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maggio **2023**

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**Monarchia e arcana
imperii. Corpo,
simboli, liturgie**

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Monarchia
e arcana imperii.
Corpo, simboli,
liturgie

a cura di Monica Centanni e Fabrizio Lollini



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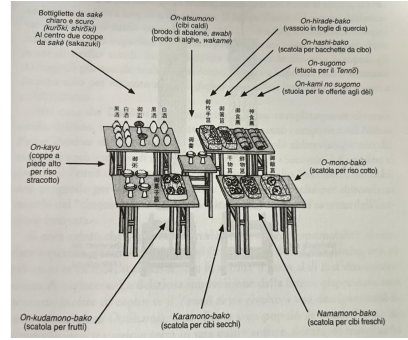
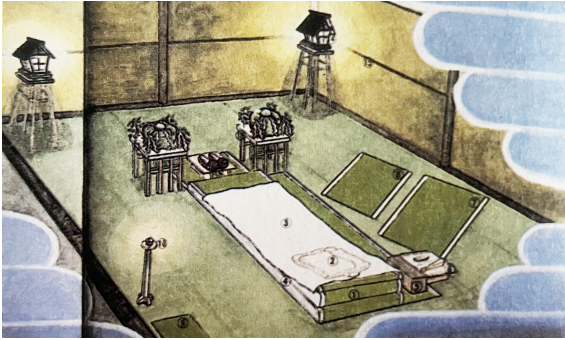
The Man Who Wondered About The Kingship of Tennō

Kurt W. Forster



Fosco Maraini, reflex camera in hand, with Bernard Berenson at I Tatti (unknown date in the 1950s). From the Photo Archive of Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

Fosco Maraini (1912-2004) shares a sense of adventure and an intrepid appetite for living in other cultures with the generation of great ethnologists from Franz Boas to his numerous students – among them Gladys A. Reichard (1893-1955) who impressed Aby Warburg in the last year of his life – and to Bronislaw Malinovsky who explored the life of little-known tribes in distant lands rather than just record their languages and myths as was the preoccupation of

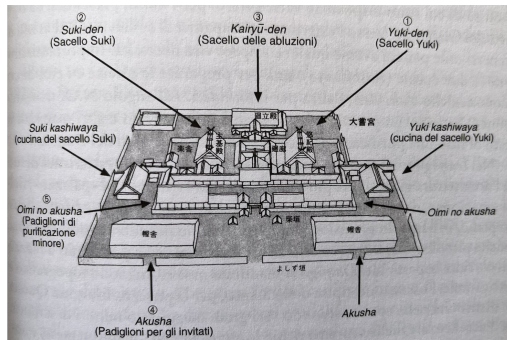


Interior of the *Yuki-den* and the symbolic offering of food stuff inside the *Yuki-den* according to Okada Shoji. Published in the journal “*Shukan Yomiuri*”, 27 November 1990 and in Maraini [1995] 2003.

Claude Lévy-Strauss (See Forster 2022,112, 115). The latter’s scholarship was adventurous in its own way and enormously influential, to the point of displacing much of the earlier ethics in the European perception of so-called primitive societies whose life was decanted through artists like Paul Gauguin and popular household goods in the popular style of *japonisme*.

Maraini’s long residence in Japan, from the 1930s through WWII, including two years of confinement in a concentration camp, made him an unflinching observer of the ‘other’, suddenly turned enemy, and obliged him to see himself as ‘other’ than the nipponophile Italian he had become. As a powerless prisoner, he demonstrated to the camp commandant his own dignity and resilience with an act that is at once Japanese in its calculated violence and ancient Italian in its ethical discipline à la Mucius Scaevola by demonstrably cutting off his own finger before him.

After his exploration of Tibet and fresh accounts of life in Japan (*Ore giapponesi*, 1957), Maraini seized the occasion of the end of emperor (or better Tennō) Hirohito’s era to follow closely the preparations for the transit of power to his successor in 1989-1990, only the third such succession to occur in the twentieth century (Taishō, 1912; Shōwa, 1926). Akihito Heisei’s ascension to the throne after the defeat of the island nation, the atomic bombs on two of its cities, and the earth-shaking disruptions in life assumed an incomparable importance for a culture that continued to intrigue by its blend of archaic ways of conduct and modern, even hypermodern, developments in industry. Every aspect of Japanese kingship, every thread of its tenuous and yet immemorial tradition came under scrutiny in midst of political strife and convulsive social change, because its enactment promised to restore the celestial origin of authority. “Stiamo muovendoci,” demurs Maraini, “in un campo pieno di oscurità, incertezze, supposizioni, ipotesi contrapposte, fantasie.” (Maraini [1995] 2003, 13). The preparations for the few days of the key ceremony in 1990 not only required months but also the construction – entirely in wood, straw and textiles, without a single nail – of a temporary palace in the Shin-to tradition. Its plan is abstract and ceremonial, serving solely the initiation of the new era. Thereafter it is completely dismantled. After the new emperor has spent an initiatory night in



