi no nijūhasshuku kyōzuka* 葛城の二十八宿経塚). Through the semiotic analysis of this case using both historical and ethnographic sources, I will try to challenge the still too common view of semiotics as a theory of timeless symbols and representation. On the contrary, following the work of Paris School semioticians like Algirdas Julien Greimas, Paolo Fabbri, Manar Hammad, Jacques Fontanille and Eric Landowski and the material semiotic trend developed from their ideas by Bruno Latour, semiotics will here emerge as a theory of actions, passions, body and materiality.

Yuri Lotman (1990, 271–72) has poignantly remarked that history has often been referred to as the memory of humankind. But if history is cultural memory, this means that “it is not only a relic of the past, but also an active mechanism of the present.” He also adds: “Memory is more like a generator, reproducing the past again; it is the ability, given certain impulses, to switch on the process of generating a conceptualized reality which the mind transfers into the past” (272). In other words, if history is a form of collective memory, it is based on a cultural reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present, on view of future expectations, hopes and purposes. Such dialogue between memory and history is fundamental for the construction of social identities and, interestingly enough, proceeds through the introduction of cultural texts from the past. Texts and fragments from previous societies work as both condensers and generators of cultural memory (18) and are then integrated into the space of the *semiosphere*, interacting with the mechanisms of contemporary world. The “semiosphere,” according to Lotman (1985, 1990, 123–42), is thus the internal sphere of culture in constant dialogue with its borders, a semiotic field of translations between different languages, texts and discourses circulating at different levels, through which new meanings are produced. We will see in our case study how all these considerations about history, memory and cultural spaces well apply to the important place of mountain asceticism called Katsuragi 葛城. Here, different semiotic texts were introduced and produced over the centuries, they were circulated, translated one into the other and integrated into a semiosphere, where *different languages coexisted in a multi-layered space*.

We will thus argue that history is constantly included, integrated into a spatial semiotics. And we define here *spatial semiotics* in three ways: (1) a space conceived as “semiosphere” or field of translation, constituted by multiple layers of cultural texts originated in the past and present time; (2) a space considered as “language” or signifying set, which not only communicates social relations, but may also be manipulated to stipulate different subjectivities and forms of life; and most importantly, (3) a space understood as “actant” or syntactic char-

acter, in other words either as an *object of value* constructed and negotiated by human and nonhuman actors, or as an *interacting subject* who can actively perform actions. We will try to explore the theoretical scenarios and the methodological challenges offered by this approach to sacred space and history.¹

2 A different idea of semiotics

While reflecting on possible scenarios offered by semiotic perspectives on sacred space, it may be useful to address forms of criticism made about semiotic theories and methods, as such critiques illustrate the way semiotics has sometimes been portrayed in study of religions and elsewhere in social sciences and humanities. In the first volume of his monumental project *Gods of Medieval Japan*, Bernard Faure (2016a) described semiotics as a sort of empty cognitive symbolism, which would only partially explain the nature of divine entities, while missing their phenomenological presence:

Gods may be part of a semiotic system, but they are not mere signs. They represent not just beliefs but the vanishing trace of a presence, perhaps a floating feeling of uncanniness, fear, or joy caused by a close encounter with an elusive higher power. Discourse about gods reveals not merely the content of beliefs but a certain existential or phenomenological tonality, which is always at risk of slipping through the meshes of symbolic discourse (Faure 2016a, 48).

Elsewhere, in both the first and second volume (2016a, 9–50, 317–28; 2016b, 4–12, 332–52), Faure instead prefers to adopt Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), as a better interpretive framework for understanding Japanese hybrid gods, also to overcome what he rightly perceives as an often limiting binarism of the kami-Buddha combinatory model:

Rather than focusing on individual actors, actor-network theory instead examines the network made up by relationships between actors, looking specifically at how (but not why) a network developed, how the network survives, and how it dissolves or transforms. In this

¹ Although related more to religious materiality than sacred space, Fabio Rambelli's work *Buddhist Materiality* (2007) is to date one of the few studies in Japanese religions to systematically apply semiotic models to themes closely related to the present discussion, like Buddhist conceptions of environment and the role of religious objects. Other examples may include Yamaguchi Masao (1988), who analysed the concepts of centre and periphery in Japan using Tartu School semiotics, as well as Manar Hammad's (2006) work on religious aspects of Tea Ceremony (*Cha no yu* 茶の湯) and Bachnik's (1995) research on indexical meanings in ritual, mentioned below.

context actors (or “actants” in actor-network theory parlance) are formed largely through their relationships within the network. [...] By viewing the Japanese gods as actors in this sense, and by remembering that they are ever-changing nodes within a network constantly in flux, we can more accurately perceive the Japanese gods as the unstable aggregates that they are rather than as static projections of human minds, society, culture, or what have you (Faure 2016a, 10).

Although Faure’s project remains invaluable for the breadth of its scholarship, as well as in terms of its scope and effectiveness in reassessing the field, one important link is here missing, especially concerning how ANT emerged and from where it borrowed its sophisticated vocabulary, including the concepts of “actant,” “actors” or “network” mentioned above. A possible clue is indeed provided by Latour himself, in his most quoted *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, when he writes, “It would be fairly accurate to describe ANT as being half Garfinkel and half Greimas: it has simply combined two of the most interesting intellectual movements on both sides of the Atlantic and has found ways to tap the inner reflexivity of both actor’s accounts and of texts” (Latour 2005, 54n54).

