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Shugendō: Pilgrimage and Ritual in a Japanese Folk Religion

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The religion of Shugendō has no shrines and it has no temples. It only has the liminality of the mountains; a space that is viewed in Japan as being ground that only gods, demons, and ghosts may set foot on. But the Yamabushi are not human, gods, or even demons. Instead they are believed to be living Buddhas, rare people that, through practice in the secluded mountains, have become privy to sacred knowledge that has awakened them to their internal Buddha nature, to borrow the words of Kukai, “in this very lifetime”. One of the defining features of Shugendō is the relationship that is formed between man, gods, and nature in the context of the sacred mountain (Grapard, 1994). Another feature found strongly in Shugendō is the role that the Yamabushi play in the communities surrounding their sacred mountains.

Man and the Mountain

An Introduction to Shugendō

A *Yamabushi* (山伏), or “one who lies in the mountains,” is otherwise known as a *Shugenja*¹(修験者), “those with power.” They are practitioners of the religious movement known as *Shugendō* (修験道); a blend of ancient shamanistic Shinto, esoteric Buddhism, Confucianism, and also Daoist principles. Its origins are just as varied as the backgrounds of its practitioners.

Yamabushi are believed to be living Buddhas – rare people that, through practice in the secluded mountains, have become privy to sacred knowledge that has awakened them to their internal Buddha nature. This is the same type of knowledge that Allan Grapard refers to as *geognosis*² in his writings on the Yamabushi and their relationship with the mountains (1994). The geognosis of the Yamabushi gives them a special status in society

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and immunity from the natural, and not so natural, threats of the mountain. As part of their practice they test this immunity with regular pilgrimages into the steep mountain ranges that make up the island of Shikoku and the Mt. Omine ridge located in the central Nara Prefecture of Japan.

One of the defining features of Shugendō is the relationship that is formed between man, gods, and nature in the context of the sacred mountain (Grapard, 1994), and another feature found strongly in Shugendō is the role that the Yamabushi play in the communities surrounding their sacred mountains. A parishioner system has developed over time wherein a single Yamabushi caters to the religious needs of his surrounding villagers. Though the Yamabushi are unique in many ways, the religion still follows similar themes found in all of Japanese religion. According to Byron Earhart (1970) there are six themes that persist: a close relationship with the deities or the *kami* (神), the importance of family both living and dead, the significance of purification rituals and the creation of charms, local Matsuri (festivals), religion that is prevalent in everyday life, and a natural bond between Japanese religion and the nation. The belief that one may become a Buddha through ascetic acts in the mountains has become a main theme among the Yamabushi.

En no Ozunu (En no Gyoja) and Kukai: A short history

A study on Shugendō would be lacking without information on the backgrounds of the two men who are often cited as the founders of Shugendō; En no Ozunu (En no Gyoja) and the esoteric Buddhist master Kukai. Kukai is credited with the founding the Shingon sect of Buddhism whose cosmology and esoteric rituals were drawn heavily on by later Shugendō; while En no Gyoja is credited with having initiated the ascetic lifestyle that practitioners attempt to live by.

The story of En no Gyoja, born En no Ozunu, is one that is both historical and mythical in nature. There is not much to be found about his early life, but there are records of his existence in both the Shoku Nihongi (続日本紀) and the Nihon Ryoiki (日本霊異記). We know that someone by that name was born in 634 and that he was an ascetic and a mystic. He is described as being a practitioner of magic who lived on Mt. Katsuragi and that he was able to command spirits. The Shoku Nihongi gives what little information we have on him. According to the legends passed on among the Shugendō, he was banished on the charge of misusing his powers to force people to do his will, but that it was a false accusation brought on by a jealous god named Hito-koto-nushi. In a later re-telling found in the Nihon Ryoiki, En no Ozunu is treated as a mystical figure who exemplified Buddhist asceticism and Daoist mysticism. According to the legends he withdrew into the mountains and performed austerities to gain magical powers such as flight. He practiced the magical formula of the Kajuku-O (Peacock King Sutra) to gain these powers, which drew the jealousy of Hito-koto-nushi. En no Ozunu was able to magically bind the god, and so he became a Daoist wizard who ascended to Heaven. It was this final effort that earned him the name of En no Gyoja; *Gyoja* of which translates as *ascetic* (Earhart, 1970). However, it is important to note that the facts behind historical events have never been a part of religious faith, as the Kajuku-O did not yet exist in Japan.

Kukai was born in 774 to Lady Tamayori and Saeki Tagimi who were members of a declining aristocracy in Shikoku. The Saeki were a branch of the Otomo clan whose history extends back to the mythological era of gods (Hakeda, 1972). In 778 at the age of fifteen he studied Chinese language and poetry under his uncle, Ato Otari, who was a Confucian scholar. He recognized Kukai's abilities and brought him back to the capitol of Kyoto for

more in-depth study. At eighteen he entered the college there and studied the Confucian curriculum imported from China. By the time he was twenty he became dissatisfied with his studies, resigned from the school and turned to Buddhism.