Plan of the Daijōkyū, the sacred village of ceremonial huts built in an area of the imperial park at the center of Tokyo, for the ritual of Daijō-sai (22-23 nov. 1990). The Daijōkyū was formed by 39 wooden buildings, covered by combed straw, and lined with white silk, and occupied approximately one hectare of terrain. (Translated from Maraini [1995] 2003)

the *sanctum sanctorum*, he emerges as the Tennō. During the night he rests on a futon-like bed emplaced in a symbolic topography of objects that stake out the domains from which he draws his powers. The cultivation of rice, the source of sustenance for the Japanese people and its fermentation for sake, enters, as an archaic practice, into an otherwise rarified festival, as does the Shinto construction of the entire complex, jointly they affirm the telluric powers of kingship.

Maraini draws on Carmen Blacker's study of the Daijō-sai, the curious blending of harvest festival and the transition of power at the heart of Japanese kingship, when she reminds observers of the

meravigliosa vivezza, [che] quasi costituisce una sorta di fossile spirituale, uno dei riti più complessi e misteriosi a consacrare un sovrano, tra quanti ne siano potuti sopravvivere dal mondo antico: il Daijō-sai è un cosmos, un'enciclopedia, un archivio, una geologia dello spirito. (Maraini [1995] 2003, 83).

What feels remote and difficult to understand is precisely what constitutes the fullness of a rite in which people can participate and enjoy many moments, acts, costumes and foods, without requiring arcane knowledge or instruction: "È uno di quei rari attimi in cui s'uniscono, si fondono, o fingono di fondersi, per la gioia del pubblico, le apparenze e la sostanza." (Maraini [1995] 2003, 33).

The symbolic meaning of the ascent to the throne remains however open to infinite speculation arising from the Daijōkyū, or sacred village, extending from the wood joinery by which posts, beams, and roofs are invisibly and mysteriously joined to the layout of the *sanctorum* and its symbolic representation of the powers that sustain kingship. The colorful costumes, the ritual actions of those who handle rice, and, finally, the sacred Yuki-den where foodstuff in its various dry or liquid states composes a miniature landscape on small tables constitute a scalar display of exquisite beauty. The cell-like Daijōkyū is patterned into a spare but intricate



Detail of the secret village with the roof of the Yuki-den. Note the female cross on the roof beam.

landscape of objects connecting distant references with miniature tokens so that their nature may be perceived and sensed in other than logical terms. The scale and neatness of these displays with their allusions to harvest, the centrality of the bed and its nighttime occupation evoke fertility and abundance. Maraini caps these speculations with an anecdote from the VI-llth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Studies held in Tokyo in 1968, where an American anthropologist delicately waffled on the possible significance of such a set-up, when, “una voce alta, sicura” was heard egging the reluctant speaker on with

“*go ahead professor!* Sì, professore, dica francamente ierogamia [...] Sono duemila anni che discutiamo in famiglia di questa straordinaria faccenda.” Tutti ci voltammo incuriositi. [...] Vedemmo un signore bassetto sulla cinquantina, vestito piuttosto trasandatamente all’occidentale, occhialuto, dall’aria accademica, sorridente, prodigiosamente sicuro di sé. Era il principe Mikasa, fratello minore del Tennō d’allora, noto studioso di archeologia e d’antropologia culturale del Medio Oriente (Maraini [1995] 2003, 93).

I was moved to take up Fosco Maraini’s book *Àgape celeste. I riti di consacrazione del sovrano giapponese* ([1995] 2003) by the early flowering of the Kyoto cherry tree I planted in the patio of my New York apartment, whilst I move into a smaller studio space in Brooklyn where a *tansu*, a stepped cupboard used to reach the attic of a Japanese house, serves to view various woodcuts of the Tokaido road, an unending exercise that recalls the poet Bashō’s Haikus and strengthens my resolve to think of life as an uncertain journey, revealing in its humble and unpredictable instances the fragile beauty of timeless moments, though they may be tinged with melancholy as was the end of the year by Arata Isozaki’s departure (see my obituary in *Arquitectura Viva*, 251 (2023) 47-49).

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English abstract

This contribution delves into Italian ethnographer Fosco Maraini's unique explorations of various cultures, with an emphasis on his profound understanding of Japanese society. His experiences culminated in the careful documentation of Japan's regal power transition in *Agape celeste. I riti di consacrazione del sovrano giapponese*, capturing the intriguing interplay of tradition and modernity. His intricate descriptions of the *Daijosai* ceremony, its symbolic references, and the *Daijōgū*'s significance provide an enriching panorama of Japanese kingship, showcasing a deep cultural insight and connection with the divine.

keywords | Fosco Maraini; Japanese enthronement ; Agape celeste.



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