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What's at Stake in Designating Japan's Sacred Mountains as UNESCO World Heritage Sites?

Shugendo Practices in the Kii Peninsula

In this article I assess the social and environmental impact of UNESCO (United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization) World Heritage designation on a sacred mountain, Mount Ōmine in Japan's Kii Peninsula (Mie, Wakayama, and Nara prefectures), paying special attention to a community of male ascetics who direct their principal energies toward performing austerities in the surrounding natural environment. Though situated in an isolated location, this place and these practices became the subject of great regional, national, and global interest after World Heritage designation by UNESCO in June 2004. The ascetic training grounds and lush forests make the Kii Peninsula an ideal candidate for UNESCO's "cultural landscape" category of World Heritage. Since 1992 UNESCO has recognized sites that combine its two prior categories of "natural" and "cultural" properties as cultural landscapes.

KEYWORDS: UNESCO—Shugendo—Mount Ōmine—World Heritage sites

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INCREASINGLY, organizations such as UNESCO and the World Wildlife Fund are realizing that the majority of the world's surviving healthy forests and mountain landscapes are those considered "sacred" by inhabitants. This has impressed upon these organizations the importance of cultural factors in land conservation.¹ Their recent efforts to protect sacred sites can be seen against a larger background of sustainability advocates collaborating with leaders of world religious traditions. Such partnerships combine strong roots in science and a concrete vision for a sustainable future with a broad grassroots presence to help shape the world views and lifestyles of large segments of the earth's population (GARDNER 2002, 5). UNESCO has mobilized this "sacredness-culture-biodiversity triptych" (HAY-EDIE 2000, 10) in its promotion of projects such as the "Man [*sic*] and the Biosphere Program," "Proclamations of the Oral and Intangible Masterpieces of Humanity" (UNESCO 2001; 2002) and the cultural landscapes category of World Heritage. In this article I focus on cultural landscapes in a

* As this article was being prepared for publication, Mount Fuji, Japan's seventeenth World Heritage Site, appeared on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2013.

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See <http://whc.unesco.org> for a complete list of the criteria for natural and cultural properties pursuant to the 1972 World Heritage Convention, a current list of all World Heritage properties, and the relevant UNESCO documents discussed below (accessed 14 May 2012).

1. A professor named Murtiraja from the University of Delhi who convened the "Regional seminar on the role of Sacred Groves for the Conservation and Management of Biological Diversity" at the Kerala Forestry Research Institute in India in December 1997, observed in northeast India during research on shifting cultivation and soil nutrient recycling that the only healthy forests left standing were sacred groves. The Kerala conference arose from efforts by UNESCO to secure allies in launching an initiative on sacred sites (HAY-EDIE 2000, 11).



FIGURE 1. “Gazing west” (西の覗き *nishi no nozoki*), 2002 Lotus Ascent of Mount Ōmine.

discussion of austerities performed in the natural environment of a Japanese sacred mountain.²

During three summers of fieldwork as a participant-observer (2002, 2003, and 2007) and producer of a feature documentary film on contemporary Shugendo practitioners in the Kii mountains (ABELA and MCGUIRE 2009), I tried to understand how UNESCO’s idea of World Heritage interacts and sometimes collides with local and national Japanese understandings of self-identity, environmentalism, heritage preservation, and tourism. After giving a brief introduction to Shugendo mountain training in Japan’s sacred peaks, I provide an overview of UNESCO’s activities

since its declaration of the World Heritage Convention in 1972. I argue that UNESCO World Heritage designation practices in Japan can be best understood as systems bestowing elite cultural prizes to stimulate sluggish tourist markets during the period of recession, zero growth, and social despair known as the “lost decade(s)” (1990s–present). This is in opposition to UNESCO’s stated goals of protecting and safeguarding the cultural and natural “patrimony of humanity.” In important ways the ironies and contradictions of UNESCO designation in Japan mirror well-documented gaps between stated ideals and the legislative, political, budgetary, and human resource realities of Japan’s national parks, national treasures, and cultural properties. As scholars have demonstrated, since the Meiji period Japan’s national park policy has had a strong tendency toward tourism

2. “Natural environment” is an ambiguous referent requiring clarification. I follow Catherine KNIGHT’s definition: “...environments such as wetlands, rivers or forests which support ecological systems of flora and fauna. Some areas may be partially or substantially modified (such as a river with concrete embankments) but still support significant biological diversity” (2010, footnote 1).

promotion and development over stewardship and conservation (OYADOMARI 1985; KNIGHT 2004, 2007, 2010; MCCORMACK 2001; KINGSTON 2005), and the national treasure and cultural property system has prioritized the creation of an orthodox culture over safeguarding cultural assets and performance traditions (LAW 1997; THORNBURY 1997; HAFSTEIN 2004; OAKES 2009; LOO 2007). I discuss each system in turn but my focus will be UNESCO World Heritage designation. In the final section, I describe how the campaign to designate the forested mountains and sacred pilgrimage trails of the Kii Peninsula has reactivated an ongoing controversy about what the Kinpusenji lineage of Shugendo (headquartered in Yoshino, Nara prefecture) claims is a 1,300-year-old prohibition against women entering Mount Ōmine's sacred peaks. The introduction of an imported, global notion of heritage has triggered reflection upon UNESCO's legitimacy, Japanese national identity, the environmental impact of mass tourism, and the changing roles of women in Shugendo and Japanese society more generally.

Shugendo

Shugendō 修験道, the “way to acquire power,” is a syncretistic tradition whose leadership and rank and file membership have borrowed selectively from Buddhist, Daoist, and Shinto sources. None of these borrowings is “final or authoritative”—when cosmology does not fit natural mountain formations, writes Paul SWANSON, “so much the worse for cosmology” (1981, 79). Denying themselves adequate food and sleep while trekking great distances in treacherous mountain terrain, Shugendo practitioners perform these austerities to access the spiritual power of patron deities for worldly benefits.³ Though retreats formerly spanned several weeks or months, they have now been drastically shortened—weeklong and even overnight Shugendo experiences are now the norm—to accommodate modern work schedules. Participants claim that time spent in contemplation walking the peaks, away from the noise of their everyday existence, helps one sort out chaotic personal relationships and cultivate gratitude. Ego falls away, resulting in a transformed view of the world and one's place in it.

Shugendo addresses the problem of desire in a pragmatic way by offering individuals a sacralized landscape on which to cultivate a higher state of consciousness to transcend mundane passions. A priest-guide interviewed in 1981 explains this practice as follows:

While you're concentrating on getting past these dangerous places your mind is clear. You do not think of money, sex, drink or any other distraction.

3. Space permits only a brief summary. Readers interested in learning about Shugendo practices in greater detail may see EARHART 1970; BLACKER 1975; SWANSON 1981; MIYAKE 2001; FAURE et al. 2009; ABELA and MCGUIRE 2009; MCGUIRE 2011.

Perhaps for only a second you think of *mu* (“no-thing-ness”).... This is the state of mind you must cultivate. (SWANSON 1981, 72)

Participants gain confidence that their successful bout of temporary resistance can be applied in their everyday lives upon descent from the mountains.

Though some overlap can be seen between the form and motivations for certain practices in Shugendo and esoteric Buddhist schools, Shugendo is best regarded as an independent tradition. Throughout history, Kinpusenji stakeholders have, for pragmatic reasons (survival during the Meiji separation of Shinto and Buddhist divinities is only one example), presented the tradition and its cosmology and soteriology as having far greater overlap with more powerful religious and political institutions than ever existed in actual practice in the mountains.⁴

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE CITY

Since formal interviews and even most casual conversations are inappropriate during Shugendo retreats, I accepted invitations to visit the homes, workplaces, and temples of several fellow participants and guides I met during three occurrences of the annual overnight Lotus Ascent of Mount Ōmine (*Renge nyūbu* 蓮華入峯) organized by Kinpusenji temple for lay practitioners. These follow-up visits took me to Okinawa, Kyushu, Osaka, Wakayama, Tokyo, and Hokkaido, where I learned how ascetics fit these austere mountain practices into their “normal” lives as TV producers, UNESCO employees, bankers, nightclub and cement company owners, day laborers, mountain guides, pastry chefs, and temple priests. For a significant number of urban lay practitioners, World Heritage status of the region was a primary initial attraction and gateway into Shugendo.