During this time Emperor Kammu (r.781-806) had come to the conclusion that Buddhism should not have a hand in affairs of the state. He began to work on reinstating all power to the Imperial family. High taxation, forced labor, military conscription, and a forced return to a secular lifestyle was what awaited Buddhist monks who were not attached to a specific temple approved by the Emperor. To combat these issues, Kukai most likely joined a private group such as the one at Hisosan-ji where they practiced Jinenchi-shu (自然地宗), Natural Wisdom School, where recitation of the Aksagarbha mantra was advocated (Abe, 1999). Kukai devoted himself to this mantra and relentlessly recited it. Hakeda (1972) states that this meditational practice is what “enabled him to regain his psychic equilibrium” and his interest in Buddhism arose “not so much from books as it did in the actual experience of meditation.” For Hakeda, this is important to an understanding of Kukai’s religion as a whole. Kukai’s experience is what spurred him into becoming a wandering ascetic. It was this wandering that re-forged his bonds with the natural world and the world of the kami. His time of wandering across the mountains of Japan was punctuated with periods of intensive study in which he rejoined the world for a short time. At the age of twenty four he wrote *Indications* in which he demonstrated the superiority of Buddhism over Confucianism. He also expounded his two strongest beliefs: Self-improvement in the physical form and self-improvement in spiritual ways.

One night, while traversing a steep mountain path, Kukai had a vision in his dreams that the Mahavairocana Sutra, a Buddhist text, was the answer to the doctrine he was searching for. However, the Sutra had only recently arrived in Japan and parts of it were unable to be translated by anyone he knew. He made a request of Emperor Kammu to be allowed to go to China to study. Kukai was chosen as a state-sponsored student in 804 at the age of thirty one (Hakeda, 1972). While in China he met Hui-kuo (Jpn. Keika), who claimed that Kukai was a joyous omen sent to receive his teachings. Kukai received transmittance of all Hui-kuo’s esoteric knowledge and was instructed to return to Japan and teach. He returned with several artifacts and copies of sutras. He had also become fluent in Chinese and could read and write Sanskrit.

During his time away Emperor Saga (r.809-823) had risen to power. He was much more open to Buddhism and was pleased with Kukai. Kukai gained popularity and requested that Emperor Saga grant him Mt. Koya to use as a training ground for his new religion of Shingon Buddhism. He was granted this request in 816 CE (Hakeda, 1972).

Fudo-myō

The Yamabushi follow a variety of Bodhisattva and Buddhas, due in part to their Vajrayana Buddhist background. Though each sect offers homage to varying deity figures, the deity that is found throughout Shugendō is Fudo-myō. Fudo-myō (Skt. Acala) is known as the Immovable One. He converts anger into the salvation of the Buddhas by frightening people into accepting the teachings of Buddhas. His sword works to cut through illusions, and his rope is for binding the demons that haunt humanity. The fire that surrounds his image is meant to “represent the purification of the mind by the burning away of all material desires (Schumacher, 2010).” Because of these associations he became very popular as a strong and rugged image, perfect for traversing the rough terrain of the mountains.

Role of the Yamabushi

Shugendō places a high value on rituals. These rituals cover everything from the mundane, such as the Bee Pacification Ceremony as seen in the film *Shugendō Now*³ (今の修験道), to the exorcism of malevolent spirits that were the cause of physical and emotional distress among the community. Even among other cultures, such as the Ndembu, we see examples of the use of ritual divination to satisfy human curiosity. Among the Ndembu the diviner “regards his task as the practical one of revealing the causes of misfortune or death” (Turner, 1977). In this way, Shugendō is very much a “living” religion. We also cannot ignore the fact that the Yamabushi themselves live in the mountains, places of the gods and of the dead. In this way a Yamabushi is a liminal being that lives between both worlds and so has special access to knowledge to which normal humans cannot be privy.⁴ This distinction of liminality gives the Shugendō a certain amount of mystery (Miyake, 2001). The Yamabushi know that they are different, and they mark themselves as such and are easily recognized as a resource for their parishioners. The Yamabushi are folk magicians, divinatory messengers, and the overseers of demonic exorcism. They were the keepers of Sangaku Shinko (山岳信仰), “mountain worship.” Though the mountain itself is not worshiped, the role of the mountain in early Japanese life is deeply tied in with their cultural development. Early agricultural societies relied on the mountain as the home of the Mountain Goddess (山の神). Stories of Mountain Goddesses, ghosts, and demons led to the collected body of knowledge roughly known as Sangaku Shinko and is not something that can be easily described, but nor can it be ignored. Kishimoto Hideo, at the *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference for the History of Religions* summed up these beliefs: “Mountain worship should certainly be understood in a very wide sense and as a complicated social phenomenon.”

Traditions, Ritual, and Dress

A Yamabushi can be recognized by the distinctive clothing they wear. Like all Japanese pilgrims they wear white robes, white being the color of the dead, and they view themselves as having crossed into the realms of the dead when entering the mountains. While traveling up the mountain they gain spiritual strength, and on returning to the foothills they are seen as being reborn in this world. This ritual of death and rebirth is meant to cleanse the Yamabushi so that he or she can attain Buddha hood. Ritual among the Yamabushi is based on the needs of the parishioners and can include fortune telling, divination, prayers and incantations, exorcism, spells and the creation of charms. Seasonal ceremonies are also common practices. Understanding that Shugendō is a religion of the people is a key feature of Shugendō, and a ceremony or ritual is performed with good reason. To understand these rituals we must first go over the religious implements of the Yamabushi, their use, and their symbolism, before we can continue into the rituals themselves. As Victor Turner once said:

“One has to first consider what kinds of circumstances tend to give rise to ritual performances, for these circumstances probably decide what sort of ritual is performed, and the goals of that ritual largely determine the meaning of the symbols used in it.” (1977)

