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Constructing Identities through the Shikoku Pilgrimage

The Shikoku pilgrimage has, until very recently, seen significant growth in pilgrim numbers and appears, as such, to provide a counter-example to the general trend evident in surveys and studies of declining engagement in religious practices in Japan. However, two caveats are needed here: numbers have started to fall in the last decade, and those doing the pilgrimage have often in recent times viewed their pilgrimages as journeys of self-discovery in which identity is paramount and faith is irrelevant or explicitly denied. In addition, the pilgrimage has been promoted by secular authorities as a signifier of regional and national cultural identity in order to develop Shikoku as a tourist destination, and boost the local economy. In this article, I explore these issues, drawing on fieldwork in Shikoku between 1984 and 2019 and on interviews with people—from pilgrims on foot to temple priests to regional government officials—involved in various ways with the pilgrimage. In discussing how identity construction is both a major factor in the motives of pilgrims and an aim of secular agencies seeking to promote the pilgrimage for nonreligious reasons, I examine what this means for studies of religion today through highlighting recent Japanese theoretical examinations of religion, pilgrimage, and tourism while discussing how the Shikoku example both fits with and provides critical counterarguments to their studies.

KEYWORDS: pilgrimage—self-discovery—faith (absence of)—economy—tourism

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IN HIS introduction to this special issue, Peter Nosco draws attention to how surveys of public attitudes in contemporary Japan show hostility to and declining associations with religion and religious feelings, issues evident in NHK surveys that show declining faith levels in Japan and that reiterate themes that I have drawn attention to previously (KOBAYASHI 2019; READER 2012). At the same time there are, he suggests, contexts in which ideas and practices commonly associated with religion contribute to issues of identity, whether individually or collectively. In this article I address this by looking at how one such practice—the Shikoku pilgrimage (*Shikoku henro* 四国遍路)—provides avenues for, and is used by, individuals and interest groups to articulate themes of identity at a variety of levels.

The Shikoku *henro* involves visiting eighty-eight Buddhist temples around Japan's fourth largest island. The route is some fourteen hundred kilometers long and can be done any way, in any order of temples, and over any time span that pilgrims wish; the crucial thing is to visit all eighty-eight temples. Many do it in one circuit, but people often break it up into a series of visits. The sites are all Buddhist temples and eighty are affiliated with Shingon Buddhism, but the pilgrimage is not sectarian and has close associations beyond Buddhism to the Japanese folk tradition and to local Shikoku customs and practices. Its origins are in the ascetic travels of mendicants (*Kōya hijiri* 高野聖) associated with Mt. Kōya 高野, the holy center of the Shingon sect, and with *Daishi shinkō* 大師信仰 (faith in Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師, the posthumous manifestation of Shingon's founder Kūkai 空海 [775–835]), who has become a major figure of veneration in the Japanese folk tradition. According to pilgrim lore, Kōbō Daishi accompanies and protects every pilgrim, and statues of Daishi, as he is known—usually in the guise of a pilgrim mendicant—are found throughout the route and at all the temples, each of which has a Daishi Hall of worship, and pilgrims commonly carry and wear various accouterments indicating their association with him (see READER 2005; HOSHINO 2001; HOSHINO and ASAKAWA 2011).

Historically, pilgrims invariably walked as there was no other choice, but walking is not a prerequisite; pilgrims have always used whatever means have been available for their journeys. As transport aids have developed—from

* Some of the fieldwork I draw on here was conducted in 2018 and 2019 under the auspices of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science research grant 17K02237 Perpetual Pilgrims and Religious Authority with the Contemporary Shikoku Henro, led by John Shultz, in which I was a co-investigator. It produced our recent book (READER and SHULTZ 2021). I thank John Shultz for his support.

bridges and ferries in Tokugawa times to railways, buses, and cars in the modern era—they have been incorporated into the pilgrimage. From the 1950s, organized bus pilgrimage tours became prominent and played a significant role in increasing pilgrim numbers and opening the *henro* up to wider pilgrim clientele (MORI 2005; READER 2005; 2007; 2014). Nowadays, and notably in the past decade or so, traveling by private car has become the most dominant mode of travel (READER and SHULTZ 2021; SHIKOKU ARIANSU CHIKI KEIZAI KENKYŪ BUNKAKAI 2019).

In the immediate postwar period, there were few pilgrims in Shikoku, but with the advent of bus tours and better infrastructure pilgrim numbers grew thereafter. By the late 1960s, according to MAEDA Takashi's (1971) seminal sociological study, there were around fifteen thousand pilgrims a year. Pilgrim numbers grew steadily until by the first decade of this century they had increased perhaps tenfold, causing repeated references in the mass media and by some academics to a "Shikoku boom" (HOSHINO and ASAKAWA 2011, 145–146). Ostensibly, then, the *henro* appears to be a relative success story in an age in which many religious institutions and practices have seen a decline in participation levels. However, caveats are in order here. First, Shikoku is an outlier in that its growth in recent decades is not a reflection of a wider growth in pilgrimage practices; many other Buddhist-related pilgrimages have seen significant falls in pilgrim numbers (SATŌ 2004, READER 2014). Moreover, as I have discussed elsewhere, Shikoku pilgrim numbers have been falling in the last decade, with organized group pilgrimages the main area of decline (READER forthcoming; SHIKOKU ARIANSU CHIKI KEIZAI KENKYŪ BUNKAKAI 2019, 4–6, 55). This has led to a shift away from a focus on religious devotionism as contemporary pilgrims, especially those on foot, choose to express their pilgrimages as journeys of self-discovery, articulations of identity, and ways of finding meaning especially in post-retirement life, while keeping healthy and enjoying hiking. Moreover, such popularity as the pilgrimage has achieved is also linked to the ways nonreligious agencies, from government offices to media and commercial interests, have utilized it for their agendas, often in ways that specifically dissociate it from any notions of faith, religious practice, and adherence. In this process, the pilgrimage has become increasingly portrayed through the lens of cultural identity on various levels. In this article I look at these themes with a main focus on individuals who do the pilgrimage on foot, but also with a consideration of how the pilgrimage is used within Shikoku to develop notions of island culture and belonging, and how it is promoted as an exemplar of national heritage and identity by national agencies ranging from government ministries to media concerns. I then discuss what this means in the context of religion and faith in the present day.