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE

Adopted in 1972 for the protection and preservation of precious natural and cultural sites, as of May 2012 the World Heritage Convention of UNESCO had been ratified by 189 member states and inscribed 936 properties (725 cultural properties, 183 natural properties, and 28 mixed “cultural landscapes”) from 153 countries on the World Heritage List.⁵ These include such famous sites as the Great Wall of China, Yellowstone National Park, and the ancient medina of Fez. Nominations for World Heritage designation requires well-documented governmental commitment to protect a site in perpetuity, surveys of clear and undisputed boundaries, and unambiguous arguments for the “outstanding uniqueness” of sites representing certain historical, aesthetic, or scientific genres.

4. I discuss this complex subject elsewhere in greater detail; see MCGUIRE 2005.

5. Source: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list> (accessed 14 May 2012).

Though in its formative years UNESCO's World Heritage selections were largely informed by Western aesthetic notions favoring monumental architecture, national parks, and predominantly Christian religious buildings ("tangible" heritage), in 1994 UNESCO revised its designation criteria to counterbalance its Euro-American bias and recognize new types of properties more representative of the cultures of the global south (HAY-EDIE 2001, 1; UNESCO 2001, 3–4; HAFSTEIN 2004, 40–69). Designation of cultural landscapes and natural sacred sites such as the Maori sacred volcanoes in New Zealand's Tongariro National Park (1993) and the rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras (1995) followed from this initial corrective (BOUKHARI 2002, 2). These adjustments, however, still left much of Africa, Oceania, and to a lesser extent Asia and Latin America with far fewer sites than Europe and North America. The primary rationale for discrepancy is that countries in these regions lacked the finances and expertise to assemble applications for UNESCO nominations.

In 2001, UNESCO Secretary-General Matsuura Koichiro announced the "First Proclamation of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" offering individual states lump sums of up to \$20,000 USD to prepare their applications. The proclamation, Matsuura claimed, would further "fill in the map of cultural diversity" (UNESCO 2001, 3) by including "intangible" heritage such as sacred and cultural spaces, ritual performance traditions, and even prayer (UNESCO 2001, 3–4). This new shift in emphasis toward intangible heritage bears the distinct imprint of the Japanese domestic cultural property legislation, which is no surprise considering that Japan is UNESCO's second largest financial backer behind the United States. Japan contributed approximately \$82 million (7.9 million JPY) of a total budget of \$653 million (12.5 percent overall) and sixty-six full-time staff members (third behind the US and France) for the biennium 2010–2011 (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Japan further contributes several "Funds in Trust" toward education and capacity building in the global south with a focus on professional development activities for Asian heritage specialists.

UNESCO's overall budget seems robust, but the World Heritage Center has only a \$4 million annual operating budget (less than 1 percent of UNESCO's budget) with an additional \$5 million in extra-budgetary resources.⁶ World Heritage designation enhances a site's prestige and visibility in global networks, opening up possibilities for guidance and support from its fellow designees and funding from a variety of international agencies. After designation, though, ultimate responsibility for a site's conservation and preservation lies with the nominating state party.

With its limited means UNESCO seeks to empower states to make the most of the designation and not squander the salvific aura of World Heritage by a poorly

6. Source: Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs; www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/coop/unesco/outline.html (accessed 5 October 2013).

conceived grab for tourist revenues. UNESCO recognizes that the temptation of tourist windfalls drives competition by some states to nominate as many sites as possible with no intention of providing adequate safeguards and protection. "Because there is no self-regulation," admits World Heritage Center Director Francesco Bandarin, "the problem is very difficult to resolve" (BOUKHARI 2002, 2). Attempting to limit the lead taken by "heritage champions" such as Spain (thirty-six sites), Italy (thirty-five sites), and China (twenty-eight sites) at the turn of the twenty-first century, the World Heritage Committee resolved in 2003 to accept only one site per country in any given year (BOUKHARI 2002, 2).

Japan's World Heritage Sites

For the first twenty years after the declaration of the World Heritage Convention, Japan did not seek nomination for a single site. Then, between 1993 and 2003, its Bureau of Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō) secured World Heritage designations for eleven Japanese sites, including Hiroshima's Atomic Bomb Dome and Peace Park, Okinawa's Ryukyu castles (*gusuku*), and Yakushima's ancient cryptomeria forests. A twelfth area designated in June 2004, the sacred Kii mountain range, is the subject of this article. Between 2004 and 2013, five additional cultural and natural sites in Japan were designated and twelve more sites appear on the "Tentative World Heritage" list, awaiting review.⁷

Nearly all of Japan's designations embody what Ron Engel calls UNESCO's emerging "global religious vision" in transmitting to future generations humanity's "universal values" (ENGEL 2004, 193). ENGEL interprets "religious vision" to include perspectives symbolizing "creation, alienation and redemption" (2004, 193), each of which can be seen in the Japanese sites. Prominent spokespeople from Shugendo communities in Nikko and Yoshino have been quick to appropriate this discourse, placing their hopes in UNESCO for opportunities to reclaim religious heritage thrown out by Meiji ideologues or American Occupational forces.

AMBIVALENCE AND RUPTURE IN SHUGENDO'S PAST

Shugendo has known extended periods of patronage by elite and even imperial institutions so it cannot be considered an historically marginalized or liminal tradition (TYLER 1989; MOERMAN 1997; 2004). But Shugendo as an institution was abolished by official imperial decree in 1868 for being a "superstitious" amalgam of Buddhist, Daoist, and "Shinto" ritual practices. The Meiji government expressly prohibited worship of its *gongen* 権現 (Buddhist incarnations of Shinto deities). During the so-called "dissociation of kami and buddhas"

7. For a complete list of and documents for Japan's World Heritage sites, see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/jp> (accessed 9 September 2013).



FIGURE 2. Tanaka Riten prays to the morning sun, 2007 Lotus Ascent.

(*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離) of the Meiji period the leadership of Shugendo and other combinatory traditions were given the choice of reformulating themselves as State Shinto priests, Buddhist priests, or returning to lay life (MIYAKE 2001, 12; TANAKA 2004, 22).

Kinpusenji priest and spokesperson Tanaka Riten argues that the architects of State Shinto sought to create a “monotheistic tradition resembling Christianity” that would enable national unity and the acquisition of a global empire under the emperor as head priest (ABELA and MCGUIRE 2009). Over time, Tanaka insists, this reckless policy proved to be “out of touch with daily realities of Japanese people,” and devastating to the Japanese military, economy, society, and environment (ABELA and MCGUIRE 2009). Barbara Ambros’ nuanced analysis of primary and secondary Meiji-era sources from another sacred mountain (Ōyama in the Kanto plain) provides counterpoint to Tanaka’s polemic. AMBROS (2008, 239) argues for a more ambivalent Meiji experience among Ōyama’s various patrons, caretakers, and pilgrims and cautions against assuming that the stated objectives and policies of State Shinto critiqued above were applied uniformly or with equal consistency. Ambros also reveals how the Meiji state gave many institutions opportunities to operate independently and gain economic stability through local and regional partnerships such as the successful parish system established at Mount Ōyama.

