



Shugendō Now

DIRECTED BY JEAN-MARC ABELA

JEAN-MARC ABELA AND MARC PATRICK

MCGUIRE, PRODUCERS

EMPOWER PICTURES, 2009

88 MINUTES, ENGLISH SUBTITLES, DVD

Reviewed by William Londo

As the title of this documentary suggests, *Shugendō Now* examines the state of Shugendō practice today as practiced by both professional practitioners, known as *yamabushi*, and ordinary Japanese people. The film begins by explaining that *yamabushi*

are those who enter the mountain to seek experiential truth. They perform austerities and ritual actions adopted from shamanism, the kami tradition, Esoteric Buddhism, and Daoism. This syncretic tradition is called Shugendō, "The Way of Acquiring Power."

This description of Shugendō is about the best one can manage in a few words, and as the documentary amply portrays, it is a tradition that is clearly rooted in ascetic practices in natural places.

Early on we meet Tateishi Kōshō, a *yamabushi* who lives and practices in the vicinity of Mount Ōmine, located in central Japan near the city of Nara. Mount Ōmine is the major, but not only, sacred mountain of the Shugendō tradition. Kōshō-san lives in a natural environment, carries out ascetic practices for those who wish them (including the "bee appeasement" ceremony, or *hachi kuyō*), and teaches laypeople the values of Shugendō, but he nonetheless lives in a house and possesses all of the accoutrements a middle-class Japanese person expects. He also trains devotees seeking to become *yamabushi*. We meet one, Ryō-kun, as we hear him chanting the *hannya shingyō* or *Heart Sutra* and then commenting on his

Miyamoto-san says,

"What we learn from nature is how small we humans are and how vast the spirit is."

experience of it. He confesses that he doesn't "know the meaning of the sutra or even understand its contents," but that when he chants it continuously, "the vibration of my voice and the way I exhale feels good." Here the filmmakers, without explicit comment, reveal a fundamental aspect of Japanese religiosity: that what matters is not doctrine, but practice and the feeling of well-being that results from practice. It is for this reason that when Japanese people are asked if they are religious, they usually reply "no," for they understand "religion" to be a set of organized doctrines, a belief in which yields a specified outcome.

This is not to say that religious practices in Japan lack doctrinal underpinning. Viewers familiar with Buddhism in particular will recognize the strong influence of Japanese esoteric Buddhism in references to the Sun Buddha (or cosmic Buddha Dainichi) and the various esoteric Buddhist rituals. As the presentation stresses, Shugendō does in fact seek to express reverence for the Shinto *kami* and Buddhas, but in the video, few *kami*, or Japanese deities, are encountered. The one notable exception is the deity Zao Gongen. Zao Gongen is not a *kami* in the ordinary sense, but rather something of a hybrid figure between a *kami* and a guardian deity of Buddhism. The problem faced by the filmmakers here may be that the kinds of *kami* one would encounter in a Shugendō setting would be those associated with natural formations and phenomena such as mountains or waterfalls. Their divine nature is understood but often left undesignated.

The film is interspersed with scenes from a pilgrimage up Mount Ōmine taken by a group of laypersons, with special attention to the experiences of a few of the participants, notably Miyamoto-san, owner of a cement company, and Fujii-san, who runs a nightclub in Osaka. Miyamoto-san alerts Fujii-san of the opportunity to participate in the pilgrimage, but the fundamental motivations of each for participating are left unclear. In chapter twenty, Miyamoto-san says,

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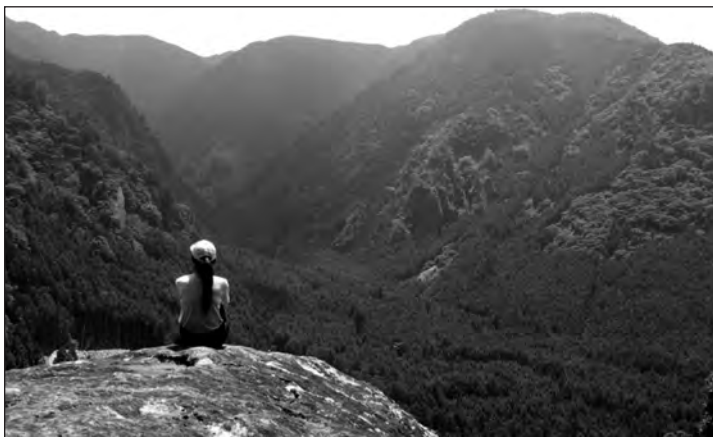
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Still photo from the film's website at http://www.shugendonow.com/Shugendo_Now/My_Albums/Pages/Film.html.

What we learn from nature is how small we humans are and how vast the spirit is. This project is very different from my usual work. Rather than call it a departure, let's say it's karma.

As Miyamoto-san speaks, images of him at his company and the retaining walls his company might have supplied concrete for are intercut with scenes of the pilgrims climbing Mount Ōmine, seeming to suggest that his spiritual quest is not without its contradictions. Visitors to Japan will be well acquainted with these retaining walls that cover the sides of many mountains to prevent rockslides onto roads and into neighborhoods and make the “natural” decidedly less so.

At the same time, we learn that Miyamoto-san takes environmental preservation very seriously, and he is working to develop cement production processes that produce less harmful waste in the environment. Other sections of the movie show Tateishi-san describing his environmental activism, including organizing people in the Yoshino area, where Mount Ōmine is located, advocating for the cleanup of tatami (traditional Japanese floor mats) that had been dumped in some of the local valleys in the aftermath of the 1995 Kobe earthquake. The film also depicts Tateshi-san and his associates removing junk cars and other scrap iron from some of the waterfall-fed ponds in the area that serve as pilgrimage destinations.

All of the pilgrims portrayed in the movie express a deep concern for and interest in the natural world, but viewers should not be left with the impression that environmental concern in Japan arises only, or even primarily, from religious concerns. Despite claims to the contrary, environmental concern is not particularly more or less widespread in Japan than anywhere else. Most Japanese people who do take up environmental concerns do so because of clear negative impacts they observe or experience. Hiking in the woods is popular in Japan, but most such hikes take place on well-traveled, paved trails on sunny Saturdays during day-trips from the city. Few Japanese people are interested in encountering nature in the rigorous way required by the Mount Ōmine pilgrimage. Even Kōshō-san himself advocates not becoming “eco-fanatics” but “remain[ing] calm” so as to maintain communication with the world as it is, both urban and rural.

Since the film is approximately ninety minutes, it is probably too long to run in its entirety in most classrooms. However, the producers have organized the DVD into twenty-nine chapters, making it relatively easy to extract vignettes that may be useful in teaching about contemporary Japanese religiosity in particular. The “Bee Appeasement Ceremony” shown in chapter four, for example, nicely reflects the kind of this-worldly benefits Japanese commonly seek in religious rituals. Chapter fifteen, by contrast, portrays the experience of Suzuki-san, a lay Shugendō adherent, who is undertaking a mini-pilgrimage around the mountain. She embodies the somewhat atypical but not uncommon Japanese person who seeks religious fulfillment because of disillusionment with society. The film is visually beautiful, capturing some of the wonderful green spaces that Japan aficionados from overseas, too often city bound, long for and seek out whenever possible. ■

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