Faure and Latour might thus have a rather different idea of semiotics in mind, or more likely they might refer to different semiotic theories. A considerable number of concepts used by Latour in his works—including not only “actant,” “nonhuman actors” and “network,” but also “figuration,” “modality,” “enunciation,” “isotopy,” “internal referent,” “program of action,” “shifting,” etc.—derive in fact from A. J. Greimas and his Paris School semiotics, combined with Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (Akrich and Latour 1992; Latour 2014, 2013a, 1998, 1992, 1988; Latour and Woolgar [1979] 1986, 19–21, 90nn, 121, 184n2). It comes as no surprise that ANT is often defined as a form of *material semiotics* (Law 2009), since this theory was developed by Latour also thanks to his early collaboration with semioticians Paolo Fabbri, Manar Hammad and Françoise Bastide,² and then with sociologists John Law and Michel Callon (Latour 2013b). Therefore, since such semiotic apparatus proposed by Latour and other theorists—and its conceptual underpinnings behind, productively endorsed by Faure—became relevant for an understanding of divine entities in a complex and multifaceted religious discourse such as the one found in Japan,

2 For an account of how ANT first emerged in connection to semiotics, see in particular Latour (2013b, 291, 296–97). Fabbri and Latour started collaborating in the Seventies in San Diego and in 1977 they co-wrote one of first articles in sociology of science, published on Pierre Bourdieu’s journal *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* (Latour and Fabbri 1977). Latour’s collaboration with semioticians continued at Greimas’ seminar in Paris (especially with Françoise Bastide, see Latour and Bastide 1986).

we need to clarify in which way the same notions may also be applied to other dimensions of religious life, including ritual action, historical time and, of course, sacred space.

3 A theory of embodied action

In the following sections, we will argue that, in order to understand how a *material semiotics of space* might look like, we need to move away from a modern—and according to Webb Keane (2007), originally “Protestant” and “Calvinist”—ideological divide between language and body, cognition and sensory world, which is implied by the idea of semiotics as a theory of *symbols* and *cognitive representations*. The latter has been considered as the standard semiotic approach for a long time. Semiotics has in fact often been presented as the study of signs and texts conceived as mental representations of reality and distinct from phenomenological approaches based on the analysis of embodied experience and perception of the world (Csordas 1994, 80–81). However, this definition seems to completely rule out the pragmatic and affective domains of reality from language, communication and signification, insofar as it considers meaning as a disembodied and inner product of thought. This notion has been for instance objected by linguist and semiotician Émile Benveniste (1971, 25), who criticized representation as “the symbolic transformation of the elements of reality or experience into concepts [...] [through] which the rationalizing power of the mind is brought about.”

It is in fact important to notice that, on the contrary, most late and post-Greimassian semiotics, from the Eighties on, has shifted its attention—e.g., through the work of Fontanille (2007; Greimas and Fontanille 1993), Coquet (2007) and Landowski (2005, 2004)—to the phenomenological dimension of discourse (Parret 1989, x–xi; 1993, 173; Merleau-Ponty 1964) and the close interconnection between *semantic* and *somatic*, *sense* and *senses* (Fontanille 2004, 17–28; Greimas 1987a). As linguistic anthropologists have often repeated, even the idea of verbal language as a cognitive-only phenomenon is highly questionable, since language is always a practice: we talk by using our bodies (including, and not limited to, our phonatory organs) and other material means, we do not project speech from our brains onto the mind of others (Duranti 1997; Goodwin 1997).

We thus need to start from a re-conceptualization of semiotics as a theory of embodied action. The basic idea behind is that not only action can be considered as meaningful (which is the standard view shared by a number of theorists, from Max Weber to Clifford Geertz), but also, most importantly, *meaning can be described as a course of actions*, as articulation of *sense* (i.e., articulation of an “oriented intentionality,” Greimas and Courtés 1982, 240). Discourse, including not

only verbal, but also audiovisual, bodily and other forms of communication, is more specifically redefined as a fabric of *actions* and *passions*, producing assemblages of *agents* and *patients* called “actants” (Fabbri 2005, 24–26; Greimas 1987b, 106–20; Cooren 2010, 4–8). Every action generates in fact a *modal reconfiguration* of what its receiver feels (Lat. *patire*, whence the terms “passion” and “patient”) in terms of obligation, volition, knowledge and power (Greimas and Courtés 1982, 193–95; Greimas and Courtés [1986] 2007, 236–37). The subject who feels, thus pragmatically reacts producing new actions (Cooren 2010, 58–62; Perron and Fabbri 1993, vii–xvi). These considerations lead to a radical rethinking of *signs* as semiotic acts, signs as forces creating and transforming situations, as *actions produced by and on bodies* (Fabbri 2005, 37, 97). According to Jacques Fontanille (2004, 2007, 2, 16–17), the *body* becomes the interlocking element between *signifiers* and *signifieds*, between the two faces of the sign function. It occupies the place of semiosis, the *case vide* of the apparatus of enunciation, located between the sensory world on the *plane of expression*, and cognitive, affective as well as pragmatic meanings on the *plane of content* (2007, 11–3, 38). A performing body taking position in the world, whether human or nonhuman, becomes the origin of a *process of signification as action*, namely of every semiotic text circulating and being translated across different networks and generated by “assemblages of collective enunciations” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).³

The terms *semiotic text* and *discourse* are here not used as logocentric metaphors. They are analytical categories to be understood in their etymological sense: text from *textus*, meaning “texture,” “fabric,” and discourse from *dis-cursus*, “running here and there” (Barthes 1975, 64; 1990, 3). From the point of view of their receivers, visual, musical or other texts are thus not *read*, they are seen, heard or perceived according to their related sensory processes. From the point of view of their producers instead, semiotic texts and discourses are textures, courses of actions and passions (Fabbri 2005, 32–37; Cooren 2010, 28–31; Silverstein and Urban 1996).

