

The Way to Supernatural Powers” (*Shugendō*) in Medieval Japan: An Introduction to the Sakuramotobō Documents

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1. Mountain Worship and *Shugendō* (“The Way to Supernatural Powers”)

Over 70% of Japan consists of forested mountains. Volcanos, dense forests, and rugged peaks were worshipped as holy areas in Japan long before Buddhism arrived in the archipelago. Mt. Fuji, a symbol of Japan, has at its peak Sengen shrine, which was a site of worship since ancient times. With the introduction of Buddhism, and the introduction of Daoist notions, mountain worship became linked to Buddhist practices. Many mountains have the names of the bodhisattvas Yakushi (Bhaiṣajyaguru), Amida (Amitābha), Kannon (Avalokiteśvara), and Jizō (Kṣitigarbha).

Thereupon, people believed that by engaging in difficult ascents to mountains, they would gain supernatural powers, as their prayers would be granted, or illnesses healed. In particular those who wandered these mountains came to be known as *yamabushi* who engaged in *Shugendō*. *Shugendō* was a way for these *yamabushi* to climb and worship the mountains, which was thought to give them supernatural powers.

Japan had a variety of mountain ranges that were thought to be holy, for example Nikko, Haguro, Tateyam, Hakusan. But among them, the most ancient and influential regions were those of Kumano and Yoshino. Both sites were close to Japan’s capitals of Kyoto, and the old capital of Nara.

2. The Beginning of Worship at These Holy Sites

Both Kumano and Yoshino became holy sites during the eighth century. By the late ninth century, these regions were worshipped as holy regions by a variety of nobles. Initially mountain priests, or *yamabushi*, engaged in ascetic practices in these regions, and they also prayed at the court for relief from drought, robberies, or other disturbances. At the beginning of the tenth century Emperor Uda went on a pilgrimage to Kumano, and at the end of the tenth century, the famous noble Fujiwara Michinaga went on a pilgrimage to Yoshino, where he buried sutras as a way of preserving the Buddha’s law during a purported period of decline.

In the eleventh century, Emperor Shirakawa was the first of many emperors, retired emperors, and members of the nobility who traveled to Kumano. At this time, the fervor of belief in *shugendō* stemmed from the rise of *mappō* belief, the idea that individuals could no longer achieve enlightenment through their own efforts. According to this view of history, things declined every five centuries after the death of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, with the year 1052 coinciding with the onset of *mappō*. As the time of *mappō* approached, the supernatural powers of *shugendō* were favored by some, although other people worshipped more the Amida, who was thought to be able to help people be reborn in the Pure Land after their death.

3. The Spread of Pilgrimages to Holy Places

The belief and practices of emperors and nobles in traveling to Kumano and other holy sites led to warriors and commoners following the same practices. In the case of Kumano, the warriors of Japan also went on pilgrimages there. As pilgrims increased in number, *yamabushi* priests came to serve as guides for pilgrims and set up places where these pilgrims could lodge. As time passed, some *yamabushi* developed ties with the families of pilgrims and created contracts with these pilgrims, where the *yamabushi* would guide them and provide for their lodging. The pilgrims who established such a contract were known as *danna*, while the *yamabushi* was known as an *oshi*. Of course, a *danna* would pay the *oshi* for his guidance, and thus this became a source of income for the *oshi* priest. Ultimately, the *danna* contract became a right which could be inherited or sold.

Oshi also worked hard to ensure that their *danna* contract would not be ended. They would travel to where the *danna* members resided, giving them amulets for protection, or performing purification ceremonies for them as well. Finally, they set up *shukubō*, structures where pilgrims could be lodged, and fed. *Shukubō* were given the same type of name as an official temple building, ending in the suffix of *bō* or *in*, but functionally, they served as a kind of hotel for the pilgrims, with the *oshi* being both the hotel manager and a travel agent.

4. The Various Roles of *Yamabushi*

Yamabushi engaged in a variety of activities in medieval Japan. Among them they did the following:

- a. Guides. Serving as a guide was their primary function, but they did not only guide their *danna*. According to the *Taiheiki*, an history of the fourteenth century, *yamabushi* served as guides for armies passing through the mountains.
- b. Conveyers of information. Because *yamabushi* traveled throughout Japan, they knew a lot about many different areas. Some estate proprietors, or political officials profited from their information. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Date, Takeda, and Imagawa, all competing hegemony, used *yamabushi* to accumulate political and social information about distant regions.
- c. Traveling merchants or vendors. In the sixteenth century, some *yamabushi* gained the protection of the Date, a major lord, and recognition as belonging to the Bandōya, a group of merchants who traveled from Northeast Japan to the capital of Kyoto. In fact, these merchants were a group of *yamabushi* who resided in the holy mountains of Kurama, located in the northern reaches of the capital. Likewise, in the fifteenth century, at the harbor of Kasumigaura in Eastern Japan, prosperous *yamabushi* were famous for their money lending activities. Likewise, sources dating from the Edo period (1600-1868) commonly reveal the mercantile activities of *yamabushi*.