Turner spent several years studying the symbolism of the Ndembu tribe of Zambia. Divination was performed with a basket filled with several small implements, each with specific meanings, which would be shaken up. The implements that rested at the top of the pile were then read from to answer questions. However, the tools used in ritual were found to change their *implied* meaning depending on the social issues involved and the nature

of the question being asked (Turner, 1977). Ritual implements among the Shugendō and parishioners of the Yamabushi are, like the Ndembu, heavy with symbolism. Each tool has both meaning and purpose. Earhart (1970) and Miyake (2001) both list between sixteen and seventeen tools⁵ that were originally purely Buddhist in nature but were adopted and adapted to mountain practice. Each one has distinct meaning and, much like the Ndembu, these meaning do shift in their implications though it is usually only due to differences amongst the various sect of Shugendō. Earhart lists these implements as such:

1. Tohatsu (頭髮): The wearing of long hair, or clipped hair. This differentiated the Yamabushi as being liminal in nature, “neither priest nor a normal man”. (Miyake, 2001)
2. Tokin (頭襟): A small black hat that wards off poisonous vapors. It is made with twelve folds to symbolize the Buddhist twelve-fold chain of causation.
3. Ayaigasa (綾い笠): A straw hat that protects against sun, rain, and represents being in the womb.
4. Suzukake (篠懸): A distinctive robe that the Yamabushi wear; it originated from lay clothing and developed into four distinct variations and color of significance.
5. Yuigesa (結袈裟): A surplice which features colored tassels that varies according to age, sect, and status.
6. Nenju (Juzu) (数珠): The Buddhist rosary. Traditionally Shugendō uses beads made of bone.
7. Horagai (法螺貝): The conch. Its blowing is compared to Buddha preaching the dharma and is also used to signal other groups when in the mountains. It is the most identifiable item of the Yamabushi.
8. Shakujo (錫杖): The priest’s staff. Derived from the khakkhara of Indian Buddhism, it served as both a walking staff and as a magical tool for protection and exorcism.
9. Oi (笈): A portable altar that is worn on the back; it contains scriptures and ritual tools. It signifies the sad mother.
10. Katabako (肩箱): Shoulder box. It is placed on top of the Oi and signifies the compassionate father.
11. Kongo-zue (金剛): Diamond cane, used for climbing and signifies firmness and wisdom in oneself.
12. Hisshiki (Hikishiki) (引敷): A sitting mat made (ideally) from a lion’s pelt. It hangs from the back of the waist and was used to sit on during mountain travel. It also represented the Yamabushi’s position as “the ruler of nature and lions” (Miyake, 2001).
13. Hiogi (桧扇): A cypress fan used as a badge of status that was first used in the imperial palace and was borrowed by high ranking Shugendō leaders for symbolic use in fanning the fire during fire rituals.
14. Shiba-uchi (芝打): Wood-cutter, a heavy sword used to cut wood for fire rituals and is symbolic of the Buddhist sword that annihilates error.

15. Hashiri-nawa (走縄): A rope used for mountain climbing and to lower members from precipitous heights during confessions of sin.
16. Waraji (草鞋): Straw sandals worn as the pilgrim's footwear.

This grouping is unique to the Yamabushi, especially those of the Haguro sect. Fudo-myō and the local mountain kami are treated as manifestations of the Buddhist divinities and small images of these are carried in the Oi. These ritual implements are used to both remind the Yamabushi of their goal to reach Buddha hood and to perform ritual. Symbolic representations are important because “they give visible form to unknown things, they express in concrete and familiar terms what is hidden and unpredictable. They enable men to domesticate and manipulate wild and wayward forces” (Turner, 1977). One of the more important rituals within Shugendō is the Nyubu (入仏), or “mountain entry”, in which the Yamabushi must first “die” before entering the sacred mountain. The second most important ritual of Shugendō is the Goma (護摩) fire ritual. This ritual harkens back to Brahmanism and the Buddhist origins of India and Hinduism (Sebe, 2004). Both of these rituals have strict rules that must be adhered to and both must begin with the long climb up the mountain.

Climbing the Mountain: Physical and Spiritual Pathways

In *Mountains and their Importance for the Idea of the Otherworld in Japanese Folk Religion*, Ichiro Hori discusses the development of mountain worship over time: “Japan presents to the observer a very complicated mountain worship which has developed along diverse lines and became quite widespread...It is generally agreed that mountains have been objects of worship among many peoples. Their height, their vastness, the strangeness of their terrain often inspire in the human mind an attitude of reverence and adoration” (Hori, 1966). Mountain worship in Japan can be traced back to tribes of hunters that lived on the mountains in the Tohoko region. Earhart refers to them as the Matagari⁶ and he links these tribes with the Shugendō based on several key practices.

The Matagari kept small huts in the mountains where shrines to specific kami were kept. Each hunting group had a tale that linked its lineage to this kami and several rituals evolved around this kami and the seasons that so visually affected the mountain terrain. Some of the rituals that developed included the divination of hunting success, venerating game taken in the hunt, and veneration of both a wooden image of the mountain kami and a stone from a mountain river. Each New Year would begin with the ritual of the first hunt, Kari-zame (狩覚め). Matagari groups were also associated with both the Shingon and Tendai schools of Buddhism. They held beliefs that can be traced to Shinto-ism such as the belief that the mountain kami would speak through a special tree called the yadori-ki (宿り木) “dwelling tree.” This kami was often pictured as a long haired woman seated in the hollow of an old tree. She was believed to practice rites of fire, controlled lightening, and worked the seasons. Despite the sex of the kami restrictions were made on women, menstruation, and childbirth as well as talk on sexual matters. Women were forbidden entrance to the mountain huts and the men were required to rest for one week before returning to the mountain if his wife had just given birth (Earhart, 1970).