3 For the key role played by the model of “acentered systems,” proposed by Paris School semioticians Pierre Rosenstiehl and Jean Petitot (1974), on the formulation of the idea of rhizome, see Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 16–18, 519–20nn14–15, 544n82).

4 A semiotics of space

Once a rather ideological separation between sense and matter, signification and action, language and body, is dissolved by adopting a *nonrepresentational theory of discourse*, at least two different options come out to investigate space and materiality from a semiotic point of view. The first option is given by Umberto Eco in a number of his early works on architecture (Eco 1968, 1986), as well as in his widely read *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976). According to the latter work, the functional use of objects and tools, once socially shared within a certain community, becomes their plane of content, i.e., their meaning or signified. Eco gives the example of the Australopithecine who discovers a sharp stone and starts using it to split the skull of baboons. He then shares this knowledge and practice with members of his community, who will begin to assign the function of splitting baboons' skulls to that particular kind of stone. Once the practice is socially stipulated, the stone becomes the signifier of its use. Using the words of Eco, "once the possible use of the stone has been conceptualized, the stone itself becomes the concrete sign of its virtual use" (1976, 24). According to Eco, the function of buildings and objects can thus be considered as their meaning (1986, 59–63). He gives the example of a cave. When the cave was first inhabited by humans in pre-historic times, it provided them with shelter from wind and water, delimiting the space inside from the one outside, through the mediation of an entrance hole. Seen from outside, such entryway evoked an image of the cave's internal space, made up by covering vaults, rock walls and the area within, with its shadows and lights, illuminated by daylight or by the light of a fire. Together with feelings of protection and maybe some unclear nostalgia for the womb, the cave, recognized from its entrance hole, communicated to its inhabitants its function as a shelter space and it was thus readily codified into a model or type, which allowed to assign the same function to other similar entryways seen from the outside, on the side of a mountain (1986, 58–59).

A second option or perspective is provided instead by Manar Hammad, whose work on spatial enunciation had a considerable influence on Latour's ANT and modes of existence, alternatively called "regimes of enunciation" (Latour 1988, 1998, 2013a). Hammad ([1989] 2002), going beyond Eco's idea that "use is meaning," takes space as starting point for semiotic investigation. For him space is not just a container for actions. In a truly nonrepresentational move, which cuts across a supposed divide between materiality and discourse, space can be considered as a language in itself, but different from verbal language. Unlike Umberto Eco, Hammad does not ask what the function of space is, but which potentialities of action it opens up to us. Instead of focusing on

use, this approach deals with possibilities of action offered by different portions of space, called *topoi* (from Greek *topos*, “place”). Hammad (2002, 18n9) defines as *topos* any portion of space which tends to elicit some particular set of behaviors, thus interacting with human actors. *Topoi* are therefore spatial actants, which can alternatively play the syntactic role of agents or patients, subjects or objects of action. A locked door, in Hammad’s analysis, can be considered as a subject delegated by someone else (a private landlord, a tenant, or a more abstract collective institution) to keep natural and human agents outside of a given space, unless they have the ability or the authority to unlock it (55–67). The closed door not only imposes a limitation, to the power of human actors to open it, but also operates on their volitions and obligations (telling them that they should not open it unless they are entitled to do it) (44–46). Following the Paris School semiotic approach, the idea is to analyse space in terms of actions performed in and through it, by considering the role of nonhuman actors such as architectural elements, infrastructures, features of the landscape, parts of the urban environment, etc.

Hammad’s analysis builds on previous works by Greimas ([1976] 1990), who had already defined urban space as a “cluster of beings and things,” a relational network “made up of all the relations of an individual with the surrounding objects,” to the point that we should imagine the whole city “*as a set of interrelations and interactions between subjects and objects*” (148–50). Such ideas also connect to the complex relationship between space and subjectivity, investigated by Denis Bertrand (1995) through three levels of analysis described in terms of enunciative, narrative and discursive subjectivity.

Bertrand (1995, 55–71) argues that space can produce certain profiles of users when it manifests an *enunciative subjectivity*, in which a certain topological organization defines particular attitudes, positions and systems of values, often expressed through diagrams and cartographies (e.g., mandalas). In other words, spatial organization may present certain models of identity and orders of knowledge, which the subject encounters and negotiates during its movements. But there is also a *narrative subjectivity* of space, when the pathways of subjects through space follow certain narrative trails and programs of action, related to the same spatial organization (e.g., foundation narratives and miraculous stories inscribed within shrines and temples’ precincts, but also ritual courses of action prescribed in them). This level thus investigates the relationship between space and narrative processes, by analysing configurations of actions and passions localized in specific places and seeing how such places are interconnected and transform the subject according to orientations, plans and expectations inscribed in them. Finally, the *discursive subjectivity* of space corresponds to how the subject mobilizes and creates space through its gestures and movements,

namely its proxemics. At this level, the interaction between subject and space can resemantize both the terms involved, in much the same way as Michel de Certeau (1988a, 97–99) describes “walking as a space of enunciation,” in which the walker appropriates the space through “pedestrians speech acts,” exploring possibilities but also subverting them through improvisation (e.g., ritual invention adapting the script to changing circumstances). We will now consider what kind of implications these perspectives may have for the analysis of religious space, in the particular case study we are going to discuss.