Walking in Search of Oneself

The development of transport infrastructures impacted heavily on how pilgrims did the *henro* in the postwar era; by the 1980s very few pilgrims went on foot. In 1984, in forty days on the pilgrimage trail, my wife and I met just six other walkers. Temple priests in the late 1980s estimated to me that less than two hundred people per year walked it, and a list compiled annually at Ryōzenji 靈山寺 (known as Temple One, the standard starting point of the *henro*) showed only 136 pilgrims on foot in 1989 (READER 2005, 308, n. 81). In the 1990s these numbers went up until by the turn of this century, HOSHINO (2001, 354) states, perhaps a thousand walked each year, while later studies put the figure somewhat higher (OSADA, SAKATA, and SEKI 2003, 354). A recent survey gave a figure of some two thousand five hundred in 2017, while noting that this number had fallen slightly in recent years (SHIKOKU ARIANSU CHIIKI KEIZAI KENKYŪ BUNKAKAI 2019, 4–8).¹

A significant factor in this growth is related to Japan's economic problems in which the 1980s "bubble economy" imploded, causing many firms to "restructure" (in other words, to downsize and reduce their workforces). From the early 1990s onwards, I began to encounter people walking the pilgrimage who had been affected by this. Some were young graduates who said they had been unable to find work in the changed environment and, with time on their hands as a result, had decided to walk the pilgrimage to find themselves and decide what they really wanted to do with their lives. Most, however, were middle-aged men or above who were walking the pilgrimage not, they said, because of religious motives such as faith in Kōbō Daishi, but because they were *risutora* リストラ ("restructured," that is, thrown out of work). Losing what had been a central element in their lives, not just economically but in terms of self-identification and meaning, numerous interviewees said that this had had huge repercussions on their lives and sense of self-worth; some had even seen their marriages collapse as a result. This was also reiterated by Shikoku temple priests; in April 2000, for example, the deputy priest of one temple talked about these new foot pilgrims and how economic circumstances had forced them out of work well before normal retirement age, and how their loss of a key element of their identity as workers and company employees left a gap in their lives. They were still relatively healthy with time on their hands; as such, the priest commented, several had come to walk the pilgrimage as they sought to find new meaning in their lives and to replace their former work-centered identities. Many of these pilgrims who I met in the 1990s and beyond commented that they saw the pilgrimage as a

1. This survey also shows that the number of non-Japanese foot pilgrims has grown from under fifty in 2007 to around four hundred by 2017. However, I am not focusing on these non-Japanese pilgrims in this article.

challenge that could help them revitalize themselves and find a new way of living (READER 2005, 27–28). Some even welcomed the opportunity that restructuring gave them to escape their former company-oriented lives. One pilgrim, for example, was deeply critical of the company system he had been employed in and the way in which he felt he had been subservient to company needs. He scathingly described himself as a “pet” (*petto* ペット) of the company sustained by “pet food” (*esa* 餌, that is, salary). Now, however, thanks to restructuring he was free from this identity as a “pet” and, through walking the pilgrimage, was finding a new one as a *noraneko* 野良猫 (wild, stray cat) unfettered by social bonds.

A very small number ended up finding the pilgrimage so conducive a lifestyle that they continued walking even after completing the circuit and found new identities as permanent pilgrims. In October 2018, I interviewed Shimada,² a man in his late sixties who fell into this category. He had worked all his life in the pachinko industry but a decade earlier lost his job and as a result was unable to pay his rent. Facing an uncertain future, with no family of his own and homeless, he had heard about people who in similar situations had done the Shikoku pilgrimage to find a new way forward, so he decided to follow suit even though, he said, he had no religious faith nor any interest in walking. He walked the pilgrimage in the normative manner, wearing a white pilgrim’s shirt and carrying a pilgrim’s book to get stamped at each temple. He slept out for economic reasons but, having reached the last temple, he realized that he found living on the pilgrimage to be “easy” (*shiyasui* しやすい) and carried on walking. This is not entirely uncommon; as John Shultz and I show, there is a long history of people who become what we call “permanent pilgrims” who either live on the pilgrimage route or do the *henro* so often that they are mentally on an unending pilgrimage that becomes the central focus of their lives in temporal and practical terms (READER and SHULTZ 2021). When I met Shimada, he had been walking the *henro* for over ten years and had, he said, become content with this itinerant lifestyle of sleeping out and living sparsely on alms solicited for sustenance. He had developed a new sense of personal purpose as an itinerant pilgrim. Life without walls had given him a true sense of freedom; as such, he would continue walking the *henro* until he died and would not go back to sedentary life even if someone offered him a job and home. He also was clear, when asked, that faith was not a motivation for his involvement with the pilgrimage, although he also commented that he had experienced such kindness from local people that he had developed a sense of gratitude that might be a form of faith (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 110–114).