Clever Mobilization of World Heritage by Kinpusenji's Leadership

Throughout its history, Shugendo's leaders have reinvented the tradition in response to proscription, ideological attack, and followers' changing needs. In 1995 Kinpusenji priests and local officials who are themselves practitioners started a clever campaign to secure UNESCO designation to imbue Mount Ōmine with the aura of World Heritage. Culminating in the successful designation in June 2004, the comprehensive Kii Peninsula cultural landscape—which includes Mount Kōya, Nachi falls, and the Kumano pilgrimage trail—commemorates a pilgrimage route (the Okugake) that neither the Bureau of Cultural Affairs nor Nara Prefectural Government planned on designating as National or Prefectural Cultural Properties. Though complicated, their reasoning can be summarized as follows. First, there is insufficient evidence of the Okugake's existence as a contiguous pilgrimage trail dating back far enough in history. Second, Nara already has a surplus of National Treasures and World Heritage sites conveniently clustered in its ancient capital. Research to secure these designations was costly and time consuming. Why should an overburdened bureaucratic staff undertake another campaign to designate an obscure pilgrimage trail in Nara's hinterlands?

So how did Kinpusenji's priests circumvent these obstacles? By collaborating with religious and bureaucratic administrators in Nara, Mie, and Wakayama, Tanaka and his staff helped weave together a comprehensive three-for-one package deal (Mount Kōya, Nachi, and the Kumano pilgrimage route encompassing Mount Ōmine and the Okugake). This brilliant example of expedient means appealed to bureaucratic sensibilities, tapped Kumano's ritual history and imaginative sacred geography, and took advantage of the serendipitous precedent of Santiago de Compostela (a joint designation between France and Spain) as the first pilgrimage trail designated a World Heritage cultural landscape. In designating the Kii Peninsula as a World Heritage cultural landscape, the needs and values of local cosmology, rational bureaucracy, and internationalization all came together. Where adequate historical evidence of the kind so valued by geographers, historians, and civil servants was lacking, semi-legendary documents, chronicles, liturgical records, and the founding narratives (*engi* 縁起) of shrines and temples were presented (ICOMOS 2004, 34).

National identity politics and the restoration of spiritual values, too, played prominent roles in the campaign. Recognition by UNESCO, according to Tanaka, would be a critical step toward reclaiming Japan's religious consciousness discarded by the American Occupational forces' forceful separation of church and state (personal communication [interview], Yoshino, 7 July 2003). Tanaka, who initiated the nomination, has stated his hope that UNESCO designation will boost Kumano residents' sense of regional identity and impress upon all Japanese the



FIGURE 3. “We hope Yoshinoyama is registered as a World Heritage Site,” Yoshino, 2002.

value of a formerly proscribed combinatory tradition’s distinct religious heritage (ABELA and MCGUIRE 2009).⁸

QUESTIONING UNESCO’S RHETORIC

Prior to the Kii Peninsula’s designation as a World Heritage site, an active community-based campaign instilled pride of place and promoted keeping it clean and its festivals well attended. Other voices from within and outside the community discussed below,⁹ however, have questioned UNESCO’s rhetoric of “promoting peace and security in the world through collaboration among nations”¹⁰ while ostensibly appropriating Japan’s sacred sites for a global consumer market. Though UNESCO strives to help local and international organizations convert its

8. Terence Hay-Edie’s analysis of a Tibetan minority group in Dolpo, Nepal, finding opportunities for “new myth-making exercises in world heritage ordered space” illustrates a similar convergence between UNESCO and marginalized communities’ interests in heritage protection. In both cases, claims for uniqueness and authenticity rest upon stewardship of sacred mountains (HAY-EDIE 2001, 3).

9. Here I depart from ethnographic convention by naming individuals with whom I spoke and walked the mountains. Harasawa, Tanaka, and Tateishi have published and given interviews detailing their opinions, thus claiming their positions as public spokespersons. Leaving them unnamed would effectively silence them and block their expressed goals of raising awareness about these debates. Each individual has given his expressed permission to cite his words and deeds.

10. This is in Article 1 (“Purposes and Functions”) of UNESCO’s founding constitution adopted in London on 16 November 1945.

ideals into effective “instruments for action” (ENGEL 2004, 192), it is my view that Japan’s World Heritage designations do not embody UNESCO’s founding principles of protecting endangered sites in countries whose own governments cannot afford to do so, and is best understood as a system of bestowing elite cultural prizes. Why do Japan’s World Heritage Sites such as the shrines and temples of Nara and Nikko, sites recognized and protected by the domestic cultural property system for decades, require further protection by UNESCO? Nara has twenty-five national treasures, fifty-three cultural properties, and was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage list in 1998. Nikko, with its nine national treasures and ninety-four important cultural assets, was designated as World Heritage in 1999. As any tourist can attest, you cannot walk down the street in Japan’s historical heartland, whether in the tiniest hamlet or giant metropolis, without encountering signposts indicating the neighborhood’s “important cultural property” or “national treasure.”¹¹ Have sites such as Nara and Nikko become World Heritage out of a concern that they are endangered or obscure? Or is it a strategy to distinguish them from a sea of ubiquitous “national treasures” and “important cultural properties” awaiting tourists on Japan’s well-trodden travel networks?

A BRIEF COMPARISON WITH JAPAN’S NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

Critical scholars of Japan’s national park system have made similar arguments that park policy has tended to prioritize tourism promotion and natural resource development over conservation and protection. Political scientist OYADOMARI Motoko (1985) historicizes alliances between “pure,” “moderate,” and “utilitarian” preservationists and “economics first” groups who lobbied policy makers during four key historical periods to show that overall park policy has favored use over preservation. New Zealand-based independent scholar and environmental policy consultant Catherine Knight provides fine-grained, multivocal, and biocentric analyses of shifting policies toward and legislative decisions regarding conservation, habitat protection, tourism promotion, and resource exploitation in Japan (KNIGHT 2004; 2007; 2010). Knight signals that Japan is not alone among nations of similar geographic size and population density in its struggles

11. Yamagata (northeastern Japan) and the northern island of Hokkaido are not saturated with cultural properties or national treasures. The Ainu have received an intangible cultural property designation for a form of folk dance at Shiraoi, but none of their land has been designated as important cultural property or World Heritage. One could argue that designating an Ainu sacred landscape would make more sense than yet another World Heritage site in Nara. It would also provide political leverage and access to resources traditionally denied to this marginalized indigenous community. The particular political and historical processes by which certain communities’ expressive cultures and sacred geographies have been written out of canonical chronicles is discussed below in connection with national treasures and domestic cultural property legislation.

to adequately protect its natural heritage. KNIGHT (2010, paragraph 2) further suggests that despite many problems and contradictions, it is remarkable Japan has retained as much natural habitat as it has. According to Knight, the three primary threats to Japan's natural environment and wildlife (habitat loss, poorly controlled hunting, and introduced species) are all attributable to a failure to protect habitat and direct habitat destruction due to inadequate legislation and conservation management policies (KNIGHT 2010, paragraphs 6 and 7).

Japan's twenty-nine national parks constitute 5.9 percent of its total land, slightly less than other countries of similar geographic size: United Kingdom (14 parks comprising 8 percent of total land), Korea (17; 6.6 percent), and New Zealand (14; 11.5 percent). Japan's national park areas are not, however, protected from "environmentally detrimental development" or human activity (KNIGHT 2010, paragraph 8). Only five areas totaling 5,631 hectares and 0.015 percent of total land area have been designated "wilderness areas" where "activities entailing adverse effects on ecosystems are strictly prohibited" (KNIGHT 2010, paragraph 9). An additional 95,000 hectares have been designated national or prefectural "conservation areas" in which human activities are limited but not prohibited (Environment Agency 2000, vol. 2, 144, cited in KNIGHT 2010, paragraph 10). Passage of the 1987 Resort Law, ostensibly created to provide affordable leisure space to harried office workers, deliberately encouraged development of tourist facilities in national parks (McCORMACK 2001, 87–88; KNIGHT 2010, paragraph 9). McCORMACK (2001, 88) suggests the Resort Law evoked a "perceived need for relaxation and communion with the natural order" but in practice created a "bubble of speculation and corruption" that burst several years later. Mountaintops were leveled and forests were cleared to make way for golf courses, ski resorts, and luxury hotels that were left unfinished or abandoned after the bubble burst. I have personally observed several such abandoned and degraded sites while walking along the Kumano pilgrimage path near Shingu, Wakayama, and represented them in the documentary film *Shugendō Now* (2009).