5 Sacred space in Katsuragi

Katsuragi is a remarkable mountain area in central Japan, stretching for more than 100 km from Wakayama city 和歌山市 on the west coast to Kame no se 亀の瀬, where the River Yamato 大和川 narrows between the ancient provinces of Yamato 大和国 and Kawachi 河内国 (Miyake 2001, 162–65). The main peak of this area is the Mount Kongō 金剛山 (1125 m, literally “Mount Vajra”), located some thirty kilometers south from modern Osaka (Kongōsan sōgō bunka gaku-jutsu chōsa iinkai 1988, 3). Ritual activities are documented in these mountains at least from the eighth century CE. Rokutanji 鹿谷寺 and Iwaya 岩屋 were probably founded at that time on Mount Nijō 二上山 (or “Two-Peak Mountain”), next to Mount Kongō, by Korean immigrants from Shiragi 新羅 (Silla), who imported construction techniques of Chinese origin (Fukuroi shiritsu Asabakyōdo shiryō-kan 2007). Rokutanji is an example of *sekkutsu jiin* 石窟寺院, a temple completely excavated from rock, in a place originally used as stone quarry. Its thirteen-story stone pagoda is still visible nowadays, not far away from the other analogous site Iwaya (Haga 2009, 106). Their construction could epitomize a process described by Satō Hiroo (2009), as a passage from a conception of mountain as inaccessible residence of kami, to the mountain as a place of ritual practice.

One of the first written sources documenting ascetic activity in Katsuragi, is the *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 (797), which recorded some events concerning the life of E no kimi Ozunu (entry 699) (KT 2:4; Gorai 1980, 22). The figure of E no Ozunu 役小角 (or E no Ubasoku 役優婆塞, En no Gyōja 役行者) will undergo different narrative transformations and embellishments, starting from the *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記 (823),⁴ acquiring then a special role in the *Shozan engi* 諸山

4 For the figure of “E no Ubasoko” (alternative reading of E no Ubasoku) in this text, see *Nihon ryōiki* in *NKBT* 70: 134–37. English translation in Nakamura (1973, 140–42.) See also Earhart (1965, 306–37).

縁起 (late twelfth century), which we will soon examine. On the other hand, we know about a shrine dedicated to the god Hitokotonushi 一言主神 of Katsuragi, which was sponsored by the court at the time of the *Engi shiki* 延喜式 (927), and which was given a number of offerings during the *ainamesai* 相嘗祭 (Bock 1970, 90–92). However, at least since the twelfth century, Katsuragi area has been crossed by a pilgrimage route, which connects together twenty-eight spots. These twenty-eight stations were associated by specific narratives with the twenty-eight chapters of the prominent Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture *Lotus Sutra*, which were said to be buried in sutra mounds (*kyōzuka* 経塚), one chapter for each spot, and venerated as the Word and Body of the Buddha inscribed into the land itself (Kashibashi Nijōsan Hakubutsukan 1999, 10; Padoan and Sedda 2018, 55–57).

The lay ascetic group I have been studying—called Tsukasakō and affiliated to the Shingonshū Daigoha 真言宗醍醐派 Tenpōrinji temple on top of Mount Kongō—was founded by the *bettō* 別当 Rev. Katsuragi Kōryū 葛城光龍 (b. 1972) in 2005 and is part of a larger Shugendō 修験道 revivalist trend which started in the Second After War. Shugendō, literally meaning “The way to master/acquire ascetic powers,” may be described as a Japanese form of mountain asceticism which, according to current views, started being established around the late thirteenth century in major sacred mountain areas (Blair 2015, 272), combining together Buddhist Esoteric, Daoist and shamanic elements with the worship of kami, the local deities. Having first met this group in 2008, I could study their activities from an ethnographic perspective over the years,⁵ conducting interviews and participant observation during ritual performances, pilgrimages, communal gatherings and celebratory events, business meetings, as well as cleaning activities at their main temple.

The modern history of this temple is closely related to the 1868 edicts *shinbutsu bunri rei* 神仏分離令 (“Kami-Buddha Separation Edicts”) which dramatically reconfigured the role of Shugendō in Katsuragi and across Japan (Tamura 1977; Sekimori 2005). In 1871, after three years from the promulgation of the edicts, the temple Tenpōrinji with its Ōshukubō 大宿坊 (Great Temple Lodgings) on top of Mount Kongō⁶ was dismantled by the supporters of the new re-

5 More recently in 2017–18, during a ten-month fieldwork project based at Osaka University, Anthropology Department, sponsored by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS grant PE16043).