Shimada and the *risutora* are good examples of an emergent pattern evident from the 1990s onwards of how pilgrims on foot appeared more likely to talk

2. This is a pseudonym.

about the pilgrimage in terms of challenge, self-reflection, and self-discovery (*jibun sagashi* 自分探し) than faith or religious practice (READER 2005, 85). Japanese scholars have also identified these as significant elements in the motives of contemporary walkers (HOSHINO 2001; 2014; HOSHINO and ASAKAWA 2011). HOSHINO (2001, 353–384; 2014), for example, has argued that there has in recent times been a move away from faith and what he sees as religious motives such as the search for *go riyaku* ご利益 (blessings bestowed by figures of worship) towards issues of “finding oneself” (*jibun sagashi*). He recognizes that walkers may have multiple reasons and that attributing single motivations to pilgrims is problematic, but his accounts of interviews with pilgrims on foot show that faith is rarely mentioned, with interviewees expressing themselves via the language of self-discovery, freedom, and personal experience (HOSHINO 2001, 365).

HOSHINO and ASAKAWA (2011) develop this theme of self-discovery and the search for personalized meaning in their discussion of the 2006 four-part NHK drama “Walkers” (*Uōkāzu: Maigo no otonatachi* ウォーカーズ—迷子の大人たち) that depicted eight people led by a pilgrim guide (*sendatsu* 先達) on pilgrimage in Shikoku. All had emotional problems, and their pilgrimage becomes a journey of self-discovery and emotional healing through which they gradually confront these problems. One, an engineer and son of a Buddhist priest, faced the dilemma of whether to abandon his profession to perform the filial duty of becoming a priest and taking over the family temple. As he walks, he realizes his identity is bound up with his profession, and so, rather than take on the family temple, he resolves to live a good life as an engineer and help others that way (HOSHINO and ASAKAWA 2011, 43–44). HOSHINO and ASAKAWA (2011, 153–154) state that in their interviews with walking pilgrims (*arukihenro* 歩き遍路) and in published pilgrimage accounts they have examined, themes of self-discovery have been central, and integral to the growth in walker numbers, while faith is barely mentioned. John SHULTZ (2009) has similarly shown that, especially since the 1990s, there has been a huge number of books and, more recently, online accounts published by pilgrims on foot about their experiences, and he, too, has indicated how finding a sense of personalized identity is a factor in such accounts. Others, too, have emphasized the significance of self-discovery as a motivating theme in the journeys of pilgrims in Shikoku (OSADA, SAKATA, and SEKI 2003; KADOTA 2014; MORI 2005, 175; 2014, 195), while YAMANAKA Hiroshi (2016, 152) has suggested that this search for self-identity and self-reflection has become an integral element of travel in contemporary Japan in general.

I recognize that doing the pilgrimage to “find oneself” is by no means a modern development (we have accounts from a century or more ago in which such

themes were evident),³ and that one does sometimes encounter people who are walking the *henro* as an ascetic or devotional exercise (READER 2005, 83–84; READER and SHULTZ 2021, 106–109). In three fieldwork visits to Shikoku in 2018–2019 and in interviews with people who performed the *henro* multiple times, I met some people doing the pilgrimage on foot for faith-related reasons; one man, for example, said that he saw the pilgrimage as a religious path through which he could follow Kōbō Daishi’s path to liberation. Another had walked the pilgrimage a dozen times and saw it as a challenge and an aid to self-discovery that (like, he said, running the marathon) could stimulate mystical feelings. However, for the most part, foot pilgrims rarely spoke in such ways and some even vehemently rejected the idea that faith, whether in Daishi or more generally, was an element in their pilgrimages. They more commonly phrased their pilgrimages in terms of health, hiking, challenge, self-discovery, and finding a sense of personal identity in the face of changing circumstances. Strikingly, too, those who were walking were largely older Japanese men who had retired. Many of those I interviewed were male and in their sixties or above as were the large proportion of pilgrims using other means of transportation, which is indicative of an aging pilgrimage population that is a source of concern to the temples (READER, forthcoming).⁴ Mostly they were retired or semi-retired; several had done the pilgrimage multiple times and said that the *henro* was a retirement hobby, something they got involved in while seeking a new sense of identity and meaning after a lifetime of work. As one respondent commented, he began doing the pilgrimage after retirement because he had nothing else to do; as a result, it became an integral part of his life and identity (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 138). For many older walkers the *henro* gives them not just a new post-retirement sense of meaning but an activity that keeps them physically fit, mentally alert, and occupied; many interviewees stated that they spent a lot of time between pilgrimages preparing, reading about, and planning for the next one, so that they were constantly engaged with it (READER and SHULTZ 2021).

As MORI Masato (2005, 270–274) has shown, interest in hiking and health issues has stimulated interest in walking the pilgrimage to the extent that the *henro* often features in guidebooks and tourist publicity as a hiking course; thus, many walkers came to see the pilgrimage as “not religious” (*hishūkyō* 非宗教). This association between the pilgrimage and hiking was highlighted by a series of television programs about the *henro* made by NHK in 2006 in its *Shumi yūyū* 趣味悠々 (leisure hobbies) series along with an accompanying book in which

3. See, for example, TAKAMURE (1987), which is the account of the writer Takamura Itsue 高群逸枝 (1894–1964) who walked the pilgrimage in 1918 to find herself after an unhappy affair.