Today, only the peak of Mt. Omine⁷ is forbidden to women. However, the Shikoku pilgrimage is a popular option for women. It has no restrictions on sex or age and for some the Shikoku pilgrimage has become a family field trip.

The Upward Spiral: Akinomine

The most famous of the Nyubu ritual, called Akinomine (秋乃峰), takes place during the fall. The Haguro-sect of Shugendō, founded by Nōjo Taishi, is the most active practitioner of this rite today and full descriptions of the rite can be found in many books, most notably in the works by Earhart. It can also be viewed in a recent documentary film titled *Shugen: The Autumn Peak of Haguro Shugendō* in which “the first recording ever of the ascetic training of Shugenja practitioners and the Haguro Shugendō Akinomine ritual (can be viewed) in its entirety” (Kitamura, 2005). This particular pilgrimage is important for two reasons, the first being that, unlike Mt. Omine where women are forbidden to pass beyond a certain point, Mt. Haguro has been fully open to women since 1947. The second is because this pilgrimage is when the novices of Shugendō will be officially initiated into the religion. Before the rituals can be performed, though, the Yamabushi must be cleansed through the ritual act of dying.

Death in the Foot Hills

Every year on August 24th, pilgrims arrive at the Shozennin temple at the foot of Mt. Haguro. They are shown how to properly wear the Shugenja garb and are treated to a small feast. In everyday life they work normal jobs and come here for a wide variety of reasons. Because women are allowed to go all the way up the mountain, more and more women have joined the Haguro sect. In 2003, there were 105 female participants, and twenty-three of them were attending for the first time. One stated that “My work involves acupuncture and eastern medicine. I’ve come here because I want to strengthen my power” (Sekimori, 2003). This is an excellent example of how one woman is seeking out the power of the kami to help boost her own. Women and their special cases will be discussed in a later section.

After the feast the pilgrims participate in a funeral ritual, where at this point they are considered to have died. Behind the curtained area inside the Temple, the Shugendō priest, the Sho-Daisendatsu (将大先達), performs a ritual to transfer their souls into the Oi for protection and to allow them to grow to fruition during the journey. The Heart Sutra is recited and the *horagai* is blown to let the spirits of the mountain know that the pilgrims will soon be on their way into the realm of the dead. All Shugenja wear the *hisskiki* (lions pelt) to symbolize Monju Bosatsu (騎獅文殊), the bodhisattva of enlightened wisdom whose vehicle is the lion (Sekimori, 2003). This is to remind them that they must struggle to receive this wisdom.

The Sho-Daisendatsu is followed by five officials called Sendatsu (先達); the senior of these is called the Tobu-Daisendatsu (頭部大先達). Together they form the ceremonial and symbolic matrix of the entire Akinomine Nyu-bu ritual. These are followed by the Doshi (導師) who helps to instruct the pilgrims in ritual practice. There are several other officers, each wearing a different sacred color (purple, red, green, saffron) that perform various jobs during the pilgrimage. The last officer is the Kari no Sendatsu (下吏の先達), who wears brown and acts as the guide to the sacred places of the mountain. Once the final preparations have been made, night falls over Shozennin and the pilgrims rest. They will not eat again for three days.

Conception in the Mountain

In the morning, the Tobu Daisendatsu wraps a sheet of paper folded to look like a sword and keeps it in his leggings; this is the same type of paper sword placed on the head of the dead at funeral rites and symbolizes the cutting away of life from death. It is also the

sword of Fudo-myō. The Tobu-Daisensatsu wears the ayaigasa and carries the Oi on his back; the Oi is no longer a coffin for the souls. Instead, it now acts as a womb that will nourish the pilgrim's souls (Sekimori, 2003). After everyone has formed a line, the seniors in front of the novices, they then travel to the nearby Koganedo Temple (黄金堂寺). Once there they are allowed to rest for a moment before a long pole called a *bonten* (梵天) and decorated with paper streamers is rotated three times and thrust up the steps of the temple by the Tobu-Daisensatsu. This action symbolizes conception and the spirits of the dead pilgrims have attained rebirth (Miyake, 2001). Before continuing into the mountain the Tobu-Daisensatsu passes the Oi and the Ayaigasa to the Doshi, which signals that the conceived fetus is now growing in the womb. The pilgrims may now formally enter the mountain.

Led by the Doshi, the procession continues down the main Toge road. By the time they reach the Yakushi Shrine (薬師寺) the fetus is no longer spiritual but also believed to have a physical form (Sekimori, 2003). At the shrine they offer a recitation of the Heart Sutra to the deities enshrined there: *I take hold of my staff and make this vow for the sake of all living beings: To organize great gatherings. To show forth the true way. And venerate the Three Treasures.* The Doshi hands the Oi to a senior Shugenja and the *katabako* (肩箱), representing the father, is placed on top of it. The fetuses are now in the womb with both its mother's and father's protection.⁸ At Jojakkoji Temple (常寂光寺) there are 2,446 stone steps that will lead them from the valley to the summit of the mountain. The procession moves at a demanding pace, stopping at any shrines along the way to pray and recite the Heart Sutra, before reaching the training ground at Kotaku Temple (穗宅寺). Once here, training begins in earnest as the initiates develop themselves through three stages⁹ of mystical training (Miyake, 2001).

