



Caleb Swift Carter, *A Path Into the Mountains: Shugendō and Mount Togakushi*

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THIS IS THE BOOK I wish I would (or wish I could) have written if, after my early exposure to Shugendō in the early 1970s, I had not been distracted into an academic career in textual Buddhist studies. It succeeds in discussing and clarifying Shugendō in general as an intriguing part of Japanese religion while also focusing specifically on one locale and its unique history and features.

Part of an encouraging addition of recent publications on Shugendō and *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合, *A Path Into the Mountains* takes us on a journey of discovery, challenging some longtime assumptions concerning the role of Shugendō and religion in Japanese history. Each chapter, rich in ideas and information, could easily be expanded into a monograph of its own. After a short introduction setting the stage and introducing recent scholarship (“Revisiting the History of Shugendō”), Carter takes a chronological approach to discuss the historical development leading to what we now label as “Shugendō.” Part 1 on “Before Shugendō” introduces some local deities (such as a nine-headed dragon), various origin accounts, and so forth, calling into question how far back one can legitimately use the term “Shugendō,” and preferring to talk about “mountain asceticism before Shugendō.” Part 2 on “Transmitting Shugendō” explains how an official transmission of a Shugendō lineage was conveyed from Mount Hiko in the sixteenth century, which provides a date (surprisingly late) for when we can identify Shugendō as a part of the Togakushi landscape. As Carter argues, “Shugendō comprised specific lineages transmitted by historical

persons at certain moments in time to certain places,” and thus “Shugendō developed as a self-conscious system that passed along specific lines of ritual transmission” (77). In other words, pre-sixteenth-century mountain religion at Togakushi could be called “proto-Shugendō,” but technically the label becomes appropriate only in the sixteenth century. Part 3 on “Shugendō, Localized and Nationalized,” discusses the local developments at Togakushi with an eye toward the wider religious developments throughout Japan through the Edo period into the modern era, indeed even incorporating international elements such as Chinese deities. Finally, the epilogue looks briefly at the collapse of Shugendō along with the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈/*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離 (“separation of Buddhism and Shinto”) in the Meiji era, and aspects of its revival in the postwar era and contemporary times.

The dizzying complexity of the subject provokes in the reader many topics for reflection, and the desire to learn more. For example, Carter usefully compares the label “Shugendō” with “Shinto,” also defined as “a self-conscious system that took shape through lineages, transmissions, and narratives” (118), against the common tendency to apply these labels to earlier eras of Japanese history. Also, the complicated interaction of various religious elements (deities, local lore, established Buddhist schools such as Tendai on Mount Hiei, the development of Shugendō in other local areas such as Mount Hiko, and so forth) makes one wonder about the unique local development of other areas famous for their Shugendō traditions.

This is not meant as a criticism of the book, but rather I was inspired to know more about some of the topics that were (no doubt necessarily) mentioned briefly but not fleshed out. For example, I would like to know more about Mount Iizuna, not just in relation to Togakushi but its own unique religious development and characteristics. Iizuna is the mountain that towers over the Nagano plain, with Zenkōji at its foot and Togakushi nestled behind it. Iizuna Gongen 飯綱権現 was once a powerful deity—famous as a guardian deity for warlords such as Uesugi Kenshin, whose helmet was ornamented with its statue—and also well known in Edo, but now seems to be almost forgotten. Why is Togakushi experiencing a revival, but Iizuna not?

I would also like to know more about Senchō, the fifteenth-century Tendai ritualist (mentioned at the beginning of chapter 10) who was reportedly murdered by his Shingon colleague over a doctrinal or ritual dispute, thus supposedly putting an end to the Tendai Taimitsu Shugen practices at Togakushi. There is a relatively new wooden plaque and stone monument at a small shrine (the Senchōsha 宣澄社) in his honor at the side of the entrance to the main Togakushi Shrine, indicating that he is (at least currently) fondly remembered by some, even “deified.”

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the importance of *shinbutsu shūgō* and its universality, not just in Japan but as an important part of any religious tradition (for example, the preponderance of “pagan” elements in the celebration of Christmas throughout the world). Although this is often presented as a “unique” aspect of Japanese religion, it is “unique” (as Japan itself is “unique”) only in the sense that, to paraphrase Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, each religion is unique in its own way, and yet every religion is the same in that it mixes and incorporates various traditions. *Shinbutsu shūgō* in a very broad sense is the basic popular/common religion of Japan that now incorporates elements from Christianity (weddings, Christmas cakes, Valentines’ Day, and so forth), “practiced” customarily and unconsciously by most of the populace. And, to turn the idea around, could not *shinbutsu shūgō* be used as a category to describe and analyze religious phenomena around the world? In this sense I hope that the audience for this book will not be limited to specialists in Japanese religion and culture but that it will receive attention from scholars who could apply its insights to other cultural milieu.

In closing, there are so many details that could have been have expanded on in the short epilogue; for example, the revival of the Yoshino-Kumano pilgrimage (as “spiritual hiking” as well as dedicated *yamabushi* training) in the last half of the twentieth century (for example, the completion of the Okugake trail, specifically between Zenki and Hongu, in 1975 for the first time in a hundred years; filmed by NHK for a special *Shin Nihon Kikō* documentary); the offering of Shugen training to international participants at Haguro; on the other hand, the disappearance of Shugen traditions in some rural areas along with the abandonment of local temples and shrines due to population loss; and surely much more of which I am not specifically aware. But this would no doubt require another book-length monograph, and I look forward to seeing more such good work by this author.

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