6 Since the Kōwa 弘和 period (1381–1384) the Ōshukubō, under the local powerful clan Katsuragi (*Katsuragi ke* 葛城家) ruling over the Tenpōrinji mountain temple complex, had been at the centre of a system including the Six Sub-Temple Lodgings (*Wakidera rokubō* 脇寺六坊) located on Mount Kongō—namely Gyōjabō 行者坊, Nagatokobō 長床坊, Nishimuroin 西室院, Jissōin 実

gime, who tried to separate a supposedly ‘pure’ Shinto from its Buddhist ‘foreign’ influences. Buildings were destroyed and the main icon Hōki Bosatsu 法起菩薩 (Dharmodgata *bodhisattva*) was damaged, together with several other Buddhist statues located in the sacred precincts (Miyasaka 1988, 212, 216, 228n20).⁷ This amounted to the laicization of the abbot of Tenpōrinji Katsuragi Shinjun 葛城真純 (1842–1905) and his conversion to the position of head priest of the Shinto shrine Katsuragi jinja 葛木神社 (Katsuragi and Ōya 1988, 183).⁸ The pilgrimage to the twenty-eight sutra mounds was no longer undertaken, until in the second half of the twentieth century, a group of Buddhist temples connected with Shugendō—first Inunakisan 犬鳴山 in 1953, then Miidera 三井寺 in 1958 and Shōgoin 聖護院 the following year—started to retrace the ancient pilgrimage spots and paths (Nakano 2002, 280). Meanwhile after the Second War, with the *shūkyō hōjin rei* 宗教法人令 allowing groups to register as religious juridical persons (Miyake 2009, 86), Shugendō groups could gain more independence and visibility and the Katsuragi family, at the head of the Katsuragi shrine, tried to reconnect to the Buddhist institutional side. Katsuragi Mitsugu 葛城貢 (1905–

相院, Ishidera 石寺 and Asaharadera 朝原寺—and the Seven Kongō Temple Lodgings (*Kongō shichibō* 金剛七坊) located at the foot of the mountain within a range of two kilometres, both on the Kawachi side—Shudōji 修道寺, Bōryōsan 坊嶺山, Tamonji 多聞寺—and on the Yamato side—Asaharadera, Takamadera 高天寺, Ishidera and Ōsawadera 大沢寺 (Ōya 1988, 144; Heibonsha 1997, 400).

⁷ Scholars disagree on this point. According to Horiike (2000, 105) the *honzon* 本尊 or main icon (together with most of the old documents and statues) was burnt during the wave of *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 (“Abolish the Buddha, destroy Śākyamuni”) in Meiji 明治 period and after that the wooden head of Hōki Bosatsu, which survived the fire, would have been protected and sent by some of the villagers to the Bodaiji 菩提寺 temple in Fushimi 伏見. According to Ōya (1988, 157) instead, the wooden head now preserved at Bodaiji was saved from the big fire of 1804, which had destroyed the temple main hall (*hondō* 本堂) and part of the main icon.

⁸ According to different records and testimonies, the abbot Shinjun himself (later renamed as Masumi) might have been responsible for stirring anti-Buddhist sentiment among villagers, having become a fervent supporter of the emperor a few years before (Miyasaka 1988, 216; Katsuragi 1988, 479; Goseshishi hensan iinkai 1965, 338). As the abbot suffered himself from severe economic damage because of the *shinbutsu bunri* edicts, we do not know whether this was actually a strategy to preserve control on the mountain, by readily accepting the new regime’s regulations. What we do know is that a few monks showed signs of resistance, as the head of the Gyōjabō 行者坊 temple Jōjun 定純, who petitioned seventy-two times Nara 奈良 and Gojō 五條 prefectures to be reappointed as abbot of Kuruno Jifukuji 久留野地福寺, *matsuji* 末寺 or branch-temple located at the foot of the mountain, where the icons from his temple, together with some of the statues from Tenpōrinji, had been relocated in 1869 (Ōya 1988, 169). Such presence of different voices on the mountain in early Meiji, shows the polyphonic character of Katsuragi Shugen discourse even during the period of epochal transformations triggered by the edicts.

1997), then the chief priest of the Shinto shrine, underwent formal initiation at the Shingon temple Daigoji Sanbōin 醍醐寺三宝院. He re-established Tenpōrinji temple in 1950 and became probably the first Shinto priest in modern times to be at the same time the head of a Buddhist temple and a Shinto shrine (Katsuragi and Ōya 1988, 187–88). His two sons became respectively the abbot of Tenpōrinji and the chief priest of Katsuragi shrine, and the Buddhist ramification of his family continued, through his son Takehiko 武彦 (1942–2001) and his grandson Kōryū, current abbot of the Tenpōrinji.

6 The semiotics of the natural world: Sacred narratives in translation

One of the narratives contemporary ascetics often refer to when discussing the origin of the pilgrimage route is the aforementioned *Shozan engi* (late twelfth century) which states:

Ritual procedure of the mansions: under the steps walked by En no Gyōja there are 69.384 characters. Walking without distracting thoughts, following the five sutra practices,⁹ and raising the ten vows, these are the mountains where he practiced asceticism with single-minded determination (*NST* 20:117, translation mine).¹⁰

This passage establishes an exact correspondence between the number of Chinese characters contained in the *Lotus Sutra* (69.384) and the number of steps that En no Gyōja undertook to complete the pilgrimage. In other words, the written text becomes the mountain and the mountain becomes a spatial text not to be ‘read’, but *walked* by the ascetics, following the steps of the legendary founder, according to what Fontanille (2007, 131–32) describes as three interrelated dimensions of meaning: *cognitive* (the ascetic knows what to see), *pragmatic* (he can make the pilgrimage) and *affective* (he can control emotions according to a precise ritual and bodily language—see above “without distracting thoughts,”

⁹ The text mentions the “five kinds of monastic practice” (*goshu hōshi gyō* 五種法師行). These are five modes of ritual activity here associated with the *Lotus Sutra*, namely learning, reading, recitation, explanation and transcription.