Challenges documented by Oyadomari, McCormack, Knight, and the Environment Agency indicate that national park land is inadequately protected from unsustainably managed tourism, hunting, real estate development, natural resource exploitation, and introduced species. Even where appropriately robust legislation is in place, overburdened and underfinanced park staff without proper training in wilderness or wildlife conservation cannot perform assigned research and conservation tasks and instead devote their time to mitigating damage caused by park visitors (KNIGHT 2010, paragraph 28). With this comparative data presented on the national park system, I return to UNESCO World Heritage.

HIGH CLASS HERITAGE,
ONE RANK ABOVE NATIONAL CULTURAL PROPERTIES

Harasawa Kenta, Secretary-General of UNESCO's Nikko branch (Tochigi prefecture), critiques and praises its institutional practices. He personally oversaw the designation of "The Shrines and Temples of Nikko" in 1999. HARASAWA (2001, 5) likens World Heritage status to the Michelin Five Star Rating or the equivalent to conspicuous brand name goods like Luis Vuitton or Prada so fetishized in Japan and elsewhere. Knowledgeable about UNESCO's activities since the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Harasawa perceives World Heritage status as having become simply one more rank on the cultural properties prestige hierarchy, above prefectural and nationally-designated cultural properties. In the eyes of most tourists, World Heritage trumps national or prefectural property. But, as discussed below, Harasawa also finds opportunities for pluralistic commemoration within UNESCO unavailable within the domestic national treasure and cultural property systems.

A research fellow at the Tokyo Cultural Properties Research Center who requested anonymity explained that important cultural properties are commonly said to stand in a lateral relationship of equals. This is the official line (*tatema* 建前). Among local residents, however, rivalries arise regarding who was recognized first and whose site or practices conform closest to what has been established as the "original" form. In an effort to stand out from this crowd of "equals," some seek World Heritage designation to distinguish themselves from their colleagues.

National tourist campaigns and popular television programs in Japan have been quick to exploit World Heritage. NHK morning TV dramas in 2002 and 2003 had UNESCO World Heritage sites as their backdrops. "Sakura" was filmed using the famous thatched huts of Shirakawa-go. "Manten" featured the dramatic scenery of Yakushima's natural environment. Commemorative "goods" in both locations were stamped with their UNESCO pedigree. The resultant tourist deluge has made some sites more endangered than if they had never been designated World Heritage. This echoes the experiences recounted by Knight and McCormack at national parks. On tiny Yakushima island, for example, hordes of day-trippers have trampled the exposed roots of sacred cryptomeria trees, forcing caretakers to construct unsightly wooden rampways.

The Solution to Global Armed Conflict?

If one were to take the preamble to the UNESCO constitution at face value, global armed conflict could be solved by nations joining together in appreciating each other's cultural heritage:

That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed; that ignorance of each other's ways and

lives have been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war.... That the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.¹²

Proclamations like this may stir emotions but they lack local knowledge, resources, legislative force, and the ability to follow through on development plans. This results in an enormous gap between its flowery prose and the actual situation in designated communities. Until UNESCO maintains commitment to follow through in helping sites manage the after-effects of designation, there can be only minimal hope that they will make good on objectives suggested by the late Lithuanian writer and UNESCO ambassador Ugne Karvelis:

At a time when we are calling for an authentic dialogue between civilizations, when we are fighting to maintain—in the context of globalization—cultural and linguistic diversity, of which the oral and intangible heritage is an essential component, the search for standards of protection for this type of heritage is essential. (UNESCO 2001, 19)

Whose Heritage? UNESCO's Ideals and Local Japanese Realities

The designation of Japan's Kii Peninsula is an illustrative case of the collision between UNESCO ideals and local realities. It is important that we ask fundamental questions about the nature of cultural heritage protection in both the UNESCO World Heritage and Japanese national treasure and cultural property systems. To whom do these cultural properties properly belong? What does it mean to "protect" and "preserve" cultural heritage? Who stands to inherit World Heritage? Does a UNESCO World Heritage site properly rank above a Japanese national or prefectural designation? These questions are not complicated, just generally neglected.

Rather than seek out heritage that is actually endangered, or decidedly "folkloristic," that is, representative of marginalized groups (as per UNESCO's 1994 revised criteria), Japan's World Heritage designations have been for sites already designated and protected by domestic legislation. National recognition is a prerequisite.¹³ Perhaps the reason Nara officials balked when first approached with

12. See portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed 5 October 2013).

13. This is not unique to Japan. Other UNESCO signatories also typically nominate elite sites with worldwide name recognition. I discuss below more recent nominations of relatively obscure sites and marginalized groups' expressive culture more in keeping with the spirit of protecting endangered intangible cultural properties (UNESCO 2001; 2002).

the idea of nominating the Kii Peninsula was that they saw no legitimate need to proceed with World Heritage nomination and designation. Kinpusenji temple and Mount Ōmine's ascetic training grounds had already been designated as national treasures and a national park. But we must still ask why priests at Kinpusenji considered it necessary to appeal to UNESCO for additional recognition and support. I have argued above that Japan's UNESCO designations signal that the aura of World Heritage, in terms of stimulating tourism and pilgrimage (the two are inseparable), surpasses that of important national culture property and national treasure status. The situation, however, is slightly more complicated than that. The move to secure World Heritage designation also reveals that Japan's domestic cultural property and national park legislation is incapable of safeguarding the Kii Peninsula's natural and cultural heritage. As critical scholars of the national park systems have argued, claiming natural spaces for the nation was an effort to stimulate tourism, not protect fragile ecosystems. Similarly, the architects of the national treasure and cultural property systems sought to create consensus around an orthodox national culture. I next discuss critical scholarship on Japan's domestic cultural property system to provide another perspective on World Heritage.

Cultural Property Systems as Mechanisms to Create Orthodox Culture

Beginning in the 1920s a dedicated group of Japanese folklorists, theater historians, and other academics, aided in their efforts by well-known novelists populating their works with itinerant puppeteers and other sacred specialists and entertainers, brought the folk performing arts into the national cultural spotlight. The Pacific War and subsequent Occupation period derailed their efforts for a time, but enthusiasts and scholars rededicated themselves during the postwar period to reviving interest in the folk performing arts. The results of their efforts, the adoption of the Cultural Properties Protection Law, were celebrated in the mass media in 1976, when Japan's Ministries of Culture and Transportation announced their first selection of nationally designated "important intangible folk cultural properties" (*Kuni shitei jūyō mukei minzoku bunkazai* 国指定重要無形民俗文化財).¹⁴ Individuals and performance traditions so designated receive modest economic assistance and legally protected status. Though seldom mentioned, the vast majority of individual performers and performance traditions recognized by these annual designations have come from outcast and untouchable communities (*bura-kumin* 部落民). There is something uncanny about former outcast performers and sacred specialists, long despised as "nonhumans" (*hinin* 非人), suddenly designated as "important intangible folk cultural properties" and engaged as civil ser-

14. A complete list of all 195 designations made between 1976 and 1995 appears in THORNBURY 1997, 157–67.

vants. Held up as depositories of Japanese cultural heritage (“Whose heritage?” one might reasonably ask), they perform on national stages and represent Japan during performance tours abroad. But what is the alternative to these folk performing arts being granted cultural property status? Would it be preferable that the traditions were lost altogether so that performers could die in dignified oblivion and poverty? How do performers feel about their recently gained fame and economic independence? Do they recognize themselves and their traditions when performing for bureaucrats and foreign dignitaries, or is it alienating for them to participate in this revival and suturing of the seams of the grand narrative of history?

