

## The Age of the Dōtaku

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The dōtaku (bronze bell) was a magical bell that was used in religious worship to ensure good crops. Today the most widely supported theory claims that as the bronze bell was an abode for the spirits of the earth and the grain, it was most important to bury them in the earth. To dig them out of the ground meant to welcome the spirits and worship them

One of the clues in investigating the purposes of the dōtaku is the design carved on the surface of the bell. The cross-band design symbolizes a band that binds objects; the saw teeth pointing to the inside, carved on the fins and the bottom of the bell, symbolize a boundary that prevents the things it contains from escaping.

In a peasant society the spirits in the grain, or the spirits of the rice, are the objects that are prevented from escaping. In general, grain spirits dwell in the first fruits of rice. The first fruit is never eaten; it is kept in the storehouse to serve as a part of the next year's unhulled rice and is sown in the rice paddies in spring. Consequently, a circulation of grain spirits takes place between the rice paddies and the storehouse. But if the grain spirits are not confined in the unhulled rice with care, they will run away or die, causing a poor harvest.

The bronze bell was a magical vessel that confined grain spirits within the unhulled rice, that guarded them from other earthly spirits such as drought, heavy rain and wind. Therefore, the place where the bronze bell was stored was the same place where grain spirits were stored. When grain spirits dwelled in the rice paddies after the sowing before the harvest, the bells might have been kept in the storehouse and taken out to ring when necessary.

Dōtaku are always found in a way that suggests that they were buried intentionally: when a state of emergency occurred that threatened the grain spirits, they were worshipped at places such as boundaries between the villages and the mountains or the sea, which were the entrances from where evil spirits would penetrate. Afterwards they were presented as offerings

Later on, bronze bells were placed or buried near the boundaries of

the Kinki and the Tokai, which resulted from an amalgamation of many communities in the neighboring areas. Dōtaku protected cultivation and later on it was given a role to protect the society itself.