



***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 [shugendonow.com](http://shugendonow.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](http://www.umedach.ch)).

***Shugen Haguro-san Aki no Mine* 修験一羽黒山秋の峰 (Shugen: The Aki-no-mine of Mt. Haguro), DVD, directed by Kitamura Minao 北村皆雄**

2005. Language: Japanese. 115 minutes, all-region DVD. Individuals ¥14,700; libraries ¥50,400. Tokyo: Visual Folklore Inc ([www.vfo.co.jp](http://www.vfo.co.jp)).

IT HAS been over thirty years since I joined the *yamabushi* of Shōgo'in in the mid-1970s as they undertook an official pilgrimage between Mt. Tamaki and Hongu Shrine, a lonely stretch on the Yoshino-Ōmine-Kumano route that had not been used officially for over a hundred years, since the time of *shinbutsu bunri* and the proscription of Shugendō in the Meiji period. The historic three-day trip was filmed by NHK and edited into a half-hour *Nihon no kikō* TV special. As I watched the broadcast, I remember feeling disappointed that it captured so little of the actual event, which is not surprising since a three-day all-sensory experience was reduced to a half hour of only sight-and-sound on a small screen (TV screens were a lot smaller in those days), to be enjoyed in the (relative) comfort of one's living room, perhaps with a beer or popcorn. This is surely the challenge faced by anyone seeking to capture and communicate such experiences through the medium of film. How is it possible to vividly and accurately convey the mountain-entering experience—with its long stretches of boredom, fatigue, smells, subtle sounds (instead of a sound track), hunger, thirst, camaraderie, fresh air, blinding rain, sore feet, exhilarating landscapes, perhaps even a religious awakening—on film? Here I will examine three recent films released on DVD which present various aspects of Shugendō and its religious-ascetic mountain practices in contemporary Japan.

*Shugendō Now* is a beautifully filmed, aesthetically pleasing, and religiously challenging presentation of traditional ascetic practices in the mountains and its place in contemporary Japanese society, with implications and meaning for people outside Japan. Interspersing scenes of natural rural beauty (clear mountain streams, green vegetation, moss-covered rocks) and modern urban life (concrete roads, buildings covered with neon signs, hectic movement), it didactically challenges the viewer to consider the value of participation in mountain ascetic practices and asks questions such as, “How does one integrate lessons learned from nature in daily life?” and “How does one return to the city after an enlightening experience in the mountains?” It follows the activities of a variety of people, from a “professional ascetic” and some of his disciples to businessmen who take a few days away from their usual urban rat race to walk in the mountains, showing them as they go about their daily lives and participate in various “religious” activities, from sitting in meditation under (or sliding down) a waterfall, repairing conch shells (*horagai*, one of the accoutrements of a *yamabushi*), “memorial services” for bees, to cleaning up industrial waste dumps. Along the way one is introduced to many of the traditional activities of mountain asceticism (group ascents in the mountains, burning the *goma*-fire, chanting the sutras) and, through interviews, to the reactions of participants to their experiences. On the other hand, it has a very “contemporary” feel to it, with a strong eco-consciousness-raising message. One learns not just about traditional Japanese religion, but how it is alive and fits into contemporary Japanese society, as well as its more cross-cultural appeal. It has stunning and well-edited visuals, a fine and appealing sound track, and informative yet unobtrusive narration.

*Where Mountains Fly* also takes a look at ascetic practices in the mountains of the Kii peninsula, but takes a more historical-literary approach. Also beautifully filmed, it is edited (with remarkable, impeccable effect) to mimic old hand-painted scrolls where sites geographically far apart seem to merge seamlessly into each other. As explained on the cover, “using real landscapes as source material, the animation recreates the extraordinary adventures of En-no-Gyōja. The fictional episodes are intertwined with documentary episodes bearing testimony to the use of these sacred mountains by various contemporary Shugendō practitioners: meditation under waterfalls, sutra recitation, pilgrimages through forests and mountains, and fasts that may lead to death.” The title refers to the ancient legend that a part of the Vulture Peak broke off and flew from India to Japan and became Mt. Ōmine, representing the arrival of Buddhism in Japan. Not surprisingly, some of the same people, scenes, and situations as in *Shugendō Now* also appear in this film, and the same technique of comments by these people reveals the meaning that these experiences have in their lives.

On a less serious note, at twenty minutes and four seconds into the film, as the voiceover intones “her appearance was malevolent, enough to awake fear in all hearts . . .” and the camera scans quickly across the wooded scene, combinations of rocks and vegetation between the trees form faces of “ghosts” or demons. Is this an accidental, visual illusion (a type of paranormal result known in Japan as *shinrei shashin*), or is it perhaps an intentional result of film editing?

As mentioned above, *Mountains* is beautifully filmed and deftly edited. For example, there is a striking scene of an ascetic on a huge boulder overlooking a valley, where he performs some practices and then speaks of his experiences and provides some commentary with the lush trees of the mountainside in the distance. As the sun sets, with the valley becoming dark yet the sun still shining on him, the solitary ascetic blows his *horagai*. Thus the film combines aesthetically pleasing sights with insights into the history and contemporary practice of Shugendō.

*Shugen: The Aki-no-mine of Mt. Haguro*: Unlike the other two films discussed above, this Japanese production is a straightforward documentary (in the sense of documenting activity without overt commentary or interpretation, not polemically like those of Michael Moore), of the ritual path through the ten realms from hell to Buddhahood. Beautifully and sensitively filmed, it provides an important visual record of this centuries-old tradition in the mountains of northern Japan. It follows the many-day event closely, from the opening ceremonies, through the “hellish” middle-of-the-night smoke-filled session of sutra chanting, the sumo wrestling competition, to the ecstatic celebration at the final stage of the path. Some of the earliest work on Shugendō by Western scholars (for example, Carmen Blacker and H. Byron Earhart) focused on this Mt. Haguro tradition, and this film provides a very good visual presentation of the subject.

As the film concentrates on a straightforward presentation of the ritual activities, it does not touch on (and perhaps studiously avoids) controversial aspects of this

tradition, such as the serious cultural and social rifts brought about by the “separation of kami and Buddhas” (*shinbutsu bunri*) policy of a century ago, and ongoing current conflicts between different keepers of this tradition. Perhaps this is just as well; the purpose of the film is to document a set of practices currently maintained by one group, and unpleasant social conflicts can be handled in a different venue.

There are some drawbacks for recommending this film to an academic audience outside Japan. Since the soundtrack is only in Japanese, showing it in a Western classroom situation would require a continuous commentary and/or explanation, as was done during its screening at the IAHR conference in Tokyo in 2005. It is also very expensive.

Although each of these films in its own way attempts to “teach” (or at least communicate) something, none is pedantic. But then again, neither are they very pedagogically accessible, that is, each would require considerable guidance and explanation in a Western-university classroom situation. *Shugendō Now* is the most aesthetically pleasing and accessible for a student audience: *Mountains* connects best with the history of Shugendō; *Haguro* presents the most information on the ritual and practices of its subject. All are highly recommended for experiencing and understanding the Japanese mountain ascetic religious tradition.

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