



Irit AVERBUCH, *The Gods Come Dancing: A Study of the Japanese Ritual Dance of Yamabushi Kagura*. Cornell East Asia Series #79. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1995. xiii + 326 pp. Bibliography, glossary, and index. \$25.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper. ISBN 1-885445-67-9, 1-885445-79-2.

STUDIES ON SHUGENDO in Western languages have so far taken a Religious Studies approach, focussing on its historical development as an example of Japanese syncretistic religion, or on a description of its activities and rituals.

Irit Averbuch's study is mainly concerned with "the confluence of religion and dance in the context of Japanese folk religion" (p. 2), specifically the yamabushi tradition of Hayachine Kagura. It is "a case study to examine the manner in which the yamabushi tradition of mountain asceticism (Shugendō) has influenced the religious life and culture of rural Japan, and the way its rituals and doctrines are transformed into a stage performance" (pp. 2-3). It thus adds another important dimension to Western-language studies on this complex subject, and provides another window through which to view the development of these religious ideas and practices in Japan.

*The Gods Come Dancing* opens with a brief but useful overview of Japanese folk religion, kagura and the folk performing arts, Shugendō, and the study of dance and religion. Though frustratingly brief, the Introduction succeeds in providing the basic background for the main focus of the work, the Hayachine Kagura, and background information is supplemented somewhat in later chapters. The ground is thus laid for the remaining chapters to discuss the kagura in detail: the history and context of the kagura around Mt. Hayachine; the setting of the kagura performance; detailed descriptions of various dances—*shiki mai*, the dance of the mountain god (*yama no kami mai*), the *gongen mai*—; and a more general discussion of the kagura performance in terms of both its human and divine audience.

The bulk of the book thus consists of detailed descriptions of kagura performances. At the risk of sounding Philistine, I must admit that I found the long descriptions of the dances tedious. But, after all, kagura is a performance art that begs for viewing—with sounds, sights, and smells—much more than for description. The inclusion of fourteen pages of pictures does rectify the situation to a certain extent, but what this subject really needs is a multimedia presentation. The author admits to having made some films of the performances, and an integrated visual, audio, and text format would be much more useful and appealing than the limits presented by the current book format. As the author herself admits, "the kagura's concrete manifestation or execution is at least as important as its abstract existence, for performance is what best expresses its eternal nature" (p. 261).

This study is aptly summarized in a short but moving conclusion which underscores that "Hayachine Kagura illustrates how deeply the Shugendō tradition has penetrated the life of rural Japan, and how it has even survived the demise of its own practitioners, the yamabushi, by translating itself into a performing art that perpetuates its world view through dance" (p. 257) Averbuch points out the importance of the ludic aspects of religion in Japan ("having fun is sacred"), and shows how kagura reflects its religious roots in blurring the boundaries between the human and the divine. We have Averbuch to thank for giving us a guided glimpse of this world, and for providing a few of the interconnected pieces to the puzzle of the Japanese religious landscape.

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