



***Shugendō Now* 今の修験道, DVD, directed by Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire**

2010. Languages: Japanese, English, French, Spanish; aspect ratio 1.85, 88 minutes. Individual \$20 CAD; public/educational \$150 CAD. Montreal, Canada: Empower Pictures. (Available at Shugendōnow.com)



***Là où les montagnes volent / Where mountains fly*, DVD, directed by Sandra Roth and Carina Roth**

2010. Umeda presente un film de Sandra Roth, realize avec Carina Roth. Regio Films. In Japanese, French, and English, with subtitles in French, English, and Japanese. 60 minutes. Individual \$25 USD; public/educational \$150 USD. (Available at www.umedach.ch)

IN A recent travel guide publication, the title “Japan: A Spiritual Escape” entices the reader to leave the typical tourist package behind and explore the beauty and tradition of Kumano, a mountainous region home to ancient temples and UNESCO world heritage pilgrimage trails known collectively as the Kumano Kodō. For over a millennium, emperors, monks, and pilgrims have walked these arduous and austere paths, seeking purification and salvation. Today, in the religious tradition of Shugendō (literally “the way of power”), mountain ascetics known as *yamabushi* still train in this sacred landscape to polish their mind, rejuvenate their spirit, and pursue enlightenment.

After two years living as an “anthropologist *yamabushi*,” I found the task of translating the very experiential world of Shugendō into words to be a selective and difficult task. How do we represent esoteric mysticism to an audience far removed from the enchanting cedar forests, perilous trails, clear mountain streams, and seemingly endless days of walking in all forms of weather?

Two films have taken this challenge, offering insight into the formerly closed and secretive world of Shugendō mountain asceticism. *Shugendō Now* is an experiential documentary that sheds light on a tradition relatively unknown outside of Japan and challenges us to think about the relationship between life and nature. The film aims to answer the question, “How does one return to everyday life after an enlightening experience in the mountains?” The film begins by revealing part of the mindset of an ascetic while walking the mountains. From there the audience is guided through the lives of a few lay participants and their “professional ascetic” teacher as they make sense of their experiences and how it conveys into their lives. Transitioning between urban business life, ascetic training, ritual, and the life of their teacher, the film reveals the meaning Shugendō has in the contemporary world as well as illuminating some of the history and symbolism of the tradition. The use of living examples is the strength of this film, connecting an

ancient practice to modern life in a compelling story that links religious practice with contemporary popular themes such as ecological sensitivity, balanced living, and reconnecting with nature. The cinematography and sound design are both excellent, fluidly moving the audience through the story and capturing the essence of both rural and urban life.

Of note, the film portrays primarily one perspective of Shugendō, which is not necessarily shared by all practitioners. While the ascetic practices themselves are fairly consistent across groups, interpretations vary widely. Other adherents may well consider the views expressed to be only one level of understanding. If the film aimed to fully explain Shugendō, it would have benefitted by addressing the internal esoteric goals, as well as explanations of the history and symbolism that frame the practices. Given that the directors describe the film as an “experiential journey,” this is perhaps too much to ask for in ninety minutes of viewing. However, without that background, parts of the film may be difficult to understand for the unfamiliar viewer.

The audience is left with an insight into contemporary Shugendō, and, perhaps more importantly in the eyes of the directors, a rich example of how we might live more ecologically balanced lives. As the only film that penetrates the lives of practitioners, I highly recommend it for anyone interested in Japanese mountain asceticism.

Where mountains fly is an artistic rendition of the twelfth-century text *Shozan Engi*, “The Origin of the Mountains.” The film utilizes the *emaki* artistic style: Japanese painted scrolls that blend widely separated scenes into one seamless piece. The storyline transitions between the mytho-historical journeys of En no Gyoja, the founder of Shugendō, and modern practices. Aiming to narrate a historical legend in light of contemporary Shugendō, the film moves the viewer back and forth between the realms of legend and real life.

While telling the story of En no Gyoja, the film takes the audience into the visual world of the Omine Okugake, one of the Kumano Kodō pilgrimage routes stretching from north to south down the Kii peninsula. It also depicts practices by modern ascetics, including waterfall training, sutra chanting, meditation, and fasting. Using commentary by monks and professional ascetics, the film does a fine job explaining the Buddhist pursuit of enlightenment and some core concepts in Shugendō. The audience also gets an intimate lesson from an ascetic who envisions the mountains as kami and buddhas, and seeks to become one of them. Filmed on a rock outcropping overlooking the mountain valley at sunset, the scene captures the beauty of Kumano and the landscape of Shugendō.

Despite the mythical overtones, the film is more realist at times than romantic. Several scenes show ascetics smoking and talking on cell phones, certainly putting a modern lens on this ancient practice. Another scene depicts Japanese men watching a documentary of a famous ascetic who died as a result of his extremist training. Their criticism of the ascetic as crazy and delusional illuminates what may be a cynical stance of the directors. Still, this realism is a good counterbalance to the idealism of *Shugendō Now*, and encourages the viewer to critically evaluate what they are watching.

In terms of cinematography, the film is at times strikingly beautiful. However, I question the relevance of some imagery in the film. Having lived in this area for some time, I am left wondering about the connection between some scenes (for example, the mountain road with steel mesh on the rock face) and the intent of the directors. This lack of congruity between the storyline and imagery creates some confusion. Similarly, while I appreciate the artistic choice to use *emaki*, the visual effect is hard on the eyes after a while. Without a clear explanation of what *emaki* is in the beginning, the movement of the film is bewildering to the first time viewer.

Despite these slight drawbacks, *Where mountains fly* offers a unique lens into Shugendō that links history with the present. Further, it contains rare footage of a pilgrimage now done only once every five years. This is a valuable ethnographic film useful primarily to audiences with some familiarity with the subject.

Both of these films are a welcome and timely addition to the field of Japanese religious studies. Film is a rich medium for representation of religious activities, offering new means to engage issues of contemporary practice. As artistic products, these films are not oriented to the academic classroom. For teaching purposes, other materials or detailed commentary would be necessary. However, both films mix artistic vision with documentary, making them more interesting to a wider audience.

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