4. Although the research was a joint project, I was able to spend longer in the field than Shultz and hence was able to conduct all of the interviews on which this article draws.

the pilgrimage was described as a hobby (READER 2014, 192). A phrase on the cover of the book also drew attention to the issue of self-discovery: “A break in life: while walking, a journey to reconsider your life” (NHK 2006). Many pilgrims I met in my most recent fieldwork in 2018–2019 expressed such themes. Two examples will suffice. One man I met near Cape Muroto 室戸 in southeast Shikoku was on his eleventh circuit. Retired, he firmly rejected any idea that faith played a part in his pilgrimages. He lived alone and found being at home with nothing to do all the time made him go crazy, so he sought out ways to counter this. The pilgrimage offered the chance to be healthy while enjoying good scenery and food (something that came up in many conversations with pilgrims) and meeting interesting people. Similar thoughts were expressed by another pilgrim, aged sixty-eight, who I met in northern Kagawa Prefecture on his twenty-fourth circuit of Shikoku. He said he did it twice a year ever since retiring at aged fifty-five, because he liked hiking, enjoyed Shikoku’s scenery, and found the *henro* was a good walking course with decent signage. It enabled him to meet people from all over Japan—he had that day met two others and planned a beer or two in the evening with them—and provided him with an enjoyable retirement activity that kept him fit. So prevalent has this pattern become that Hirahata Ryōyū 平端良雄, a Buddhist priest who runs a nationwide pilgrimage association (Junrei no Kai 巡礼の会) and is an ardent advocate of performing pilgrimages as an act of faith, lamented in an interview with me that Kōbō Daishi faith was in decline among Shikoku pilgrims while walkers were no longer doing it as a religious practice (*shugyō* 修行) but simply as a walking exercise with no religious orientations.

It is not just those who walk regularly who frame their post-retirement lives around performing pilgrimages. Shultz and I found this orientation also common for those who went by car. We met many retired people who spent large parts of each year traveling around the pilgrimage route and sleeping in their cars (a practice called *shachūhaku* 車中泊), which had been customized for the purpose (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 17). It was striking, too, that many were husband and wife couples who, after retirement and with offspring no longer at home, had time on their hands and found that they enjoyed doing pilgrimages together, and that it gave them a sense of purpose in their retirement. As one couple, who had done the *henro* twenty-eight times in their customized van (once a year since the husband had retired) and had been all over Japan visiting shrines and temples, told us, they did this not because of any religious motives or because of *Daishi shinkō*. Their first pilgrimage was to celebrate his sixtieth birthday and retirement; they enjoyed it and found it gave them a sense of togetherness and harmony. As a result, they carried on doing so; at home, they commented, they always fought, whereas on pilgrimage in their van they got on (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 181–185). As we discuss, it is common for those who

perform multiple pilgrimages, whether walking regularly, living permanently on the route like Shimada, or traveling by car and doing multiple circuits to not just make pilgrimage the central organizing principle in their lives but to develop a special sense of identity as pilgrims (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 17, 225–235; READER 2001, 127–132).

Regional Identities: Pilgrimage as Local and Island Commodity

Twice, a year apart in 2018 and 2019, I met a man from Tokushima walking the *henro*. He did it, he said, twice a year, taking around forty days each time, always sleeping out and living on minimal resources. When I asked if *Daishi shinkō* was a factor in his pilgrimages he responded emphatically in the negative. While he “liked” Daishi he was adamant his travels were not connected to faith, nor, he emphasized, did he do any religious practices such as soliciting alms (*takuhatsu* 托鉢). His reasons for doing the pilgrimage twice a year were that he liked walking; he was from Shikoku and the *henro* was integral to the history and culture of the island where he was born and lived. As such his pilgrimages were an expression and articulation of his identity as a person of Shikoku (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 203–204).

He was a good example of how the pilgrimage plays a role in shaping and articulating island identity and how pilgrimage, often thought of as something involved with traveling to distant places, can also be a highly local phenomenon. In Shikoku, Kōbō Daishi is seen as belonging to the island (because Kūkai was from Shikoku) with a cultic following that transcends sectarian dimensions (KANEKO 1991), while various local and regional pilgrimage customs such as the practice of *settai* 接待 (giving alms to pilgrims) are seen as part of the island’s culture and common heritage (ASAKAWA 2008). Historical records show that a significant number of those on the pilgrimage route from the Edo period onwards were from Shikoku (MAEDA 1971, 160–161). Some did the whole pilgrimage, but many did either the section of the pilgrimage within the feudal domain they inhabited, or a more local section still. Often doing such localized sections was an initiation ritual for age sets (MAEDA 1971, 182–183; HOSHINO 2001, 258–310; HAYASAKA 1992, 248). In the modern era, too, many pilgrims are from Shikoku; studies in the 1980s and 1990s indicated that the four prefectures of Shikoku were the most common areas from which pilgrims came and that over 40 percent of pilgrims were either Shikoku residents or had Shikoku roots (SATŌ 2004, 214–217). Shultz and I also provide examples of people originally from Shikoku but now living elsewhere, whose repeated returns there to do the pilgrimage are associated with their sense of island belonging (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 182–183, 206–208).