¹⁰ 宿の次第。行者の歩み歩みたまふ御足の下に、六万九千三百八十四字あり。散じて余念乱心なし。五種の法師行じて十願を立て、発行し給ふ所の峯なり。The original *kanbun* text is “宿次第く行者歩々御足下、六万九千三百八十四字、散無余念乱心、五種法師行立十願発行給所之峯也” (*NST* 20: 353). On *Shozan engi*, see Kawasaki (2005), Roth Al Eid (2014) and Grapard (1982).

or “he practiced asceticism with single-minded determination”). Moreover, this may be an example of *inter-semiotic translation*—defined by Jakobson (1959) as translation from one semiotic system to another—from the written language of the sutra to a *semiotics of the natural world* (Greimas and Courtés 1982, 374–75), namely the spatial landscape of the mountains. Using the term *translation*, we wish to emphasize that the content of the verbal text is not ‘read’ in the mountain but is rather *perceived* through the landscape’s phenomenological and “sensible qualities” (375), i.e., experienced through the *mediation* of the mountain’s natural elements and of the perceiving body of the practitioner who walks throughout it.

Therefore, the figure of En no Gyōja plays here the role of *mediator* (Latour 2005, 39) between the practitioner and the Katsuragi territory, in which the teachings of the Buddha are inscribed word by word, character by character. These narratives are continuously brought back to memory today, both orally and through a re-enactment of the founder’s ritual actions, as we can see from the following ethnosemiotic analysis.

7 Texts, bodies, places and temporalities

Space, from a semiotic point of view, is inextricably related not only to history, as mentioned before, but also to different forms of temporality, which may be either inscribed into geographical landmarks—as argued by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 7) with his concept of *chronotope*—or produced by actors through different kinds of action, the most prominent of which is without doubt *ritual*. During the ritual performed nowadays at the twenty-eight sutra mounds, Katsuragi ascetics chant a series of mantras and sutras, accompanied by the rhythmic shaking of *shakujō* 錫杖 (short Buddhist staff provided with six metal rings on top). The whole ceremony is temporally demarked by the sound of *horagai* 法螺貝 conch shells at the beginning and at the end, and lasts for about eight minutes. Such ritual is preceded or ended by five protective mudrās and mantras called *goshinbō* 護身法 performed before the first and after the last ceremony enacted during the day at the pilgrimage spots, only by practitioners who received ascetic initiation (*yamabushi tokudo girei* 山伏得度儀礼).¹¹

The main prayer offered is the *Heart Wisdom Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō* 般若心經). Often, in this as in other services, specific deities from Katsuragi are also invoked, reflexively mentioning in this way the name of the places *and* of the lead-

¹¹ See Sawa (2008, 215) for an explanation of *goshinbō* esoteric practice.

er's family ("Katsuragi" 葛城), which share the same designation.¹² This invocation of a sacred place-name that coincides with the leader's family name has the effect of reinforcing the bond between the group and the leader implicitly referred to; but it also reinforces a 'kinship' relation between the group and the landscape itself. The abbot belongs in fact to the Katsuragi household, which has been running the Tenpōrinji temple throughout the centuries and which claims to be direct descendant of the ancient local clan Kazuraki 葛城 from the same area (Miyake 1986, 61; Kashibashi Nijōsan Hakubutsukan 1999, 8; KK: 550).¹³ This double isotopy (Greimas and Courtés 1982, 163–65), or co-presence of two trails of meaning activated by the invocation of the name Katsuragi, connects therefore people and places together, highlighting the deep historical relation between the leader's ancestors, the temple and the sacred mountains.

Moreover, rhythmic intensification, use of tools and positions in space, play a crucial role during the ritual, with the practitioners *facing the mound* where the *Lotus Sutra* chapter is venerated (an important semiotic aspect which will be analyzed in detail below). The act of praying in front of sacred scriptures containing the Word of the Buddha, considering them as main icons of worship, has been considered standard Buddhist practice in Japan for a long time (Moerman 2007, 252). For the Shugen practitioners in particular, the sutra mound may be considered as an *object of value*, a term used in semiotics to indicate specific targets of action—human or nonhuman actors, namely people, deities, animals, things or portions of space playing the actantial role of "object"—which are phenomenologically invested with values by the acting subjects (Greimas 1987b, 84–105). Portions of space where sacred scriptures have been buried, are in fact charged with religious meanings by the ascetics, becoming objects of worship, i.e., objects of value actively constructed by the practitioners. However, the values invested on the sutra chapters, enable the semiotic construction of sutra mounds not as inert things, but as *bodies*.

The *Lotus Sutra* itself provides justification for this practice, somehow clarifying to the readers, as a sort of manual of instructions, the way the scripture itself should be venerated, by stating:

12 For example, when reciting the prayer "Adoration to the Seven Great Womb [Maṇḍala] Divine Children of Katsuragi (*Namu Katsuragi shichidai taizō dōji* 南無葛城七大胎藏童子)."

13 For the early history of the Kazuraki clan, intertwined with mytho-historical chronicles from *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, see Tsukaguchi (1993) and Kitatani (1988, 249–52). For some of the narratives related to the Kazuraki clan in the two ancient chronicles, see Heldt (2014, 133–34) and Aston (1972, 242).

Whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a stupa of seven jewels [...] There is no need to even lodge a *śarīra* [corporeal relic of the Buddha] in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One [i.e., the Buddha himself] (*T* 9.262.31b; Hurvitz 1976, 178).¹⁴

In this and other passages,¹⁵ the *Lotus Sutra* presents itself as corporal relic of the Buddha. It is striking that in well-documented Buddhist practices across Asia, relics and religious icons have been envisaged for centuries, in a clear nonrepresentational and immanentist move, as concrete material presence of the body of the Buddha on earth, rather than symbols or representations of the sacred (Sharf and Sharf 2001; Sharf 1999; Faure 1998).¹⁶ The same devotional attitude is shared by ascetic practitioners in Katsuragi, who ritually engage with the sutra mounds, in the same way in which they perform prayers, chants and mantric powerful ritual formulas in front of other Buddhist icons.

We should however note that a specific form of temporality had also been previously inscribed in the *materiality* of mound by the act of burying the Buddhist scripture itself, a temporality which is no longer considered relevant in the contemporary practice. Katsuragi and the nearby mountain areas of Ōmine 大峰 and Kumano 熊野, had been in fact in classical time, in particular between the tenth and the twelfth century, the site for an intensive activity of sutra burial called *maikyō* 埋經 (“sutra burial”), performed by aristocratic people for eschatological and millenarian purposes (Miyake 1986, 62; Seki 1999; Sekine 1968; Moerman 2007). In a time when a discourse about the End of the Dharma (*mappō* 末法)—a period of world degeneration when Buddha’s teachings are no longer understood—was permeating the life of aristocrats and monks alike, powerful court politicians and Emperors commissioned and even engaged themselves in copying and burying a great number of sutras, including especially the *Lotus Sutra*. In so doing, they were following the teaching that through this practice they could preserve the Buddhist Law, until the arrival of the next Buddha Maitreya (Jpn. Miroku 弥勒), some 5.67 billion years in the future. Also, through the practice of sutra burial, aristocrats and monks could achieve enough merits to be reborn in Maitreya’s paradise (Tuṣita, Jpn. Tosotsu 兜率). Sutra tubes and sutra mounds thus worked as time-capsules, introducing a future temporality in

14 Ch. 23 “Bhaiṣajyarāja.”

15 The text also praises “who shall receive and keep, read and recite, explain, or copy in writing a single verse of the *Scripture of the Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, or who will look with veneration on a roll of this scripture as if it were the Buddha himself” (*T* 9.262.31b; Hurvitz 1976, 178).

16 See Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007) for other examples of nonrepresentational approaches to materiality, coming from ethnographic research.

the sacred landscape of the pilgrimage. However, differently from these premodern concerns for the future, embedded in material practices expressing the anxieties and hopes of aristocrat people, time undergoes a radical process of collapse during the contemporary rituals.

8 Ritual enunciation of space

As mentioned above, the practitioners and the sutra mound face one another in the ritual situation—using a term of Landowski (1989), in the “semiotic context”—establishing a *relation of co-presence* (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Practitioners facing the sutra mound during the ritual performance. Courtesy of Tatsuma Padoan.

Both are characterized by what Hammad (2006, 75–115) calls “immanent referential” (*référentiel immanent*). These are centers of reference inscribed in humans, things, architectural elements and other nonhuman actors, orienting spatial directions around them according to topological schemes and axial systems (e.g., front/back, up/down, right/left, etc.), a phenomenon also observed by Lotman (2001) in his analysis of artistic space in Gogol. Positions of people and things in space, would be related to the mutual intersection of their immanent

referential, according to the form of interaction prescribed, or the course of action followed (Hammad 2006, 82–83). In other words, when people approach a material object or a particularly marked place, especially in ritual situations (but often in other circumstances too), they need to be aware of the immanent referential inscribed in it, whether for example a pot or tray in a *Cha no yu* Tea Ceremony should be handled from a particular side (2006, 84–85), or an altar should be oriented towards east, with the shaman, patient and audience standing behind it, as in the Maya exorcism ritual in Yukatán analyzed in a similar way by William Hanks (1996).¹⁷ If we apply this to the ritual stage performed in Katsuragi, we can see how practitioners, icons and mounds have all their centers of reference in the space and how places inscribed with the *Lotus Sutra* are worshipped from a particular spatial position, as they have to be orientated towards the Shugen ascetics (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Immanent referential embedded in the sutra mound as *topos*.

Such referential embedded in the sutra mounds makes them the ‘zero point’ *topos* around which space and ritual action are deictically structured, as an immanent ‘I’ according to which a co-present ‘you’ (the ascetics) and a lateral

¹⁷ See also the Japanese funeral ritual analysed by Bachnik (1995) in terms of *uchi/soto* (inside/outside) and *omote/ura* (front/back) deictic anchoring, for another parallel example.

‘them’ (human bystanders or deities evoked through mantras) are spatially rearranged. Ritual thus works as a *concerted conversation*, in which different nonhuman actors are *brought together* and *put into motion* by the enunciation of space.¹⁸ Space is here not only produced by actions, but it can actually become a producer of actions itself, an acting subject or *topos* (a “spatial actant,” following Hammad 2002) eliciting a response from the practitioners, prompting their volitions and obligations to perform the ritual.

If *in presentia*, as immanent referentials, we can observe ascetics and mound in mutual relation, *in absentia* we instead have a second couple of elements, consisting in the figure of the founder En no Gyōja and in the *Lotus Sutra* considered as relic and Body of the Buddha, according to the following homologation:

Ascetics : Mound :: En no Gyōja : Body of the Buddha

Figure 3: Homologation between terms *in presentia* and *in absentia*.