In a study of Awaji ritual puppetry, one of the performance traditions recognized as an important intangible cultural property in the first selections in 1976, LAW (1997) offers insights into the mixed reactions of puppeteers and community members. We learn about what was lost in the conversation about Awaji’s revival: namely, any mention of the stigma of being a descendant of a puppeteer and the ambivalence many individuals felt about their past. Many performers themselves had contributed to efforts to kill off the tradition in the hopes that if it went away, so would the pain and discrimination. The designation leapfrogged any attempt to deal with these real issues of pain, poverty, and discrimination. Law focuses upon these painful memories as a “lens through which this tradition is constructed” and thereby seeks an understanding of the question, “What creative and even healing process was being served by this ‘painful longing’ for the past and by the effort to retrieve what was rapidly vanishing?” (LAW 1997, 10). In contrast to Law’s efforts to understand Awaji puppeteers, the national government opted to fossilize this remembrance in the past and not allow it to bear upon present realities.

For many puppeteers, the money and recognition may be their main motivation. Why not? Puppeteers no longer have to feel ashamed of their heritage and can actually earn a living by doing what they are good at. Law points out that we ought not be so quick to assume, as some scholars have, that the irony of these former outcasts suddenly being given esteemed positions squarely within the grand narrative of Japanese history is lost on the performers and members of their rural communities. It may be less satisfying than having the historical truth laid bare *and* getting to keep the notoriety and economic security their status as folk cultural property has bought them. But then again, why would they want to dredge up all those painful memories? Their children can now make a living as performers, and have the experience of traveling abroad. Cultural property legislation also stimulated domestic travel when the Ministry of Tourism launched several large-scale publicity campaigns urging domestic tourists to return to traditional “exotic” Japan.¹⁵

15. Posters appearing in train stations throughout Japan at the time featured prominently the word “Exotic” (*ekizochikku*) transcribed from English using a phoneticized script (*katakana*) reserved for foreign loanwords; see IVY 1988.

In many cases this meant visiting the sacred locales associated with the folk performing arts designated as “intangible cultural properties.” Such campaigns, while suggesting Japanese reclaim those regions that are particularly imbued with “Japaneseness,” have at the same time made Japan seem other to itself.¹⁶ With this discussion of the domestic cultural property system’s having claimed former outcasts performer’s expressive culture for the nation and situated this process within tourism promotion campaigns, I return to the discussion of related practices within World Heritage branded spaces.

Is This World Heritage?

Japan’s Bureau of Cultural Affairs typically focuses on discrete sites and objects and not the ways individual communities manage the spaces in between. This is as true in Kyoto (TUNG 2001, 372–82) as in rural Kii Peninsula. While individual sites are protected, the overall environmental scene in the region is often degraded. During fieldwork in 2003 and 2007 near Hongū (Wakayama prefecture), my host Tateishi Kōshō, a Shugendo priest ordained at Kinpusenji and operating an independent retreat center there, gave me a tour of sites where former sacred peaks have been smashed into gravel by road construction outfits managed by yakuza-owned corporations. The yakuza bought the land at preferential rates under the pretense of starting dairy farms and amusement parks. In another nearby site 50,000 tatami mats gathered from the debris of the 1995 Kobe Awaji earthquake were illegally dumped into a ravine, creating a thirty meter high “tatami mountain.”



FIGURE 4. Tatami Mountain in Oyama (Wakayama), 1995. Photo by Tateishi Kōshō. Used with permission.

16. A brief note on the socio-historical context of the mid 1980s: there had been several cases of prominent murders and disappearances of young Japanese women traveling abroad. The “Exotic Japan” campaign implicitly suggested a retreat to the rural to curb risky travel abroad. A similar promotion of domestic travel by transport providers and travel agencies has taken place in post-11 September America. Outdoor gear provider L. L. Bean pushed its signature monogrammed suitcases for traveling “back home.”

Not only was this dumpsite an eyesore and obstruction, high concentrations of pesticides in the mats contaminated soil and groundwater.¹⁷ The impact of dumping construction waste and smashing mountains in ascetic training grounds in Kumano are part of a broader narrative of suffering, pain, and death that results when toxins emblematic of civilization and modernity are deliberately released into the ecosystem and penetrate the permeable bodies of “*homo sapiens industrialis*” (WALKER 2010, 6–7).¹⁸ Nearby, junked cars protruding from a sacred waterfall were removed by helicopter.¹⁹ Tateishi asked, “How can Shugendo practitioners perform ritual ablutions in a waterfall with a car sunk to the bottom?” Tateishi has been successful working with local public officials and television and print media to raise awareness of Wakayama’s environmental problems. In 1996 the tatami mountain was relocated to a legal dumpsite; by 1998 Tateishi and several local residents drove into bankruptcy the gravel production ventures of three corporations (McGUIRE 2004, 1768). Remnants of rusted metal still remain to be removed.²⁰

Tateishi considers tunnel construction and road widening another serious local problem. The construction industry makes large profits and transforms formerly functional, fragile ecosystems into what Tateishi considers “concrete nightmares.” The concretization of Japan’s countryside by the “construction state” (*doken kokka* 土建国家) is an alarming trend within Japanese environmental circles (McCORMACK 2001, 25–77; KINGSTON 2005, 123–46) and religious communities whose priests and followers derive their spiritual potency from mountain austerities. Tunnels and paved roads are cutting broad swaths through former ascetic training grounds, knocking down trees and disrupting wildlife habitats. On several stretches along the Ōmine pilgrimage, practitioners walk along paved roads that did not exist two decades prior. It is noteworthy that Japanese road infrastructure increased by 40 percent in area and 80 percent in length during the 1980s and 1990s (OECD 2002). Of these compromised environmental sites in remote mountain training sites, Tateishi asked me repeatedly, “Is *this* World Heritage?” The ironies of prefectural governments celebrating Kumano’s natural and cultural heritage while subsidizing construction of an

17. See “Hanshin daishinsai ga Wakayama ni tobi-hi? ‘Fuhō tōki’ sareta go-man mai no tatami no yama” 阪神大震災が和歌山に飛び火? 「不法投棄」された五万枚の畳の山, *Shūkan Asahi* 週刊朝日, 12 August 1995.

18. I discuss Tateishi’s remediation and commemoration efforts in the light of Japan’s broader history of industrial pollution and civil society responses elsewhere (McGUIRE 2013, 151–57).

19. See “Kumano kodō fukin no Kitadani Hondani ni fuhōtōki: Kuruma no sukurappu o kaishū” 熊能古道付近の北谷本谷に不法投棄—車のスクラップを回収, *Minamikishū shinbun* 南紀州新聞, 3 September 1996.

20. Tateishi illustrates this story with archival photos and a visit to the formerly degraded sites in the documentary *Shugendō Now* (2009).

ambitious road network connecting the Kii peninsula with the Kansai region are not lost on Tateishi.²¹

UNESCO: Last Hope for Salvation?

