

SEEKING THE HEART OF *SŌMOKUTŌ*

During my term in office as president of Yamagata University, I have been striving hard to realize our university's guiding philosophy of 'Harmonious Existence Between Nature and Human Beings'. Some would claim that the breakdown of morals we are witnessing in Japan reflects the death throes of a society which has long held dear the principle of material competition. The new world of the 21st century requires a new paradigm which transcends such competitive principles. Viewed in this light, I believe Yamagata University's guiding philosophy of 'Harmonious Existence Between Nature and Human Beings' may be regarded as just such a new paradigm. To paraphrase Yoshinori YASUDA, author of "Nippon yo, Mori no bunka-kokka tare", Japan, a nation of agriculturalists, has envisioned its civilization as being in harmony with nature, and thus should be the messenger of such a new paradigm.

Yamagata Prefecture is the home of *sōmokutō*, erected in homage to plants and trees, and as such is eminently suitable as a standard bearer for the philosophy of 'Harmonious Existence Between Nature and Human Beings'. Chitose Sakae has been seeking to put this philosophy into practice through raising new *sōmokutō* for the 21st century. Let's now listen to his lecture. Mr Chitose, please.

***Somokuto* – memorializing the spirits of trees and plants**

I first came across *somokuto*, stone monuments dedicated to trees and plants which had been cut down, many years ago at the Yamagata Prefectural Museum, in a report written by its former head, Yoshimi Yuki. As an architect, I have a close relationship to trees and timber, and so when I read the report I felt moved by the sympathy felt by people of old for the spirits of trees.

According to the report, there are 58 *somokuto* to be found in the Okitama region in southern Yamagata, centred on Yonezawa and the districts of Kawanishi and Iide. They date from the 1770s through to the latest, built in 1981. A later investigation undertaken by Jun'ichi Funabashi found 94 scattered throughout the prefecture, and recent surveys made nation-wide have uncovered a total of 101, including ones at the temple of Sanzen'in in Ohara, near Kyoto, and a number in the city itself. They are

inscribed variously “somokuto” (literally, grass-and-tree monument), “somoku kuyoto” (literally, grass-and-tree memorial) and “somoku kokudo jukkai jobutsu” (literally, grasses and trees, mountains and rivers, all attain buddhahood).

There are varying explanations about why these monuments were first erected. One is that people whose livelihood was derived from trees and plants expressed their gratitude in this way, memorializing the spirits of vegetation when they cut down the trees. Another says that *somokuto* are erected when timber is cut to rebuild a house destroyed by fire. The practice may also be a kind of spirit-pacification: those who cut down trees in the forests or who transport the lumber down rivers may easily find themselves in dangerous situations or be involved in natural disasters, which they fear as curses sent by the spirits of the trees they have cut down.

There are also a number of theories why there should be so many *somokuto* in the Okitama region. Okitama was the heartland of the Yonezawa domain, whose lord Uesugi Yozan (1751-1822), is said to have respected trees and plants, and whose clan, the Uesugi, had close ties with the Shingon Buddhism of Mt Koya.

In some places *somokuto* and Mt Yudono stele stand side by side, suggesting the influence of the Yudono cult. Mt Yudono is considered the inner precinct of the Three Mountains of Dewa (Dewa Sanzan) and is believed to be sacred not only by those dwelling in Yamagata prefecture but by people throughout the whole of eastern Japan. There are in fact over 500 Mt Yudono stele in the Okitama region alone. At the end of the seventeenth century, Mt Yudono and Mt Haguro, the centre of Haguro Shugendo, were involved in an acrimonious dispute concerning rights to perform ritual at Gassan and Mt Yudono, and thereafter the temples associated with Mt Yudono retained their identity as centres of Shingon esoteric practices. In his *Unjigi* (On the syllable *hum*), the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan, Kukai (774-835) wrote that since even grasses and trees have the potentiality to gain buddhahood, how much more so is it for human beings. This is the basis, I believe, for the construction of the *somokuto*. In Tendai ideas about innate enlightenment (*hongaku*) too there is the expression we noted above, “grasses and trees, mountains and rivers, all attain buddhahood”. This represents a fusion of the esotericization of Tendai thought and Japanese natural conditions, which explains why it was used as

an inscription.

On the hillside opposite Yamadera (Risshakuji), the municipality of Yamagata has erected a museum to the poet Matsuo Basho, alongside which is a public facility called Yamadera Fuga-no-kuni, whose construction I was in charge of. When preparing the ground for the building, inevitably some trees had to be cut down. With the permission of the owner, I erected a *somokuto* in the grounds to memorialize the spirits of those trees, and beside it there is an information board explaining its significance, written by the philosopher Takeshi Umehara.

Today, as environmental destruction continues apace throughout the world, the continued existence of the human race has been called into question. Japan is no exception when it comes to cutting down forests and destroying the natural environment. Why is it that the Japanese, with their vaunted veneration of nature, should show such little concern about its destruction? People say that this arises from the rationalism of modern society and the value placed on science and technology, and also from materialism and an over-riding concern for economic progress. However, at root, I think that we have lost our sense of awe for the sacredness of nature.

If we consider that the *somokuto* developed out of a combination of animistic ideas, in terms of a love for trees and plants and a feeling of gratitude to their spirits, and of manaistic thought, the awe felt in the face of the spiritual power of nature, we have to realize what an important spiritual and cultural heritage they represent. I fervently hope that such an understanding will be of use in the movement to preserve the world environment, particularly in terms of forests and vegetation.

What is a *somokuto*?

By Takeshi Umehara

When I heard that there were many *somokuto* in Yamagata prefecture, I could not help but be moved. They hardly exist in the area round Kyoto and Osaka, where I live, and they seem to embody the notion intrinsic to Japanese Buddhism that “grasses and trees, mountains and rivers, all attain buddhahood” . The fact that this idea developed after Buddhism came to Japan I consider to reflect the Japanese view that divinity is innate in natural phenomena. That there are so many *somokuto* in Yamagata prefecture perhaps tells us that native ideas about the divine nature existing in every tree and every blade of grass live on strongly in this region.

Here a new and modern *somokuto* has been erected. It is not necessarily conspicuous, but I think it a great achievement befitting the times in which we live. Today people all over the world have to be aware how much their lives are connected to the lives of trees and plants, and that they cannot live without this connection. The erection of a new *somokuto* at this time sounds a warning claxon to the modern age.