



Tullio Federico Lobetti, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion*

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL research on Shugendō 修験道 is far outnumbered by those of religious studies and history, yet it offers innovative perspectives with multidisciplinary implications.¹ The method of analysis that distinguishes the anthropology of Shugendō from those of other disciplines is the emphasis that anthropologists place on understanding Shugendō within *and* beyond specific contexts: considering the relational dynamics, for instance, between Shugendō and various dimensions of social life in contemporary Japan, while striving to discern its ontological insights—what Shugendō can teach us, directly or indirectly, about the human condition. Situating its pantheistic ontology, rites, and political history in the gamut of anthropological thought, ethnographies of specific Shugendō contexts can lead to more general theories of asceticism and the soteriological trinity of life, death, and rebirth, which is pervasive in Asian thought (see OBEYESEKERE 2002)

Lobetti's recent work, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion*, is a solid contribution to the anthropology of Shugendō because it offers a multifaceted analysis of contemporary Shugendō, exploring its influence on sociality and contemplating its more existential aspects. A common problem in the study of contemporary Shugendō is tracing ascetic social networks because modern communication and transportation technologies—for example, social media websites and bullet trains—collapse time and space in ways that extend social networks far beyond any “local” context. As such, contemporary ascetics herald from everywhere to attend Shugendō retreats and it is difficult to determine the locus of their faith. Ascetics tend to be religious pluralists and belong, in varying capacities, to other sects and religions. This makes tracing ascetic networks a challenging task. In *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion*, Lobetti rectifies how asceticism is manifesting in the complicated inter-sectarian networks of contemporary religious affiliation by participating in retreats throughout the country, attempting to determine what the core of Shugendō, in its ubiquity yet multifarious orthodoxies, might be—for those who leap between sects and rites and for those who are devoted to one in particular. Divided into five chapters and

1. Two recent examples include MCGUIRE's (2013a; 2013b) research into Shugendō ecopilgrimages, UNESCO politics, and civic engagements in the Kii peninsula region of central Japan, and SCHATTSCHNEIDER's (2003) study of gendered landscapes, rebirth rites, and religious identity among female ascetics at Mt. Iwaki in Aomori Prefecture.

an introduction, at 136 pages it is a lean text. Without grounding in a single site, it may come across as somewhat superficial to ethnographers, yet it still offers useful ethnographic observations and theoretical insights into the structure and values of asceticism in contemporary Japanese religion.

Lobetti positions his text as a work of “philosophical anthropology” and he frames Shugendo as an “embodied tradition.” The crux of his theoretical argument is that Shugendo is a “bodily hermeneutic” based on a model of “ontological progression”—of becoming a more “perfectible” being through asceticism. This process is described with the term *corporis ascendus*—an embodied ascent to higher ontological status through asceticism. While most ascetics do *shugyō* 修行 to acquire “an uninterrupted flow of this-worldly benefits,” the exemplar case of *corporis ascendus*, he argues, are the *sokushinbutsu* 即身仏 of Tohoku, “those who have attained Buddhahood in their own living bodies” through self-mummification (see HORI 1962; JEREMIAH 2010). Having willfully entered an earthen chamber buried three meters underground, covered in large stones and with nothing more than a bamboo pole connecting to the surface for air, the ascetics designing to become *sokushinbutsu* fasted and meditated into death and thereby, according to Lobetti, achieved the highest ontological status possible within their ascetic value system—complete self-effacement leading to corporeal immortality and sainthood.

As most scholarly accounts of Shugendo have been occupied with the monumental task of simply trying to understand its history and structure, not theorizing it, Lobetti’s text makes a valuable contribution to a once sorely understudied aspect of Japanese religiosity. He is one of the first scholars of contemporary Shugendo to address the difficult matter of intra- and inter-sectarian ascetic networks by committing himself to various forms of asceticism throughout the country, from the Buddhist and Shinto Fall’s Peak retreat (*aki no mine* 秋の峰) of Dewa Sanzan, which symbolizes rebirth in the mountain’s womb, to the Fire Crossing (*hiwatari* 火渡り) and Sword Ladder Climbing (*hawatari* 刃渡り) practiced on Mt. Ontake. It is this multi-sited approach which helps Lobetti to formulate what could be referred to as an “affect theory” of ascetic experience, where the doctrinal discourse of what ascetic acts mean is secondary to the affects they produce in practitioner—a pattern he observed in numerous rites. However, with such a wide sweeping ethnographic scope, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion* has difficulty reaching beyond superficial engagements with any one group or rite. Because it does not delve deeply enough into any single tradition, it may leave some researchers of Shugendo unsatisfied in their desire for ethnographic detail, depth, and context. Also, the near-exclusive attention this text gives to ascetic acts and affects serves to isolate Shugendo and the people who practice it from the broader socio-historic context from which it and they emerge. Some key questions left unanswered include: Who are these ascetics outside of their asceticism? How is contemporary Shugendo shaped by the current circumstances of the world around it and how does it, in turn, affect the world? Such

questions must occupy future research on Shugendo. That is where the research is lacking the most.

In spite of its shortcomings, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion* makes a fine introductory read for students of Japanese religions and Shugendo and offers creative theoretical insights. It provides sufficient information about what ascetic practices are being undertaken in Japan and where to find them. Lobetti's theories of *corporis ascendus* and of the "bodily hermeneutic," which theorizes the body as a central "text" in Shugendo practice, are novel in the study of both historical and contemporary Shugendo. They speak to the value of spiritual and bodily purity that motivates Shugendo practice as well as to the contemporary de-emphasis on doctrinal knowledge for lay practitioners—the affect of ascetic acts and the personal interpretation of such experiences where ascetics perceive themselves to be procuring power from nature.

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