Rebirth at the Gateway

The first of the three stages takes place from late evening of the 25th through the 27th of August. After nearly two days of travel the Shugenja are finally able to rest. They are allowed to eat a small meal of soft rice and vegetables, their first meal in just over forty-five hours. This will be their last meal for the rest of the Nyubu. The Sendatsu decide the positions of each Shugenja in the room and, once in position, two wooden sticks are beaten together above each individual's head. This signifies their purification, and in case any of them begin to fall asleep, a loud banging rings out from all of the wooden doors around the temple. This action is meant to frighten the pilgrims out of their illusions and awaken them to their Buddha nature (Miyake, 2001). The Oi is placed on the altar and is venerated by reading sutras. While the sutras are being chanted the Sendatsu bring in a large brazier on which hot charcoals simmer. Spices are thrown onto the coals which are fanned vigorously so that the fumes fill the room. This is meant to exorcise bad spirits in the initiate (Miyake, 2001) and is done in the evening and at midnight until the 27th. The pilgrims are still prohibited from eating or drinking anything. During the day they traverse the mountain for long distances, returning to the temple late at night. On the 27th a memorial service for the dead is held and sutra chanting continues. On the 28th a ceremony is held to enter into the second stage.

The second stage spans from August 28th to the 29th. Exorcism rites and chanting are continued, but there are no longer any frightening noises to challenge their devotion. The Sho-Daisensatsu uses two sticks that are waved around the sitting pilgrims and then strikes the altar with them, meant to mix and bind their souls together (Miyake, 2001). In the evening they sumo-wrestle and are taught mysterious rites and rituals by the Sho-Daisensatsu. At midnight, the Saito Goma¹⁰ fire is lit. After the fire ritual, sutras are read as the initiates re-enter the temple and white and red streamers are hung from the ceiling to

symbolize communion between the heavens and the Earth. Songs are sung and the initiates are allowed to drink rice wine together (Sekimori, 2003).

On the 30th the pilgrims pray to the founder of the Haguro sect and travel to places where ancestor spirits live and where they might receive special geognosis. On the 31st the pilgrims travel back down the mountain. Leaving Kotaku temple they descend quickly and with joy, and on September 1st blisters and hunger are forgotten as the group arrives back at Shozennin and a fire is lit to celebrate their rebirth as Yamabushi (Sekimori, 2003). After worshipping at the shrine the pilgrims kneel down and then leap into the air with cries of joy symbolizing the first breath of a newborn baby (Miyake, 2001). They then leave the shrine to jump over the fire. This fire is much like those lit as a guide to souls returning home during the Japanese Obon Festival (お盆).¹¹ The fire is meant to celebrate the pilgrim's return and rebirth as Yamabushi initiates and as Buddhas. The Tobu-Daisensatsu gives each initiate a signed certificate of participation and a religious name. The pilgrims are elated with praises on their hard work: "When I came down the mountain everybody said I had done well, I was so happy that I almost cried!" Others are grateful for the experience, "Yes, it really is bodhisattva practice, I think. I feel very grateful. It's not easy though!" (Sekimori, 2003). After nine days of ascetic practice a feast is provided, blisters are bandaged, and the pilgrims head home until next year. Some will return and some will not, but all will have felt that they have changed in some way: "Now I've finished I think I understand a bit more. Have I been reborn? I might have been. But it's enough to work hard, do things properly, after I go home tomorrow" (Sekimori, 2003).

Spiritual Pilgrimage: Geosophia, Geopietry, and Geognosis

Pilgrimage up the mountain and the rituals performed at the Nybu serve several purposes. The first is to help the individual awaken to their inner Buddha nature; the second is to be initiated into the esoteric practices of Shugendō; and the third is to cultivate supernatural abilities that can be used to help the individual and others. The powers of the Yamabushi deserve a section of their own as they are vast, somewhat unnerving in nature and, at times, they are astounding if not altogether unbelievable. Many of these supernatural abilities come not from the practitioner himself, but from the kami he worships and the helper spirits that are granted to him by this kami. Ordinary men and women cannot deal with the strange and unpredictable forces that appear to take interest in everyday life for whatever reason. This is why people like the Yamabushi, female shamans, exorcists, and even Shinto or Buddhist Priests are so important to not just the culture of Japan but also to cultures across the world. These special human beings have the ability to speak with the kami, spirits, demons, ghosts, and ancestors to discover hidden knowledge that can be used to help us overcome the obstacles of daily life. Yamabushi were often attributed powers over animals and nature. They were said to have been able to fascinate animals and to have been able to communicate with them. It is not at all surprising that so many Yamabushi report having animals such as foxes and snakes as spiritual guides (Blacker, 1999). In fact, serpents play a major role in the religion of Shugendō as Fudo-myō himself is often represented as a dragon that is wrapped around a sword standing on its hilt.

One of the most important powers of the Yamabushi, though, is the ability to exorcise malignant spirits. Exorcism in Japan is done in two ways and usually involves the use of the Kuji-in, certain finger and hand positions used alongside nine magical syllables¹² to expel evil spirits. The first way is with two Yamabushi men and the second is with a Yamabushi man assisted by a *Miko* (巫女) woman who acts as a medium, housing the malignant spirit until it is exorcised. By doing this the Miko puts herself in great danger. If the exorcism fails she may be forced to live with the spirit in possession of her body for

the rest of her life. If the spirit is extremely malignant, she may even commit suicide in an attempt to destroy it (Blacker, 1999). Her will power would need to have been previously cultivated through austerities practiced in the mountains since “a diviner must be in a fit moral condition before he undertakes a consultation” (Turner, 1977), very much like that of the Yamabushi. Ritualistic actions, combined with deep mountain shrine visitations and worship of the kami combine to create specialized knowledge and abilities.