However, what occurs through this ritual is actually a *presentification* of the second couple of terms within the first one. A homological pattern or semi-symbolic relation, of the kind used for example by Lévi-Strauss (1966) to describe relations between totems and social groups, is not explanatory enough in order to analyse this process. Practitioners in fact constantly stress the idea that En no Gyōja and the Buddha left their concrete *traces* on those mountains. Moreover, En no Gyōja often emerges as a strong simulacrum of identification for them, not only as a devotional figure, but also as *exemplar* to be embodied while praying and walking. Quite a few members of the group, besides following ordinary ritual activities in the Tsukasakō, also make pilgrimages dedicated to the life of En no Gyōja and to the sacred sites he allegedly visited in Japan. Moreover, some of them pursued this model to such an extent that a physical resemblance with the iconographic image of the founder was also sought—as pointed out by some participants while talking about a member, whose look ended up being so similar to that of En no Gyōja, because he was the one who had climbed and practiced in sacred peaks for the highest number of times in the group. What in the interviews they describe in terms of an *immediate* religious experience, is expressed

18 Some of the Buddhist deities evoked through mantras are Hōki Bosatsu, Zaō Gongen 藏王権現, Fudō Myōō 不動明王, the Seven Great Womb Divine Children of Katsuragi and the Eight Great Vajra Divine Children of Ōmine.

in ritual through the *mediation* of these two simulacra of identification, En no Gyōja and the Buddha's Body:



Figure 4: Apparatus of enunciation.

We could consider this as an *apparatus of enunciation*, namely a way of constructing subjectivities into the ritual discourse. We might more precisely define this operation, in semiotic terms, as a “shifting in” or *engagement* (Greimas and Courtés 1982, 100–2) corresponding, on one side, to the embodiment of the founder's identity by the practitioners, and on the other side, to the identification of the Buddha's Body with the landscape (the sutra mound or *topos*, which is the *actor* to whom the prayers are offered). Such operation is realized *through* the ritual activation and presentification of the traces left by the two virtual terms *in absentia*.

It is worth noting here, that Latour (2013a, 2001) describes religious enunciation as a way of realizing a relation of presence, as an instauration of co-presence between the enunciators, *deictically* defined by *we/here/now*. In other words, he sees religious enunciation as a way to set a form of *simultaneity* of bodies. Every time religious enunciation occurs, the presence of enunciators is re-actualized and renovated. Such positions of enunciators may be occupied by both human and nonhuman actors. This might be quite an accurate description of what also occurs in this ritual in Katsuragi. Cosmological actors, times and spaces are actually re-actualized and played out, reconfigured through patterned action. If we look at the rituals of Tsukasakō, soteriological effects are indeed produced by a specific mode of interaction, which sets up a relation of co-presence between humans and deities. Such *presentification* is achieved through *rhythm*, through voice, prosodic elements and tools, all activated by the body.

According to Leroi-Gourhan (1993) in fact, rhythm is not only sound, but involves deeply somatic, visceral sensorimotor mechanisms, thus producing a common bodily sensory field. Rhythm synchronizes a bodily presence, becoming a mechanism of interaction between practitioners and deities. From a semiotic point of view, *ritual becomes a way to mobilize space* through a specific form of interaction, connected to a particular manipulation of time: namely, a ritual interaction between human and nonhuman bodies (*topoi*) facing each other,

bringing the past into the present, through an operation of presentification and synchronization.

9 Conclusion

Either considering the sutra mound as object of value—the target of ritual action—or as acting subject—a topological body prescribing ritual acts—the *Lotus Sutra* is materially buried and inscribed in the mountains, it is not just the representation of a transcendent or remote reality these practitioners think about or imagine. The *Sutra*, considered as Body of the Buddha, is embedded in the natural landscape of the mountain and can only be grasped through the experience of the ascetic practice. This claim is supported not only by the fact that the revivalist ascetics themselves were always very keen to stress the importance of experiencing the practice and the mountain through their body and affectivity (often using expressions like *ogamu kimochi*, or “mood to pray,” and *mi ni tsukeru*, or “learning through the body”), but also by the idea that gods and Buddhas live in the landscape (an idea which I found was not commonly shared by tourists or hikers). The body of the practitioners plays the role of *great translator* in the Katsuragi pilgrimage, creating a specific *semiotics of the natural world* by realizing—as we have seen in the analysis of the ritual—the presence of the Buddha. And yet, such ritual activities produce *spaces* and *times*, which overlap with other ones, including the premodern mythological narratives, the mountain trails as differently practiced by hikers and tourists and different pilgrimages made by ascetic groups in competition with each other.

To conclude, we have seen that history, from a semiotic perspective, is not to be considered as a hard timeline of reality, running below signs, meanings, texts and discourses. History, especially in the case of religious revivalist movements, is instead understood as a strategy of memory. We need to recall what anthropologist Michael Lambek (2003, 212) said about the entangled relation between history and memory: “Memory is history located in relatively subjective space; history is memory located in relatively objectified space. History is memory inscribed, codified, authorized; memory is history embodied, imagined, enacted, enlivened.” Then, together with a clear-cut division between history and memory, a strong demarcation too, between “writers of history” and those experiencing it as “living memory,” soon falls apart. What we call history is in fact, following De Certeau (1988), inevitably constructed by both the scholars and the people they are studying. But as we have seen, history is also constantly included, integrated into a spatial semiotics, into a space constituted by multiple layers of cultural texts originated in the past. All these modes of experience compose a

multiple, multifaceted landscape, which we may end up calling the “mountains of Katsuragi.”

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