In this section I offer an additional lens for considering how UNESCO maps onto Japan's cultural property and park systems. Might it be seen as a last hope for salvation for Japanese communities who are left out of discussions of cultural and natural heritage preservation? Many communities are so skeptical of the cultural property system and Bureau of Cultural Affairs that they no longer seek their aid.²² "We don't want national treasures or intangible cultural properties," they say. What do they really stand to gain? They receive only minimal assistance and must conform to a vision of their community and practices imposed by outside scholars and organizations. They are more likely to succeed by relying upon their



FIGURE 5. Tateishi Kōshō at *The Forest of Mountain Learning*. Photo by Jean-Marc Abela 2007. Used with permission.

21. See "Three prefectures in Kii Peninsula to strengthen cooperation," *Kippō News*, 30 May 2001. The article describes a gubernatorial meeting in Yoshinoyama in May 2001, in which Mie, Nara, and Wakayama officials agreed to strengthen a cooperative relationship to promote development of the region in the following four areas: 1. construction of highways; 2. preservation of forests; 3. development of tourist resources; and 4. development of cultural heritage and research on culture. Representatives from the three prefectures lamented the increasing isolation of the Kii Peninsula resulting from the opening of Shinkansen railways and automobile highways in the 1960s connecting Kansai and Tokyo (these high-speed options enable drivers to bypass the Kii Peninsula altogether). They pledged to work together for early completion of the Ise Bay Road, Tōkai-Nankai Liaison Road, and Kii Liaison Road, three arteries that will create a new transportation network enabling drivers to reach any destination within the peninsula in three hours.

22. Two examples illustrate the kinds of concerns and complaints I heard during fieldwork in 2002 and 2003. A Buddhist priest and his followers in Kunisaki peninsula whose temple has been designated an important cultural property expressed frustration that they have not been permitted by the prefectural government to perform the *goma* fire offering out of a concern for fire damage. Ainu practitioners of a dance form designated a national intangible folk cultural property in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, complained bitterly that their skills have atrophied after being made to perform in contrived settings as "tourist Ainu." Because they cannot innovate or adapt their performance to modern styles, it has become increasingly difficult to attract young practitioners to maintain the tradition.

own efforts in grassroots preservation societies or, alternatively, by seeking aid from international groups such as UNESCO.

I have met a number of Shugendo practitioners who express sincere gratitude to UNESCO for recognizing their sacred spaces and practices. Even critics like Harasawa Kenta find reason for hope. “Finally, 130 years after the violence and destruction of the Meiji period,” HARASAWA writes, “Shugendo is being recognized by UNESCO for its contribution to humanity” (2002, 4). He considers this an opportunity to share Shugendo with the larger world community in service of international understanding. Harasawa hopes UNESCO World Heritage designation will enable communities in Nikko and the Kumano region to recognize their diverse local histories and cultures. In Harasawa’s estimation, this will put into action UNESCO’s ideals. In his writings and public speaking, Harasawa reminds local community members that their heritage and cultural property extends beyond physical architecture and encompasses intangible traditions such as Shugendo asceticism and the legacy of discrimination and suffering during Meiji. To increase public awareness of Nikko’s diverse religious and political history, Harasawa recommends creating detailed pamphlets and an inclusive public museum at the site of what has become famous as Tokugawa Ieyasu’s mausoleum.

Economic and Social Considerations

As with Nikko, the Kii Peninsula’s World Heritage designation includes not only temples and shrines, but also the natural environment and human community. This raises a number of practical concerns. For instance, how has World Heritage designation affected the economic and social viability of community members such as hunters, construction workers, fishermen, and loggers whose lifestyle and ability to earn a living might be constrained or possibly shut down all together if World Heritage policy dictates such measures?²³ From an ecological and religious standpoint, stopping new road construction, hunting, and logging may seem like positive outcomes, but is this always necessarily the case when you consider the actual nature of these ecological niches? Kii Peninsula inhabitants have never been forbidden to harvest timber and other resources from sacred mountains. One should also remember that many forests in Kumano, as in most areas of Japan, are monocultural timber plantations created during the postwar period.²⁴ These plantations were part of a national campaign to replace trees

23. For a related study of how practitioners of traditional occupations and leisure activities in Kumano have clashed with recreational hikers from urban areas, see KNIGHT 1999 and 2001.

24. Tracts composed exclusively of conifers are most common.

“sacrificed” during the rebuilding of areas devastated by American firebombing during World War II.²⁵ They require regular thinning and other maintenance.

Since the 1990s, Japan has filled 80 percent of its new construction needs with cheaper imported timber from Southeast Asia, the Northwestern United States, and Southwestern Canada, leaving these domestic plantation forests neglected and susceptible to problems like inadequate sunlight, soil erosion, silted rivers, and diseases like cedar rot. There is ostensibly no viable understory in Japanese forests. The problem is not scarcity of timber resources but of jobs, especially in rural areas like Kumano that are beset by forestry bankruptcies brought on by the aforementioned influx of cheaper foreign timber and the increased use of synthetic materials in modern construction. Aging, rapid rural depopulation, and an unwillingness to do manual labor are other key factors in the forestry industry's decline. Forestry is a typical “three K” job generally disliked by urban office workers (“three K” stands for *kitsui* [tough], *kitanai* [dirty], and *kiken na* [dangerous]). In 2000 Kimura Yoshiki, the governor of Wakayama Prefecture, wrote a proposal (the “Green Employment Project”) to restore the forests' health and provide employment to a growing number of jobless Kumano residents. In Wakayama prefecture alone the government provided 1.5 billion yen (approximately \$140 million) in subsidies and employed 261 residents during the period 2001–2003.²⁶ Careful forestry management will help create “multiple use” forests providing timber industry employment but also increased mountain recreation opportunities (KNIGHT 2001).

Tokyo bureaucrats and local political officials and public relations representatives in the Kii Peninsula are realizing that regional economic and ecological needs converge well with World Heritage recognition. What they may not have anticipated, however, are the potential clashes between local industries, spiritual and environmental stewards, and visiting urban tourists, each of whom has different visions of how these sacred areas ought best be managed. Examination of the current environmental situation, government forestry subsidies, and recent proposals for road construction to maximize tourist revenues in the Kii peninsula suggests that not all of these visions can be accommodated in World Heritage ordered space. Future conflicts seem inevitable. It remains to be seen if UNESCO and local officials will avail themselves of up-to-date research and pragmatic methods for protecting the Kii Peninsula's natural environment, or if this situation will be another instance of sanctioning mass tourism at the expense of the surrounding natural environment and residents' quality of life. These speculations

25. See KNIGHT 2001 for a more sustained discussion of postwar reforestation campaigns and tensions between recreational forest users and forestry employees in the recent promotion of “multiple use” forests in Japan.

26. See “Paradise is given a chance,” *Washington Times*, 25 November 2003.

will need to be borne out by sustained fieldwork undertaken over decades following designation of the Kii Peninsula, but we can ask some important questions now about how the designation campaign and first years of World Heritage status have proceeded thus far. For example, when UNESCO states that a “community agreement” is required to proceed with the designation process, which members get to express their opinions, and who gets consistently left out of the discussion? What exactly are stakeholders agreeing to, and what do they get in return? Recognition of “cultural value” and “heritage”? Does being recognized for one’s cultural value or heritage mean anything to local residents left jobless or stripped of their community’s natural beauty and solitude for the sake of tourism?

Several community members have suggested the following be negotiated into the designation. Rather than simply shut down primary industries such as logging and fishing (an unlikely occurrence given the government subsidies), would it not make better sense to offer alternative economic ventures that can be pursued with less environmental degradation? Since 2000, more environmentally sustainable eco-tourist ventures in Kumano such as whale watching, canoeing, and rafting have been attempted. But these activities, too, bring problems like excess garbage and overuse. Local merchants and tour operators simply do not yet have the skills or knowledge to balance the need for employment and tourist revenues with environmental sustainability.