Woman and the Mountain

Women have a unique place in the world as liminal creatures in their own right. As bearers of the future generation women deserve celebration; but, as polluters of the world through the very process of menstruation and childbirth, they are harbingers of great fear and misunderstanding. Women as a whole appear to have one foot in the grave during both monthly menstrual cycles and during the painful ordeal of childbirth, and yet somehow they almost always survive. They hold a unique relationship with the mountain as Goddess that no male can ever experience.

The Cave, the Womb, and the Woman: Women and Shugendō

Though places such as Mt. Omine are off limits to women, there are still several places of worship that women may exploit. Shrines at the border of the Mt. Omine range, for instance, are under the care of Miko who work to bless the parting pilgrims with rituals of protection from the malignant spirits of the mountains. “At these sites halls for women’s worship gradually came into being, sacralizing the borders (Sekimori, 2006).” And at the foot of Mt. Koya a shrine was built for the mother of Kukai “to compensate her for not being able to climb Koya-san (Sekimori, 2006).” As pilgrimage grew in popularity among women shrines began to offer Blood-Pool rituals to cleanse women of their pollution. These boundaries are, in themselves, liminal and for women they are invaluable places of access to the kami.

Carmen Blacker’s *The Catalpa Bow* is a fascinating look at female Shamanism in Japan. Women are featured prominently as traveling fortune tellers, Miko shamans, and healers with their roles among the Yamabushi often being hard to see without one taking care to read between the lines. Women, though not always holding an active role in Shugendō, often formed co-alliances with Yamabushi Priests and laymen:

“During the feudal period¹³ it was common to find marriages between the two kinds of people, an ascetic husband married to a female medium. Clearly we have two mutually dependent functions (Blacker, 1999).”

Carmen Blacker and Dr. Gaynor Sekimori have worked to reveal the mysteries of female Shugenja. Though not all of the women mentioned in the work of Blacker would be considered Shugendō followers, there are several who use methods that are very specific to someone knowledgeable in the religion and demonstrate unique understandings of the spirit realm of the mountain.

Women as Healers

Hiroshima Ryuun was an ascetic well known for her wanderings.¹⁴ She would often travel far distances, on foot, to visit ancient war grounds where she would consult with the spirits of the slain. Earlier in her life, she often had visions of En-no-Gyoja. At one point he was said to have stood over her bed and urged her to take it upon herself to “save those suffering from sickness in the world (Blacker, 1999).” She undertook austerities such as standing

beneath waterfalls in the winter ice for the length of time that it took to recite the Heart Sutra one hundred times. She performed these austerities often without sleeping and without eating, and she refused any offers of water. After many months of wandering across the country side and performing austerities, she was overcome by a divine seizure where multiple deities entered her body and spoke through her until finally a “mysterious spirit called Magotaro Inari” took the place of En-no-Gyoja as her guide. This spirit, or kami, would often appear to her in the form of a fox, a small boy, or more commonly, a snake. From this time onwards she was able to cure people miraculously. Her healing powers became very well known throughout the area and the Magotaro-Inari Jinja (孫太郎稻荷神社), located in Yakushiji near Nara, is dedicated to this kami and can still be visited today.

Nakano (first name not given) was a healer and an ascetic active in the 1960s. She was from the island of Shikoku and would often travel to Kyoto to join the Akinomine Nyubu of Mt. Omine that begins every year on August 1st. She used mainly her powers of clairvoyant vision to diagnose sicknesses or other troubles. When examining someone she would either see an image of a dog, a snake, or an ancestor that still harbored resentment for whatever reasons (Blacker, 1999). Sometimes, if it were a physical ailment rather than spiritual, she would see an image of a body part, swollen with disease. She was also able to use these powers to find people who were missing. Nakano also had the ability of clairaudience and would often hear a voice speaking into her ears that would explain the true cause of the patient’s malady; she believed that this voice was the voice of Fudo-myō.

The Female Exorcist

Matsuyama (first name not given) was a healer who lived in Sagano. She attended the Haguro Akinomine Nyubu regularly and was very successful in her art. But, her true abilities were with exorcism. In the fall of 1963 she was forced to deal with an especially vile fox spirit who had possessed a young woman. In order to expel the fox spirit she first seated herself before her Fudo-myō altar and recited the Middle Spell of Fudo-myō.¹⁵ This was followed by the Heart Sutra, repeating it over and over again until she was compelled to make “odd grunts and moans amidst the words of sutra...one or two piercing magical yells called *kiai*¹⁶ (気合), while her clasped hands shook violently (Blacker, 1999).” Matsuyama, during this time, had been taken over by the spirit of Fudo-myō and at this point the fox spirit, in possession of the body, began to scream that it was not afraid and even attempted to climb up onto the roof of Matsuyama’s home to get away. When the fox spirit was expelled the girl could not remember anything that had happened since her original possession.

