

CURRENT TRANSFORMATIONS OF SHUGENDŌ PRACTICE



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THE JAPANESE Agency for Cultural Affairs designated Shugendō as part of Japan’s cultural heritage in 2020 under the nationwide “Japan Heritage” campaign. Since then, this recognition has been utilized to promote Shugendō practices in Wakayama and other regions. These efforts include offering ascetic workshops to the public and enhancing tourism marketing locally, for example by supporting temples or individuals engaging in agricultural activities such as rice-planting or the production of *sake*. Additionally, Shugendō groups nationwide are increasingly active on digital platforms, forging connections and collaborations with international counterparts, such as the Korinji Shugen Dojo in Wisconsin, USA. These developments have sparked debate on various fronts, including environmental policies, sustainability, questions about national identity, and cultural heritage. It is important to explore the dynamics between practitioners of Shugendō and external stakeholders, whether they interact through collaborative ventures or conflicts of interest. Moreover, the current situation raises questions about how religion influences socioeconomics and shapes perceptions of the categories of “tradition,” “religion,” and “culture” in contemporary society.

My recent field research and extensive engagement with local stakeholders have yielded valuable insights into the cultural heritage campaign and the evolving role of Shugendō, particularly in anticipation of Expo 2025 in Osaka. According to Amada Akinori (2020), Shugendō has become an increasingly prominent feature in mass media and has benefited from a surge in tourism linked to sites deemed sacred or powerful by various religious practitioners. Furthermore, over the last several years Shugendō has undergone a transformative process of national and international proliferation, as well as commercialization and populariza-

tion through media channels. In his lecture at Harvard University titled “Ancient Spirit, Modern Body: The Rise of Global Shugendō,” Shayne Dahl (2021) described Shugendō as evolving into a “transnational religion.” This evolution has seen Shugendō practices in some contexts diverge from their original exclusively ritualistic religious framework. Shugendō has even been utilized as a tool to promote rural areas grappling with depopulation, contributing to their revitalization efforts (Amada 2019, 148).

The international and interdisciplinary focus on Shugendō studies has intensified in recent years. Many practitioners, both Japanese and non-Japanese, have responded positively to the diverse research initiatives undertaken. For example, one practitioner created his own brand “Hijirisha” in Yamagata Prefecture and is actively involved in various activities related to “modern” Shugendō practice. He engages in cultural revitalization, wilderness exploration, handicraft promotion, and educational initiatives spanning from junior high to university levels, alongside his research on local culture.

Alena Yushu Eckelmann, a female non-Japanese practitioner, engages in Shugendō in the Wakayama area. Beyond her role as a *yamabushi* 山伏, she is a licensed forest-bathing (*shinrin yoku* 森林浴) guide and contributes occasionally to online magazines such as *Buddhist Door* with her “Shugendō Diaries.” Her contributions focus on her personal experiences as a non-Japanese woman participating in contemporary Japanese Shugendō and document the revival of Shugendō groups, rituals, and the revitalization of historic Shugendō sites. Eckelmann has also conducted interviews with academics studying Shugendō and filmmakers producing documentaries about its current practice. In essence, these examples highlight the dynamic and multifaceted engagement of Shugendō practitioners who are active in the media or digital “natives.” They come from various backgrounds and affiliations and contribute to practice, education, environmental advocacy, and media representation both within Japan and internationally.

In addition, Shugendō has become associated with environmental activism, as exemplified by figures such as Richard Pearce (also known by his *yamabushi* name, Yanchabō やんちゃ坊), a non-Japanese Shugendō practitioner and ecotourism consultant. Pearce is the founder of “Sustainable Daisen” based in Tottori Prefecture, an organization that focuses on initiatives including the protection of the Japanese giant salamander and promoting sustainable lifestyles through educational programs. Similarly, Tim Bunting (known as Ryosen 諒宣), a Shugendō practitioner from New Zealand, operates from Yamagata and serves as a project manager at “Yamabushido,” a platform that offers *yamabushi* training tailored for non-Japanese audiences. Aside from their own media platforms, these individuals and others have been featured in interviews with Joy Jarman-Walsh on the YouTube channel “Seek Sustainable Japan.”

These examples underscore the growing visibility and accessibility of Shugendō as well as its related themes in the contemporary digitalized and globalized world of the twenty-first century. They also suggest Shugendō's role as a manifestation of "diffused religiosity" and "ecospirituality," reflecting a global trend towards integrating ecological and spiritual concerns rooted in animistic and shamanistic worldviews (Roth 2019).

Though many have examined Shugendō as a distinctly Japanese tradition, Kikuchi Hiroki (2020) critiques religious discourses that emphasize ethnic affiliation. In particular, he argues against ethno-anthropological perspectives that assert mountain religions like Shugendō are inherently Japanese (*Nihon koyū shinkō ron* 日本固有信仰論). Instead, he suggests the emergence of ideas centered on fundamental beliefs (*kisō shinkō ron* 基層信仰論). These fundamental beliefs may resonate within broader cultural debates such as theories of Japaneseness (*Nihonjinron* 日本人論), and Shugendō may thus serve as a platform for Neo-Nativist interpretations and expressions. At the same time, these beliefs may also resonate with individuals and organizations outside of Japan.

Alongside Japanese Shugendō groups, international groups also use the internet to establish their YouTube channels and share content on social networks. When exploring social networks related to religion in Japan, one encounters numerous public groups, official accounts (such as those of Buddhist temples or schools), and profiles of various religious stakeholders. These platforms facilitate discussions, debates, and the exchange of information on a global scale, reflecting the diverse and interconnected nature of contemporary religious discourse and practice.