This close association of the pilgrimage and its customs with concepts of island heritage and identity has become especially prominent in recent years and

has been widely used by various political, economic, commercial, and educational agencies as a means of developing regional strategies to combat the island's economic and depopulation problems. Always marginalized economically, Shikoku has suffered particularly since the bubble economy burst, as industries have declined, and it has suffered serious rural depopulation. As prefectural government officials commented to me, despite numerous local and regional rivalries there was a recognition that the island needed a combined strategy to deal with these problems and that the four prefectures were under pressure from Tokyo to do so.⁵ A key island-wide strategy has been to promote Shikoku as a tourist destination—with intended clientele from within Japan and from overseas—by presenting it as a place where “traditional” culture, rural scenery, and historical customs can be encountered. The *henro* was integral to this strategy because it was shared across the four prefectures, and because its general ambience of old temples, pilgrims, and customs, could readily be presented as a manifestation both of island and national culture, history, and heritage. The governor of Tokushima Prefecture, Endō Toshio 圓藤寿穂, for example unveiled such a tourist development plan in 2000 using the catch phrase *subarashii furusato* すばらしいふるさと (splendid homeland) in which the *henro* featured as a manifestation of the region's cultural and historical heritage (HOSHINO and ASAKAWA 2011, 164–165; ASAKAWA 2008; READER 2014; 2020a). Other prefectures and civic agencies did likewise.

This also led to a coalition of interest groups, led by the island's four prefectural governments, campaigning to seek UNESCO World Heritage accreditation for the pilgrimage, spurred particularly by the realization that UNESCO accreditation in 1993 for another pilgrimage route—the Camino of Santiago de Compostela in Spain—had boosted pilgrim and visitor numbers to northwestern Spain. The Shikoku campaign, which began early in this century, also has the support of the Shikoku Reijōkai 四国霊場会, the association that represents the eighty-eight pilgrimage temples, partially because of a concern about a potential decline in pilgrim numbers and that UNESCO accreditation might address this as it had in Santiago de Compostela. The campaign has been encouraged by the national government, which sees the acquisition of UNESCO recognition for as many Japanese sites as possible to be a marker of national pride and a means of encouraging more overseas tourism to Japan (READER 2020b 163–165; ROTS and TEEUWEN 2020, 11). Government plans to recalibrate the national economy and address issues of rural depopulation have also focused on encouraging tourism,

5. I base this on discussions with various government officials and others in Shikoku from 2008 onwards. Diplomacy prevents me from outlining some of the conversations I have had in which intense rivalries and negative comments about the people in other prefectures have surfaced.

both internally and from overseas (READER 2020b; FUNCK and COOPER 2013; SHARPLEY and KATO 2021).

In the UNESCO context the pilgrimage has been portrayed as a symbol of Shikoku's heritage and culture while customs such as *settai* are cited as examples of the kindness and warmth of island people who share a common identity through the *henro* (READER 2020a). The Shikoku World Heritage campaign in Shikoku has especially focused on the term *henro bunka* 遍路文化 (pilgrimage culture) as a key unifying marker. It is a term chosen deliberately and with clear political considerations in mind, as Ehime government officials working on the UNESCO campaign informed me; portraying the pilgrimage in this way was intended to avoid any hint that it might be connected to religion. The worry was that any prefectural or civic support for the pilgrimage, whether by featuring it in publicity produced by prefectural tourist offices or in applications made by the regional governments for nomination to UNESCO, might be seen as examples of state support for religion. As such, the *henro* is presented as a manifestation of island culture and common identity, while terms such as “faith” and “religion” are, as much as possible, avoided (READER 2020a).

There are numerous other ways in which the pilgrimage has been used in connection with island regeneration strategies and the UNESCO campaign. These include focusing on younger generations—the people most likely to leave the island—in order to address the depopulation problem. In 2008 when studying the UNESCO campaign in Shikoku, for example, I was invited to take part in a one-day walk along the pilgrimage path in Kagawa Prefecture, organized by a non-profit organization (NPO) set up by island business interests to support the heritage campaign. The organizers told me that a key intention of the walks, which run monthly, was to get parents to take part with their children. By walking part of the route, visiting a temple or two, and having talks along the way about the *henro* by members of the NPO, they sought to encourage young children to learn about the pilgrimage and its place in island culture and to realize that they shared a cultural identity that should be maintained.⁶

Universities in Shikoku, too, have joined in. Ehime University established a major research program on the *henro* and its place in world pilgrimage culture, which has received funding from the Ministry of Education.⁷ Naruto University has since 2001 been offering courses on the pilgrimage that get students to walk parts of it and engage in local customs such as giving alms to pilgrims.⁸

6. See <http://omotenashi88.net> for further details. All online sources accessed 12 July 2021.

7. Ehime established its research center in 2015 but had been running research programs and organizing conferences on the pilgrimage for many years before that under the title *Sekai junrei no naka no henro* 世界巡礼の中の遍路 (<http://henro.ll.ehime-u.ac.jp/eng/>).