The Womb Cave: Return to the Mother

Caves are distinctly female in nature. Their entrances are comparable to the vaginal cavity and a cave can be viewed as a womb. This adds a female slant to the nature of mountains in general so that the relationship formed between a Yamabushi and his mountain is almost like that of a loving couple, both being vastly different in nature but still respectful of each other’s differences. For women the caves are a place to revere and to renew their ties with the gods. They are places where, in the old days, women would come to pray for healthy children. They would pray that breast milk would flow plentifully, that they experience easy child-birth, and that Kannon (観音)¹⁷ would save them from the Blood-Pool that awaited them in hell after years of menstruation and childbirth. The cave can be viewed as a woman that does not menstruate, and because of this she is different and far removed from the mortal female. Since she can never give birth to her own children she must adopt them instead. The Yamabushi, male and female, are the adopted children of the mountain;

and while her sons may climb her body as far up as they dare, her daughters have full access to her inner secrets in ways that no man can understand.

In 1982, Helen Hardacre joined a group of pilgrims for the annual ascent of Mt. Omine. While the men continued up towards the main peak of the mountain the women separated off to a trail that led to a spur called Oku no In. It is at Oku no In that women practice their austerities by ascending a vertical shaft to a hidden cave. This is the same cave that En no Gyoja was said to have practiced austerities for several years (Hardacre, 1983). To reach the cave one must climb for around two hours along a steep path and enter the mouth of the cave by use of a swinging steel ladder. When all fifty-five of the women in Hardacre's group had made it into the cave they were then led in recitation of the Heart Sutra. In order to fully enter the second room of the cave it is necessary to crawl on hands and knees through a damp, narrow, and ice-cold passageway. At the end of the passage pilgrims ascend, one at a time, up a pitch black nearly vertical shaft that has horizontal steel bars pinned into the rock. It is nearly twenty meters long (70 ft.) and has to be climbed one person at a time. Most of the women in her group had brought candles with them and shoved them into rock crevices while encouraging each other with shouts of "Rokkon shoujou!" (六根清浄), meaning to purify the six roots (Hardacre, 1983).

The final cave is triangular in shape. On the left wall is an altar to En no Gyoja, on the right is an altar to Acala (Fudo-myō), and in the front of the cave you will find a natural rock formation that came to represent the Eight Naga Kings.¹⁸ Once again we can clearly see the connection between Fudo-myō and the serpent as "the Eight Naga Kings were often illustrated beneath the feet of wrathful deities (Beer, 2004).

"For the male ascetic, the focus is upon re-emergence from this womb, "reborn" in the sense of being newly endowed with esoteric knowledge and power. The rite of ascending into the cave at Oku no In partakes of this motif of a return to the womb, of clawing one's way into its deepest recesses to return to the original source of all life, to acquire knowledge and wisdom. In the case of women, however, there is a self-referential quality that is alien to males (Hardacre, 1983)."

This ritual ascent into the caves of Oku no In marks the individual as a liminal being in the same way that the Yamabushi are liminal for traversing the mountain. The climbing of the pathway works to separate mundane reality from the supernatural realm of the dead and the Mountain Goddess. In this way the cave acts as both tomb and womb and does not differentiate between genders; on this one thing man and woman are equal.

Conclusion: Shugendō in the Modern World

Japan

Today, Shugendō is still active albeit in small private groups. The modern world has slowly encroached and those active in the religion have come to understand that, if not careful, their beliefs could die out. More media coverage of rituals that used to be private, such as the Haguro's Akinomine Nyubu, can now be found and the rituals themselves are now open to both the public and the media. Many of the Yamabushi have been able to make a generous living as guides for pilgrimages to the tops of various mountains often for secular reasons more so than religious. This is often the case in Shikoku and around the Mt. Omine range as well. Movies such as *Shugendō Now* illustrate the benefits that modern men and women can gain from taking time away from their desk jobs and recreating their relationship with nature through the mountain.

France

Recently, the religion of Shugendō has taken a foothold in France. Its vast mountain ranges are welcoming to the imported religion and currently a rather large group holds Nyubu rituals every year. The group is led by Sylvain Guintard and is recognized by the *Union Bouddhiste de France* (Buddhist Union of France). During the summer months they offer seminars on ascetic practice for the novice practitioner and offer intense winter Nyubu for the veteran. The front page of their website¹⁹ features a large Fudo-myō, and they list several other websites as informational references as well as detailing their own activities and listing contact information. They also provide an extensive bibliography of works in English, French, and Japanese on Shugendō that is updated every year. There are several videos up of their own rituals and photographs can be browsed on both the website and Facebook page. Guintard was given the name Kuban Jakkōin on his ordination as a Yamabushi.²⁰ In 2005 he established the Shomudo hermitage in the French Alps. It is important to note that they practice the religion in its original Japanese and encourage their members to take up lessons in the spoken language. Another important thing to note is that Guintard refers to his practice as Neo-Shugendō²¹ in recognition that, though he is an ordained practitioner, he is not Japanese.

America

In America, the religion of Shugendō is nonexistent in practice and lies relatively unknown outside of scholarship. Fans of films such as *Shugendō Now* and Japanese popular culture are only just now taking notice of the influence Shugendō has had on Japanese culture at large. In 2008, a symposium titled, *Shugendō, the History and Culture of a Japanese Religion*, was hosted by Barnard College, Columbia University in New York. It was the largest conference for the dissemination of knowledge about Shugendō to be held in North America and was “dedicated to Professor Carmen Blacker for her fundamental role in opening the mountain of Shugendō studies in the West (Castiglioni, Gottardo 2008).”