Within the realm of Shugendō-related groups on social media, there exist various categories that cater to different styles of interaction and information sharing. One notable example is the Facebook group "Mountain Religions," managed by two international scholars. Despite its broader focus on mountain religions globally, the group prominently features discussions and posts related to Japanese mountain religions, including Shugendō. It boasts 230 members from around the world and allows for open participation. Members contribute information and engage in discussions on events, publications, and various topics related to mountain religions.

In contrast to the inclusive and seemingly neutral approach of "Mountain Religions," there is the official profile page of Koshikidake Shōdō, a Japanese man who claims to be a certified Shugendō priest. His profile, presented in both Japanese and English, has gained over 5,290 followers worldwide. He claims to be the head of the "Koshiki tradition" and the founder of the International Shugendō Association (ISA). On his page, Shōdō regularly shares photos depicting rituals, lectures, and mountain ascents involving international participants. His posts often attract comments, including positive feedback, expressions of interest in participation, and expectations regarding various rituals, often accompanied by emojis symbol-

izing prayer gestures (*gasshō* 合掌). Additionally, he extends invitations to paid instructional training opportunities and shares his critical perspectives on various aspects of Shugendō practice, clarifying what he considers to be authentic within the tradition. These examples illustrate the diverse ways in which Shugendō is represented and engaged with online, ranging from scholarly discussions in international forums to the personal and authoritative voice of practitioners and leaders within the tradition.

In a recent post on Facebook, he shares information on an upcoming program called “Koshikidake Mountain Training 2025,” including details on participation fees and other logistics while also reflecting on most recent Mountain Training events in one of his Facebook posts:

This time, more than 40 participants gathered, with over half coming from overseas—a situation unprecedented in our history. We conducted various events, including mountain ascension, religious services, waterfall meditation, reciting the Heart Sutra a thousand times, ordination ceremony, fire ritual, and the Esoteric Initiation. Each event was meaningful and significant.

Despite preparing since the end of last year, the smooth execution of the events was challenging, causing some frustration. However, by viewing these challenges as unique opportunities, I was able to maintain a calm mindset. Through this experience, I reaffirmed the importance of perceiving everything positively and never forgetting to express gratitude.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the participants and everyone who supported this event. I am also deeply grateful for the blessings of the deities and Buddhas. I intend to apply the experiences and insights gained from this training to future activities. (Facebook post published by Shodo Koshikidake on 30 May 2024)

Posts like these received a reaction of around 60 to 120 likes and 10 to 30 comments by Facebook users throughout 2024. Followers of Shōdō’s page often share self-doubts concerning ritual practice or ask further questions regarding opportunities for participation. As mentioned above, some individuals or groups within Shugendō assert claims of authenticity and exclusivity within their respective traditions. Utilizing digital tools, these stakeholders project a sense of “sacred power” associated with Japan’s mountains through digitally mediated Buddhist semantics, practices, and aesthetics. These stakeholders often express their views online while

simultaneously promoting paid training programs that promise self-optimization through participation.

Given the dynamic and abundant nature of accessible online materials from these online Shugendō groups, it becomes crucial to discern which individuals and groups are disseminating what types of content, rituals, ideas and practices. This observation helps distinguish between neutral information exchange, collective religious activities online, and the personal teachings published by individual actors within the community. Such distinctions could be important for understanding how Shugendō is represented and engaged with in the digital age, where various interpretations of authenticity and practices are showcased to global audiences interested in Japanese mountain asceticism.

As the tradition has undergone digitalization and mediatization, Shugendō has also undergone a process of heritagization. Shugendō was officially recognized as a form of Japanese “heritage” in 2020. This heritage status acknowledges narratives of Japanese culture and tradition according to regional historical significance or unique characteristics. The program, run by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, aims to encourage regional revitalization by preserving, utilizing, and strategically promoting cultural properties that embody these narratives. In 2020, Katsuragi Shugen in Wakayama Prefecture was designated as a Japan Mountain Heritage Site, one of ninety-one cultural properties included under this designation. The representation of Shugendō within the Japan Heritage campaign is overseen by the Katsuragi Shugen Japan Heritage Promotion Council Secretariat, part of Wakayama Prefecture’s Tourism Promotion Division. This body develops informational materials and websites in both English and Japanese. Recent outcomes of this initiative include digital and printed pamphlets, maps, and content available on their official website. Additionally, the Katsuragi Shugen Department offers training for *yamabushi* who wish to serve as guides for tourist groups visiting the area. The campaign also successfully partnered with the hiking app YAMAP to digitally map popular pilgrimage routes and significant sites associated with Katsuragi Shugendō practice.

Governmental and private entities seek recognition from UNESCO and other bodies as a means to validate and promote specific historical narratives, thereby gaining national and international legitimacy (Rots 2019; Teeuwen 2020; Reader 2023). These efforts may lead to visible transformations in worship sites and ritual practices, potentially transitioning them from private to public properties that are simultaneously secular and sacred. Heritage-making processes could ultimately redefine these sites and practices as national, public, and secularly sacred entities. Therefore, it remains crucial to monitor future developments and transformations in the practice of Shugendō. These questions highlight the evolving nature of Shugendō and its adaptation within the broader context of cultural heritage and tourism promotion strategies.

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