8. See www.naruto-u.ac.jp/gp/henro/index.htm and www.naruto-u.ac.jp/gp/henro/aruku/aruku-top.html.

Naruto University Vice-President Ōishi Masaaki has outlined how the university was given Ministry of Education funding in 2007 to develop the program and make the pilgrimage and its environs into a “total museum” (*marugoto hakubutsukan* まるごと博物館) that combined academic teaching about the pilgrimage and studies of its historical and material culture with practical engagement through participation in the pilgrimage and its various customs, and interacting with local people to this effect. Ōishi also stresses the importance of passing on knowledge of the *henro* and Shikoku’s pilgrimage culture to the next generations, because of its significance for the island as a whole (ŌISHI 2011). Naruto University’s course descriptions emphasize these points. One course aimed at training people to be teachers talks of deepening awareness of the pilgrimage and its role in local culture; by learning how the pilgrimage helps shape Shikoku identity the course seeks to nurture the students as future education leaders of the region aware of the links between the *henro* and regional society.⁹ Tokushima University also does similar courses, especially for its short-term college, that train people to work in the hospitality industry; these courses, which have been running even in the current pandemic, also involve students walking part of the route, talking to pilgrims, giving them *settai*, and discussing such activities as acts of public service.¹⁰

As I have commented elsewhere, some of those running the temples and many pilgrims have been lukewarm—or implicitly hostile—to the implications of these activities, notably the UNESCO campaign, as they fear it will make the pilgrimage increasingly into a tourist spectacle and bring an influx of sightseers that will demean the pilgrimage (READER 2020a). Yet there are also those who are supportive because of worries about the potentially fraught longer-term prospects of the pilgrimage (READER, forthcoming), because they recognize that the *henro* is deeply associated with Shikoku identity and because they consider that this in turn adds to and enhances Japanese national identity. ŌNO Masayoshi (2007), an ardent pilgrim guide, for example, has written a book emphasizing the significance of the *henro* as a symbol of Shikoku and as a means to aid Japanese nation building. He complains that Shikoku is marginalized in Japan and has had an unclear identity structure in an age in which it is important to develop a strong sense of regional identity. However, he asserts, Shikoku has something found nowhere else: the *henro*. This not only provides Shikoku with a unique identity but contributes also to the nation by improving the lives of its people and offering a pleasurable way to reduce the stresses of modern life.

9. See www.naruto-u.ac.jp/_files/00106429/H29chipla_n.pdf.

10. See <https://www.takamatsu-u.ac.jp/univ-jrcol/junior/secretary/class/> and www.takamatsu-u.ac.jp/topics/7-14/.

The Pilgrimage and National Identity

Ōno's portrayal of the *henro* as a symbol of national identity reflects also the ways the mass media and related interests (including commercial agencies) have treated the pilgrimage in recent decades: as a signifier of national cultural belonging and identity. This is a recurrent theme in the various documentaries and television series about the pilgrimage produced by NHK for example (READER 2007; 2014, 109–110), and they have been an important part of its appeal for many pilgrims. They are grounded in the notion that the “real” essence of Japan is not found in its modern, hectic, and “Westernized” cities and lifestyles, but in some idealized premodern harmonious native realm—the *furusato*, or ancient ancestral homeland—a trope that, as numerous commentators have shown, has long been used to promote emotional images of belonging and identity in a variety of social, religious, and political contexts (READER 1987; ROBERTSON 1991). This idea of the pilgrimage as representing the traditional Japanese homeland and its concomitant, the “spiritual homeland” (*kokoro no furusato* 心のふるさと), has been a recurrent theme in *henro* publicity too, used by the temples, by regional and national tourist agencies, and by the travel concerns that encourage people to use their services (READER 1987; 2005; 2007; MORI 2005; HOSHINO and ASAKAWA 2011). The *henro* featured, for example, in Japan Rail's “Discover Japan” campaigns of the 1970s that encouraged urban dwellers to travel to out-of-the-way regions in search of what it termed “lost Japan” (*ushinawareta Nihon* 失われた日本) (MORI 2005, 174–175), and such themes have been prevalent in NHK productions as well. NHK's series *Shikoku hachijū hakkasho: Kokoro no tabi* (“Eighty-Eight Pilgrimage Sites: A Journey of the Spirit”; my translation) aired initially between 1998–2000 and again in 2004–2005 and the books that accompanied the series, for example, presented the *henro* in this way as a journey where one could encounter the “spirit of the Japanese people” (*Nihonjin no kokoro* 日本人の心) and the positive traditional essence of Japan that was disappearing elsewhere (NHK 1998–1989; MORI 2005, 263). In the last episode of the series, Hayasaka Akira 早坂 暁, a Shikoku author who has written extensively about the pilgrimage as an aspect of regional and national culture, emphasizes the link between the pilgrimage and Japanese identity by saying that if one wants to know about the Japanese people, one should do the *henro* (MORI 2005, 264).

As MORI (2005, 252) has commented, in NHK's representation of the pilgrimage any hint that the pilgrimage might have “religious” aspects is barely visible. I have similarly said that media depictions such as NHK's have distanced it from its religious orientations by replacing the faith-motivated pilgrim with a traveler in search of his/her cultural roots (READER 2007). There are political reasons for this: NHK is a publicly funded body with a remit, among other things, to focus on Japan's traditions and heritage, but it has to be careful, like any public

or state body, to avoid appearing to privilege religion in any form, so as not to be charged with breaching the constitutional separation of state and religion. This point was stressed to me by two members of NHK's educational department who were involved with the production of the aforementioned "hobby" documentary series; the *henro*, they said, was excellent material for documentaries because of its photogenic nature and long history, but because of NHK's state-funded position they had to steer clear of talking about faith and religion.¹¹ As with regional governments and related agencies in Shikoku, depicting the pilgrimage meant doing so through the prism of identity, culture, and heritage, not religion.