In her 2009 paper, *Shugendō: Japanese Mountain Religion-State of the Field and Bibliographic Review*, Gaynor Sekimori gives a brief history of Shugendō as a religion as well as an overview of past, current, and future ideas for study. This new movement of learning has brought on analysis of not only ancient texts but also items such as ritual manuals, pictorial maps, travel guides and records, commercial and land documents, licenses, and parishioner lists are all used to look for clues as to the true nature of religious life in and around the mountains (Sekimori, 2009). In the last few years these types of documentation are becoming more valuable to researchers as they explore different angles. Some of these angles include the ban on women from sacred sites (Sekimori, 2006; 2007), the blending of Shinto and Buddhist deities (Murata, 1999), Onmyouji and Shugendō rivalries (Hayashi, 1994), and pilgrimage (Nenzi, 2002).

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Endnotes

1 The terms *Yamabushi* and *Shugenja* can be used interchangeably and often will be. However, there seems to be a distinction made by Miyake in that *Shugenja* is usually the term used for the laity and parishioners in the care of a *Yamabushi* or used for those who are on a religious pilgrimage under a *Yamabushi*. In this paper I will use the term *Yamabushi*.

2 Knowledge gained from particular places seen as repositories of potential knowledge infused with esoteric characteristics that need to be decoded through efforts, either physical or ritualistic in nature, in order to be earned and used by the *Yamabushi* (Grapard, 1994).

3 The *Yamabushi*, in preparation for honey gathering, performed the *Bee Pacification Ceremony*. Parishioners were worried about how many bees would suffer and die while collecting the honey and so wanted to ensure that no bad karma would be incurred for their transgression (Abela, 2009).

4 For more information on the liminality of the *Yamabushi*, see Appendix I.

5 Miyake lists the white robes worn by *Yamabushi* as being part of the religious instruments of *Shugendō* while Earhart does not; this may be because the wearing of white was a common religious practice used to represent death of the individual.

6 I am unsure of the etymology of this word. Earhart may be meaning the *Matagi* (またぎ). The *Matagi* were hunters from the Tohoku region and are still active today in both Tohoku and the Hokkaido regions of Japan.

7 Mt. Omine is currently caught up in controversy because of this restriction. It was proposed to be listed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 2004. Many women requested that the ban on women be lifted because of this however, many of the local women have taken the stance that it is a “mans mountain and should remain so (Hasegawa, 2004)”.

8 Other items that are carried but not mentioned above: A scroll with a portrait of the Haguro *Shugendō*'s founder painted on it, a *Torii* (representative of the vagina through which rebirth is possible), and three bundles of sticks, 108 total, that represent the 108 defilements of humankind (Sekimori, 2003).

9 The three stages are named: *Ichi no Shuku*, *Ni no Shuku*, and *San no Shuku* (一の祝、二の祝、三の祝).

10 *Saito Goma* is a large bonfire where sticks with prayers carved into them are burned and sent to the deities.

11 *Obon Festival* is usually held between the 13th and 17th of either July or August depending on the region you are in. It is a major holiday in Japan. Candles are left lit around homes or on mountain paths to guide ancestral spirits home for the holidays.

12 *Rin-byo-to-sha-kai-jin-rets-u-zai-zen* are the nine magical syllables.

13 The feudal period is a misnomer; medieval Japan had many differences from the feudalism of medieval Europe and this period should be reclassified. This information is based on a lecture by Dr. Lara Nenz-Detto-Nenzi, a Japanese history Professor at the University of Tennessee.

14 *Hiroshima Ryuun*'s actual dates are unknown. Everything here was related to Blacker by *Hiroshima*'s daughter in 1972.

15 *Nomaku samanda basarada*, *Senda makaroshana*, *Sowataya untarata kamman*.

16 This is the same sound made while performing martial arts. The sound is meant to amplify and release built up energy that can then be used to strengthen blows (<http://www.kodenkan.com/success.html>).

17 *Kannon Bosatsu* is the bodhisattva of compassion and the loving mother. She is known as *Guam-Yin* in China and as a male deity, *Avalokitesvara*, in India (Beer, 2004).

18 *Nanda*, *Upananda*, *Sagara*, *Vasuki*, *Takshaka*, *Balavan*, *Anavatapta*, and *Utpala* are the names of the Eight Naga Kings (Beer, 2004).

19 www.shugendo.fr

- 20 I was unable to find when this date was, who ordained him, or where the ordination took place.
- 21 This information comes from a personal email exchange between the author and Guintard.

About the Author

Andrea K. Gill graduated from the University of Tennessee in December 2010 with a B.A. in Asian Studies and a minor in Religious Studies. During her time at UT she studied Japanese language and religion, which accumulated in this research paper that was completed over a period of two semesters. The intention was to dissect the variety of information, both mythological and factual, that can be found on the Japanese folk religion of Shugendō and break it down into smaller, more presentable, and understandable bits of information. It was presented in full with an accompanying slide show at the Japan Studies Association 17th Annual Conference, January 6th-8th 2011 in San Francisco, California. Currently, Andrea is a master's degree candidate at the University of Memphis where she studies English with a concentration in Teaching English as a Second Language. She is also working toward a graduate certificate in Community College Teaching and Administration and is a member of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society.

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Rachelle Scott received her B.A. in Religious Studies from Lawrence University in 1992, her M.A. in Religious Studies from Arizona State University in 1994, and her Ph.D. in Religion from Northwestern University in 2002. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee, where she has been teaching since 2002. Her research interests include new religious movements in South and Southeast Asia, Buddhist authority and identity, and modern Buddhist saints.