Reaching out to UNESCO and its global network of experts may be one solution needed to manage an increasingly complex situation, provided, of course, what they offer is expertise on how to meet the demands of tourism in a fragile ecosystem. But it must be said that in discussions about whether sacred mountains and pilgrimage trails should be designated as cultural and natural World Heritage sites, certain actors such as temple priests and government bureaucrats yield greater influence and power. Local community members who oppose these decisions have not yet had sufficient opportunities to voice their resistance. Their frustration can be seen in periodic outbursts such as the case of a gentleman in Wakayama who wrote messages in Day-Glo paint on the Kumano trail’s iconic stone pathway to protest a municipal decision preventing him from logging on his property.

Exclusion Rather Than Remediation of Degraded Sites

An early and clear indicator of the lack of shared commitment and understanding among various stakeholders was expressed by ICOMOS (International Committee on Monuments and Sites, a nongovernmental organization) in their 2004 evaluation of the Kii Peninsula’s dossier. ICOMOS highlights the lack of a meaningful plan to ensure the long-term sustainable management of the unprecedented (and complicated) multi-site and surrounding wooded landscape beyond a “handshake agreement” that the three prefectures would “consult” each

other in the event of problems (ICOMOS 2004). Anticipated tourist windfalls in the amount of 37.3 billion JPY in the first year following designation played no insignificant role in the hastily assembled nomination and designation of the Kii Peninsula on less than solid management protocol. To date, no such plan for long-term, sustainable management of the Kii Peninsula sites has appeared. Further causes for concern among ICOMOS members were the fragmentation of ascetics' training paths. Unchecked development of housing settlements (the proliferation of overhead power lines merits special concern), plantation timber forestry, road and tunnel construction, and illegal dumping activities all carried out in close proximity to the Okugake trail have carved up the sacred landscape into a large number of discontinuous swaths, according to their report. In a section entitled "Authenticity and Integrity," concerns about the "discontinuity" of the pilgrimage route are voiced. We learn that the committee was forced to settle upon an expedient compromise. Rather than suggest remediation of degraded sites prior to or following nomination, unnamed ICOMOS officials opted instead to simply leave them out of the designation. I quote the dossier:

There is one issue connected to integrity: the discontinuity of the nominated pilgrimage routes. What has been nominated is only those parts of the pilgrim routes which are still relatively intact in terms of the conditions of the track and its setting. Where development has intervened negatively the track has been excluded. This means that the pilgrim routes are in some places a series of short stretches. If the discontinuity is to be understood by visitors, then measures need to be put in place to allow an understanding of the links between disconnected pieces of the route. (ICOMOS 2004, 39)

We see here that environmentally degraded sites or stretches of the pilgrimage path now encumbered upon by housing settlements, road infrastructure, or illegal dumping posed no obstacle to designation or status as World Heritage. Any such compromised sites would simply be excluded from consideration, and thus set aside and forgotten. No tourist would pose before them for a photograph.

Stairway Hell

Since the World Heritage designation campaign began in 1998, there have been numerous alterations to Mount Ōmine's physical environment. These include several new wooden platforms and stairs on the ascetic training course, particularly within those sections accessible to day-trippers wishing to ascend to the summit in a few hours from the Dorogawa Village side. Veteran ascetics have expressed concern about this phenomenon they call "stairway hell" (*kaidan no jigoku* 階段の地獄). Proliferation of stairways makes Mount Ōmine easier to ascend and reduces the mountain's cherished danger and uncertainty. This is welcome news for tourists, but for ascetics the ritual ascent's potency is partially

derived from the real possibility of injury and death. Such physical danger also places strict limits on the numbers of ascetics who can enter and successfully complete courses on Ōmine and in nearby Wakayama. It happens on occasion that practitioners require hospitalization and surgery from injuries sustained during mountain training. Tateishi Rika's story depicted in the documentary *Shugendō Now* illustrates this danger (ABELA and MCGUIRE 2009).

Prohibition of Women on Mount Ōmine

Another challenge to UNESCO's assumptions about shared human values is the collision of modern gender politics with what the tradition claims is a 1,300-year-old prohibition of women from climbing Mount Ōmine. The most spirited debates about Mount Ōmine hinge upon whether female ascetics will finally be permitted to perform austerities alongside men. Observing how Kinpusenji has managed its World Heritage designation has been an excellent study of how a tradition responds to crisis. When the Ōmine mountains were designated as the Yoshino-Kumano National Park in 1932, there were similar protests that the tradition banning women undermined the idea behind the park's designation—the creation of opportunities for the general public to enjoy Ōmine's natural scenic beauty.²⁷ Current debates about the Kii Peninsula's World Heritage status transcend Japan's domestic leisure space and provoke reflection upon national identity. The central question for the male practitioners with whom I climbed Mount Ōmine is, "Why should Kinpusenji temple, under pressure from an outside institution with only fifty years of history and declining relevance (UNESCO), overturn [what the tradition claims is] a 1,300-year-old Japanese tradition?" Male and female opposition to lifting the ban appeal to environmental benefits of keeping the mountain "spiritually pure." If women and then day hikers are permitted to climb to Ōmine's summit, according to this logic, it will become a profane mountain like Mount Fuji. Fuji, though lovely on postcards, is notorious for its garbage, vending machines, and human excrement. Kinpusenji Shugendo practitioners opposed to lifting the ban argue that the onset of Fuji's current problems can be traced to lifting the prohibition on women and hikers.

Young women, though officially prohibited from climbing Mount Ōmine, make up the fastest-growing segment of Shugendo practitioners. They participate in festivals and folk performing arts events and retreats at other mountain centers and urban ascetic training grounds.²⁸ It is also rumored that women

27. On controversies surrounding Mount Ōmine's designation as a national park, see MIYAKE 2001, 143–58. For an historical perspective on periodic demonstrations protesting the prohibition of women on Mount Ōmine, see KIZU 1993 and SEKIMORI 2006.

28. Tokyo's Mount Mitake, a "miniature" Mount Ōmine, and Yoyogi Park are two such sites where young, urban ascetics congregate on weekends.



FIGURE 6. Woman Boundary Gate, Mount Omine (note coniferous plantation forest).

regularly defy the prohibition on Mount Ōmine, climbing during the off-season or disguised as men. Vandalism and graffiti written on the gate and signposts marking the space beyond which women may not proceed are further indicators of opposition and resistance.

Practitioners have debated lifting the prohibition during official meetings, symposia, opinion polls, and a lively essay-writing campaign in Kinpusenji's quarterly newsletter. Included in this discussion of changing gender roles and expectations is a reflection upon national identity and internal controversies within Japanese Buddhist institutions. Gojō Kakugyō, head priest of a Hokkaido branch of a Shugendo temple, memorably participated. Beginning with self-deprecation ("We Japanese have poor discussion and debate skills. When faced with opinions that run counter to our own, we often become emotional and lose our concentration"), Gojō deftly inserts a critique of mainstream Buddhist institutions from which Shugendo priests are quick to distance themselves:

Controversies such as abolishing the prohibition of women are valuable opportunities to polish debating skills and consider other such social problems such as the widely held view that Buddhist temples exist solely to profit from funeral services and priests are disconnected from social problems. (Gojō 1998, 6)