As HOSHINO and ASAKAWA (2011, 43–46) have commented, such portrayals present an idealized and mythologized image of the pilgrimage in which Shikoku is a special place that provides a direct contrast to modern urban Japan. It is an idealized mythology that has proved effective. Various informants, including temple priests and officials of bus companies that run pilgrimage tours, have indicated to me that the rise in pilgrim numbers in the late 1990s and the first decade or so of this century was closely linked to the imagery promoted by NHK and other mass media in which the pilgrimage represents Japanese tradition and is a way to discover one's essential Japanese nature. Pilgrims I have interviewed have affirmed that such perspectives were important motives spurring their journeys (READER 2005, 82). Respondents to a detailed questionnaire about their pilgrimage histories and attitudes that Shultz and I administered commonly saw doing the pilgrimage as part of their Japanese cultural heritage as well as being as integral to their post-retirement identity (READER and SHULTZ 2021, 136–138).

This emphasis on the pilgrimage as a signifier of national cultural identity has become widely used in state-generated publicity associated with the national government's strategic policies focusing on tourism. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Tourism's strategic plan to this effect talks of "Realizing a World-Class Tourism Nation and Building a Beautiful Nation" and includes the *henro* as one of the places to see and find the "essence of Japan." Shikoku is portrayed as "Spiritual Island: Shikoku *henro*," and forms part of a wider aim—designed particularly to attract overseas visitors but to encourage Japanese people to be travelers in their own country—to create an image of a spiritual and mystical Japan.¹² In 2015 the state created a new cultural award, Japan Heritage (*Nihon isan* 日本遺産), to further these efforts. Japan Heritage, overseen by an agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Tourism, is presented as epitomizing the "real Japan" and in 2016 all eighty-eight Shikoku temples were given this award—bestowed, it is clear to see, to strengthen the case for UNESCO World

11. Interview, Tokyo, 3 April 2008.

12. I should note that the *henro* is just one of many places featured in this context (www.mlit.go.jp/common/001325165.pdf).

Heritage recognition (READER 2020a).¹³ In such ways, the national government and state have complemented the activities of regional and civic agencies in Shikoku in adopting and publicizing the *henro* as a window into and manifestation of Japanese belonging, identity, and heritage.

Concluding Comments: Reconsidering Religion in an Age of Decline?

The Shikoku pilgrimage in recent times has been depicted by various interest groups, including media, civic, and political agencies, primarily through the lens of identity, culture, and heritage. These themes are also manifest in the attitudes of contemporary pilgrims, especially those on foot, who have become less concerned with faith and religious affiliations and more oriented towards issues of finding out who they are and constructing personalized identities that may have nothing to do with faith. In this way, individual pilgrims are reflecting, in their behavior and attitudes, themes evident also in regional and national political and mediatized uses of the pilgrimage.

This raises questions about how one can interpret the *henro* as a relative success story—but only a relative success, as I have indicated above—in an age of declining religious engagement, when much of its growth and public manifestation has been framed around issues that have little to do with themes such as asceticism, faith, and religious practice once considered integral to it. Does this indicate a further process of secularization and the erosion of the religious sphere? I have suggested in other contexts in which Buddhist temples and famed pilgrimage routes have developed joint ventures with commercial ventures. This effectively marginalize faith as temples become increasingly like agents furthering the commercial agendas of their secular partners, and in which traditional religious institutions, weakened by declining support levels, become increasingly prone to the influence of external interests (READER 2020b, 175–176).

Recent contributions to the study of religion in Japan, respectively by Okamoto Ryōsuke and by Yamanaka Hiroshi, offer potential avenues to start addressing this issue in ways that counter such perspectives. OKAMOTO (2015), in his study of contemporary pilgrimages, recognizes that society is becoming increasingly secularized and that as this occurs the influence of religion (notably the established traditions) in public contexts wanes. Rather than seeing this as producing religious decline, however, he argues that this opens up space for people and institutions to expand into the religious terrain and appropriate themes normally associated with religion. He especially focuses on pilgrimage, discussing how modern pilgrims in a variety of contexts travel without articulating any concept of faith and showing how new arenas of pilgrimage practice related

13. In an earlier version it was also the “innermost essence” of Japan (<https://japan-heritage.bunka.go.jp/en/index.html>).

to seemingly secular realms, such as visits by fans to anime sites, have become popular. The proponents of these practices have given them a label that clearly appropriates religious terminology; fans call their visits to anime and manga locations *seichi junrei* 聖地巡礼 (sacred site pilgrimages). For Okamoto such tendencies are an expansion of the realms of religion, while showing that faith is a non-essential element in pilgrimage. Modern pilgrims of this ilk are thus *shinkōnaki junreisha* 信仰なき巡礼者 (pilgrims without faith) (OKAMOTO 2015, 9, 180, 211). He also notes how secular interests such as tourist offices and government agencies actively promote seemingly secular sites using terms associated with the sacred, in order to encourage travel and tourism. This is not so much a process of continued secularization at least in terms of the decline of religion, but of the expansion of what can be included under the rubric of religion. As such, pilgrims without faith and practices associated with secular sites given a “sacred” label are incorporated into and become as much a part of religion as are those driven by faith. Okamoto has subsequently expanded his discussion beyond just pilgrimage to argue that faith is not a key component of religion in general in Japan.¹⁴

