

## In Japan



Japanese gods and nature spirits, called kami, inhabit or attach to striking natural locations (a large rock, a waterfall) and to institutions (a village, a company, a family). Originally their presence was signified by a rope surrounding an object, marking a sacred space. Now they have shrines, which can be as small as a box the size of a bird house nailed to a tree by a waterfall, or as large as a huge complex of buildings. They are given offerings of rice and other foods, and people ask them for help with seasonal fertility, and with mundane issues such as high school examinations and marital problems. The kami are arranged in a hierarchy depending on the importance of their location or institution. Every neighborhood in Tokyo, or village in the countryside, has its own shrine, and there are big regional and national shrines.

## Koto-ku, Tokyo



When the local spirit at a neighborhood shrine appeared to me she said that she was a little tired of having to look out at the dull architecture of the surrounding buildings, so couldn't I do something to spruce them up. I said that as a foreigner I didn't think I would have much leverage. She said that the native inhabitants were so busy asking for favors when they came by that she never had a chance to get a word in about the architectural quality of her neighborhood.



"You have no idea what it's like to have to spend your time worrying about traffic tickets and high school examinations -- every day fifteen more examinations, and as the neighborhood gentrifies the new people keep bringing more requests about their cars." "It's not easy," she said, "when you were brought up to be concerned about crops and fishing, and when they didn't bother you much except for the festival days." "On the other hand," she admitted, "I suppose that without the examinations and the traffic accidents I'd have nothing to do but sit and look at those dreadful

concrete buildings. You should have seen this place when it was a seaside village: waves, grasses waving in the wind, children playing around the midden, boats with shining sails out in the bay where there is all that ugly landfill now. We nature deities are not really suited to a hectic urban life."

I pointed out that the inhabitants of the fishing village originally on this spot had not lived as long or healthily as their modern descendants. "Look around you," she said, "is this living? Packing into that subway or getting stalled on that hideous highway on stilts? And where are the natural rhythms and cycles of life in this city that never sleeps? We fertility gods know a lot about natural cycles."

You're missing my point, I replied, which is that it is important for people to get beyond natural cycles and become more self-aware.

"Sure," she scoffed, "modern self-development and self-assertion. Where does it get you? Rushing around, no community ties -- even here they are weaker than they were -- profit and greed."

Modern self-development can get you, I argued, to a place where natural cycles are still honored but no longer dominate, a place where community can reconstruct itself to be fairer and easier, but still supportive.

"And can you show me that place?" she asked?

No, but we're working on it, I replied.

"That's just the point," she said, "some of you are working on it, but a lot of my people are just suffering from the current state of things around here. And even if you achieved what you are trying to do, would they be part of it? What would they have to do? Move to the suburbs?"

## **Ebisu**



The kami in the shrine at the big downtown Tokyo redevelopment called Ebisu Garden Place told me that he didn't get much attention now that the new development had surrounded his shrine. "Tourists and shoppers may drop by," he said, "but their requests are usually aimed at other localities, so I pass them up the hierarchy. Life is pretty quiet here now."

He did receive visits from a few office workers and shop personnel, whose requests were mostly about office politics. Those he could look into on his own. "Their problems are like the difficulties the agricultural laborers around here used to have with their village co-workers or authorities, so I feel at home dealing with those requests."

I said something about social grammars reproducing themselves even as they alter, and he agreed that he found those continuities comforting. "Still," he added, "they have rather messed up the environment around here." He didn't particularly like the new buildings.



"Imagine," he said, "your shrine has been rooted to the earth for centuries, so first they build subways to shake you up, then they lift your shrine on top of these gloomy levels of parking and surround you with office towers. It's not as bad for me as for the kami of the shrines they put on top of tall buildings, but it's unsettling."

I said that maybe he should adapt to the mobility and linkage of the contemporary world. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked, "become a tourist?"