Citing a modern proverb about Japan's fraught relationship with America ("If America sneezes, then Japan catches a cold"), Gojō asks, "Why should Japan always imitate a country with such a short history as America?" Gojō insisted that the relevant issue is strictly *religious*, a position allowing him to elide troublesome social and political implications. In Gojō's view, the prohibition hinges

not upon discrimination “in the derogatory sense” (*sabetsu* 差別), but in the “positive sense” (*kubetsu* 区別). Arguments for “gender difference rather than gender discrimination” have a long history among conservative political and religious organizations in Japan. Groups who have sought to revise the postwar constitution have asserted traditional gender ideologies that enshrine the sanctity of the family as a bulwark against “alleged excessive individualism” arising from assertions of gender equality (HARDACRE 2005, 240). In a concise study of two attempts at constitutional revision by religious organizations, Hardacre analyzes the mobilization of arguments rejecting “equality of the sexes” (*danjo byōdō* 男女平等) on the basis that it denies “distinctions based on sexual difference” (*danjokan no seisa no kubetsu* 男女間の性差の区別) by the Shinto Shrine Association and its political arm Shinto Seiji, who claim such gender differentiation undermines the mother-child relationship and thus the “normal” development of children, the family, and the nation (HARDACRE 2005, 241–42). This campaign was undertaken in the context of supporting an attempted revision of Article 24 by the Liberal Democratic Party to eliminate specification of the “essential equality of the sexes.”²⁹ The Shinto Shrine Association, according to Hardacre, is less a religious organization than a full-time lobby group whose chief aims are “prohibiting married women from using their maiden names, preventing the enthronement of a female as emperor, preventing gender equal education, and if possible, repeal of the 1999 Fundamental Law on Gender Equality” (HARDACRE 2005, 241). Conservative refrains of “gender difference rather than gender discrimination” have implications beyond semantic wrangling and can be heard within Shinto, Shugendō, and other Japanese religious and political organizations.

During the week I spent with Gojō in Hokkaido in 2003, the issue of the prohibition of women on Mount Ōmine came up several times. He became uncomfortable with my suggestion that all traditions were initially created by human beings, and most likely powerful males. As a fourth generation male descendent of priest-guides in the Kinpusenji lineage, Gojō opted to speak from his religious authority, leaving aside political and social aspects not in his interest to address.

The flurry of essays was punctuated by statements from powerful female figures voicing conservative opinions such as Yoshida Yoshie’s assertion that “Sanjō-ga-take [Ōmine’s summit] is but a dream, and an aspiration. I only gaze upward from below” (YOSHIDA 1998).³⁰

Visitors to Tanaka Riten’s personal blog will find an essay about climbing Sanjogatake with his son that concludes provocatively: “It is inevitable that the time

29. Christian G. WINKLER (2011) provides further context and detailed case studies illustrating conservative objections to and attempts to revise Article 24.

30. Yoshida is leader of the Tokushō-kai, a pilgrimage organization affiliated with Kinpusenji in rural Fukuoka.

will come when women can also ascend Mount Ōmine. When that day arrives my elder daughter also wishes to make the climb together.”³¹ It is difficult to assess to what extent lifting the prohibition is a serious possibility, but any future decision-making process, if it is to be viewed broadly as legitimate, will have to be informed by open discussions among diverse local stakeholders free from external pressures and internal filtering.

*Conclusions: Accommodating Conflicting
Visions of World Heritage in the Kii Peninsula*

In this article I have raised questions about cultural heritage, to whom it rightfully belongs, and who bears ultimate responsibility for its preservation and upkeep. Previous World Heritage designations in Japan have, in my view, not adequately upheld UNESCO's stated ideals of safeguarding precious heritage. They can be seen as symptomatic of the way World Heritage in Japan is regarded as a high-class brand name marketed for regional, national, and global tourism. Threats to a tradition's cultural heritage stimulate debates about reform and the proper management of the effects of modernization. No matter how creative, innovative, or modern responses by a tradition's leaders may seem, their ultimate concern is survival and the preservation of tradition. Notions of timelessness, universal cultural values, and a master list of World Heritage or Masterpieces of Humanity come embedded in discourses ripe for appropriation by local stakeholders hoping to achieve certain spiritual, economic, and political agendas for their communities. Despite their radically different visions for the Kii Peninsula's future, religious ascetics, local community members, tourists, politicians, and even timber industrialists are all finding satisfying interpretations of UNESCO's global, imported idea of heritage. In significant ways, their interpretations and policies echo those of previous designation regimes such as the national park, national treasure, and cultural property legislation. It remains to be seen how these competing visions will be accommodated in the specific context of the Kii Peninsula designation as the region receives an estimated fifteen million visitors annually in the first decade after UNESCO World Heritage designation.³² Further longitudinal field research and data gathering will be required to assess the long-term economic, ecological, and social impact of designation. Will UNESCO and local officials make use of up-to-date research and implement pragmatic methods for protecting the Kii

31. Select 「息子と大峯山に登る」 (“Climbing Ōmine with my son”) from the following site: http://homepage3.nifty.com/enno-f/zatubun_5.htm (accessed 5 July 2013). The essay first appeared in the January 1999 edition of the *Abeya Shimin Shinbun*.

32. Source: Kii Peninsula page on UNESCO's World Heritage Center site: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1147> (accessed 5 July 2013).

Peninsula's natural environment, or will this be another case of promoting mass tourism without sufficient regard for the impact upon the natural environment and human community?

Postscript, May 2012

A series of typhoons devastated the Kii Peninsula in autumn 2011, killing at least thirty-four local residents. Many more were injured, traumatized, and grieve for their deceased loved ones. Destruction of homes, businesses, and portions of the Nachi Taisha site and Kumano pilgrimage path (both are World Heritage properties) reminded residents of the awesome force of nature and their vulnerability in the face of it. According to Alena Eckelmann, a Hongu-based freelance writer and business consultant originally from East Germany, main access roads and tourist infrastructure related to World Heritage have been rebuilt, but homes, apartment blocks, shops, and roads that are not on tourists' itineraries remain as they were when flood waters receded. "Landslides that cut right across the Kumano Kodo trails have been fixed and all paths are walkable" Eckelmann confirmed. "The tourists are back and on the trails, but all mountain roads and trails that don't affect the tourist influx have not been fixed at all. This affects the locals who live nearby and who need these ways as their lifeline" (personal communication [Skype interview], 30 April 2012). Eckelmann had relocated to Kumano from Tokyo shortly after the triple disaster of 11 March 2011 only to find herself in more serious harm's way. The house she had been renting was completely destroyed while she was away performing twenty-one days of austerities at Tateishi's mountain training site. Her friend and co-occupant had gone missing for three weeks. Police later recovered parts of his body among the wreckage.

Publication in December 2011 of the case of a middle school student in rural Mie prefecture repeatedly injured while biking to school eighty minutes per day over a stretch of mountain road strewn with typhoon debris eventually prompted a local school board to provide an ad hoc shuttle service one day a week.³³ Meanwhile, junior high school students and their families living near a provincial route that tourists travel to visit World Heritage properties have a smooth passage along freshly laid pavement. Eckelmann informed me that frustrated neighbors are taking their insurance settlements and moving to Osaka, rather than rebuild in Kumano. When I inquired about their reasons, respondents who requested anonymity spoke of frustration that the municipal government has not rebuilt roads or assisted in clearing debris in areas where tourists do not visit. As with the policy discussed above favoring exclusion over reme-

33. See "Typhoon damage on Kii Peninsula no match for Mie student determined to attend class," *The Japan Times*, 24 December 2011. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn2011224cc.html> (accessed 14 May 2012).

diation of degraded sites within World Heritage ordered spaces, post-typhoon reconstruction plans also appear to exclude sites that will not be objects of tourists' gaze. Entire families' lives are on standby with no clear reconstruction plan or budget allocated. One can understand how Japan's national and municipal governments, media, and public would prioritize reporting about and rebuilding the stricken Tohoku area and attending to the nation's long-term energy needs. But in having been overshadowed by the tragic events of 11 March 2011, typhoon survivors in the Kii Peninsula have found themselves yet again lacking needed assistance from municipal governments in clearing and rebuilding road infrastructure, providing affordable and safe housing, or reassuring them that their concerns matter. Meanwhile tourists continue to flow into the region, oblivious to their struggles. Tateishi Kōshō may well wonder, "Is this World Heritage?"

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