YAMANAKA Hiroshi (2012; 2016; 2017), too, has argued for an expansion of the notion of “religion” to fit with the changing context of modernity. His primary interests are in how travel and tourism intersect with religious traditions, sites, and practices, and he argues that these are areas (notably tourism, commerce, and consumerism) that have thus far been neglected in the study of religion. For Yamanaka, attempts to set religion apart from consumerism are not viable in modern contexts, as he shows by discussing the intersections of tourism and religion and indicating how places associated with religious traditions have become central to promotional activities by tourist offices and regional government agencies seeking strategies to boost local economies. Religious authorities have frequently been involved in such activities in order to increase visitor numbers to their institutions (YAMANAKA 2016; 2017). Yamanaka, too, draws attention to institutional religious decline, while noting that there are many areas in which people engage in private, individual interactions (for example, doing pilgrimages) without making commitments to institutions or wanting to be seen as religious. This sense of participation without affiliation or institutional belonging is a characteristic of modern religious behavior, and is, he argues, emblematic of modern, economically, and technologically developed societies such as Japan (YAMANAKA 2017). He uses the term *karui shūkyō* 軽い宗教 to characterize this

14. He calls this “religion without faith” *shinkōnaki shūkyō* 信仰なき宗教 (OKAMOTO 2021, iv, 149, 183–213). I thank Clark Chilson for bringing Okamoto’s latest book to my attention, providing me with a detailed examination of its contents and discussing it with me in an extended Skype session on 30 June 2021.

modern religious form in which people can engage in practice without affiliation and in which religion, commerce, and economic activities are interwoven rather than existing in separate spheres. While *karui shūkyō* literally translates as “light religion,” Yamanaka has also used the term “floating religion” while alluding to Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity (BAUMAN 2000; YAMANAKA 2016, 156–157; 2017, 280). As such, *karui shūkyō* is a “liquid” and fluidly shifting notion.

Their theories overlap in some ways, notably in seeing affiliation and faith as not necessarily intrinsic to religion, while recognizing that religion is not set apart from other spheres and that various nonreligious agencies play a significant role in the dynamics of religious institutions and sites. In terms of the issues outlined above, one could argue, following both Okamoto’s and Yamanaka’s lines of thought, that earlier narratives of the pilgrimage that related to Kōbō Daishi, miraculous events, and expressions of faith have largely given way to new ones. The pilgrimage becomes an avenue for journeys of self-discovery whereby faith is not necessary and to contexts in which various interest groups promote and use the pilgrimage to develop ideas of identity at individual, regional, and national levels often with commercial motivations in mind.

In many ways, I am in accord with Okamoto and Yamanaka in their arguments about the need to constantly rethink what “religion” might mean and how it should be seen as something porous and fluid that need not be associated with faith or disassociated from tourism, commerce, economic, and political interests. Such developments are readily visible in the contemporary history of the *henro*, which grew in popularity from the 1950s onwards until around 2010 thanks in great part to some of the themes that Okamoto and Yamanaka have highlighted. This has certainly opened up space for those who want to find themselves, develop a retirement hobby, or engage in hiking for the sake of their health, becoming pilgrims in Shikoku without feeling they should have or express a sense of affiliation to Buddhism or devotion to Kōbō Daishi. It has allowed those who see the *henro* as something to make photogenic documentaries about, to promote Shikoku as a tourist destination, or to use it as an educational means of training people so as to stem the tide of depopulation, to do so. Their activities have helped shape and reshape a pilgrimage that, like pilgrimages more generally, is itself constantly evolving and being remade in the light of changing circumstances.

Yet, I would question whether the Shikoku example really indicates an expansion of the scope of religion or can be seen as an example of participatory vibrancy that counteracts the notion outlined in the surveys and studies mentioned earlier, and that this is an age of religious decline and contraction. It is not just that pilgrim numbers have been falling recently in Shikoku, as elsewhere in Japan, but that as different interest groups utilize the *henro* for purposes

such as generating regional revival and attracting tourists and as people see the *henro* as a hobby or means of finding a new identity, the potential for the pilgrimage to become an activity increasingly dissociated from its roots grows. That, as I have previously indicated (see above and READER 2020a) is why there is some unease in Shikoku about the campaign for UNESCO recognition. The contemporary drive strongly aided by national government support to promote *henro bunka* while distancing this identity culture from associations with the religious world implies that, rather than the arena of religion being expanded and enhanced, it is being controlled and limited. When a living pilgrimage is talked about as a “museum,” even one intended to inculcate a sense of identity and cultural heritage into future generations, one can also question whether this really could be seen as an expansion of the scope of religion.

What one can say is that the Shikoku pilgrimage as a practice whose origins are suffused with religious themes has, in modern times, become a vehicle for articulations of identity at multiple levels. It has been used in this way by various actors and interest groups to pursue their own interests and construct their own agendas and versions of identity that need not involve religious commitment or faith. For civic agencies, it has become a means of enhancing regional policies and economic strategies that rely on dissociating the pilgrimage from the realms of religion and faith and turning it into a secularized icon of culture. It has flourished to a great degree because of this fluidity and capacity to be so used. At the same time, this means that the religious dimensions of the pilgrimage have been increasingly marginalized, while the recent decline in pilgrim numbers suggests that any notion of the expansion of the realms of religion need not be accompanied by growth in participation.

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