Japan, as was the case for most regions of the world, had itinerant merchants. During the Edo period, these peddlers sometimes came into conflict with more established merchants. When these disputes arose, these itinerant merchants relied on secret documents which granted them privileges. These documents reveal much about how these merchants conceived of themselves. For example, some documents from these merchants in northeastern Japan makes the claim that they were related to *yamabushi*

from Kumano and they abided by *yamabushi* rules about how to set up a market, or how to tie ropes when transporting goods, and that their actions were a manifestation of the Kumano Avatar's desire to protect and save people in the world. Thus, they saw themselves as being linked Kumano *yamabushi*. From these documents, it is possible to imagine how in medieval times, *yamabushi* traveled to various places, carrying with them goods, and gaining income from their sale. Likewise, peddlers claimed to be *yamabushi* so as to gain protection when traveling to various regions. *Yamabushi* and peddlers thus had these two faces.

- d. Healers. *Yamabushi* also served as doctors of sorts. As they frequented mountainous and wild regions, they had a good knowledge of various medicinal herbs. They provided a variety of services for their *danna*, and one of those was the distribution of medicine. Yoshino *yamabushi* commonly distributed an herbal remedy called *daranisuke*. It is a medicine for stomach aches made from the Amur Cork tree (*Phellodendron amurense*). It continues to be made in Yoshino to this day. Likewise, Ibukisan in Shiga prefecture is known for its manufacture of the medicine moxa, made from mugwort, and I have discovered documents references to medicinal herbs in an Ibuki *shugendō* temple. Finally, Toyama prefecture is still famous for its manufacture of medicines. The industry started when *yamabushi* made medicines at the *shugendō* center of Tateyama. Thus, *yamabushi* clearly served as healers. It is difficult to judge how good their medicines were, but for the people of Japan who had few opportunities to meet doctors, who were very few in number, the medicines brought regularly by *yamabushi*, coupled with their medical knowledge, gave them hope.
- e. Village surveyors. Some roles of the *yamabushi* are most unexpected. One of them concerns population registers. Because *yamabushi* often traveled to their *danna*, they knew who lived where. Because of that, at times, they were enlisted as tax officials. A number of registers exist where an *oshi* recorded the names of his *danna*. A sixteenth century document from province of Tango, which was written by an *oshi* with links to Ise shrine, is informative. The names and abodes of the *danna* are all recorded, as well as the number of households located in each village. Those numbers appear in the following slide. As you can tell, the number of households in harbors, or at the central political locations can be easily known. I do not know of other comparable registers, but this one does show how *yamabushi* by being able to cross various boundaries in different regions and jurisdictions, were able to grasp the true state of regional society.

5. Yoshino *Shugendō*

The Princeton collection of medieval documents are linked to *shugendō* in Yoshino. Let me first briefly introduce *shugendō* in Yoshino before discussing these documents.

Yoshino is located in the southern half of Nara prefecture, which is in central Japan. It is an area which has prominent mountain ranges, and deep forests, even by Japanese standards. As late as the seventh century, the people who lived in Yoshino were thought to be a different ethnic group. During the fourteenth century, a civil war erupted in Japan, fought by partisans of two rival emperors, and two courts. The Southern Court was based in Yoshino.

In the mid-seventh century, Japan's first *Yamabushi*, En no Gyōja, otherwise known as En no Ozuno, engaged in various austerities at Yoshino.

A variety of myths exist regarding En no Gyōja, among them that he grew horns, and many mysteries remain regarding him. The main avatar of Yoshino *shugendō* is called the Kongō Zaō Gongen and he is depicted breaking rocks in front of En no Gyōja, who is undergoing *shugendō* austerities. En no Gyōja himself is not shown as a Japanese shrine official, or a monk, but rather as a Chinese hermit. Likewise, Zaō Gongen is often depicted with one hand and one foot raised, and this image is that of him immediately after he appeared from the rocks.

In the ninth century, a Shingon Esoteric monk named Shōbō, following the example of En no Gyōja, went to Yoshino to perform austerities and he established Yoshino as a sacred area. From that time, it became a region where religious austerities were commonly performed.

There are fundamentally two distinct holy regions at Yoshino.

The first is the peak of Mt. Ōmine. It can only be reached by a narrow, steep and dangerous path. Among *shugendō* paths, this is thought to be the most difficult place to practice austerities. Zaō Gongen was thought to have manifested himself at the peak of Ōmine. In this region too there is the Omimesan temple, and here a large statue of Zaō Gongen is prominently displayed. Women are prohibited from going on top of the mountain because it was thought that they would hinder the practice of austerities by the male monks. Even today women are expressly prohibited from climbing this sacred mountain.

The second holy area is known as Yoshinoyama. It is the gateway to Mt. Ōmine. In contrast to the latter, which is known as the *sanjo* or peak of the mountain, this is called the *sange*, or the foot of the mountain. Here too there is a major hall where Zaō Gongen is worshipped, and it is called Zaōdō, or the Zaō Hall. The current Zaō Hall was built in the 1580s, and is the second largest temple in Japan, next to Tōdaiji. Below the Zaōdō there exists Sakuramotobō, Kizōin, and a number of *shukubō*, or temple lodgings, as well as the Yoshimizu shrine. Yoshinoyama is also famed for the beauty of its cherry trees and cherry blossoms in the spring.

6. Princeton University's Collection of Sakuramotobō Documents

Almost all of the documents in the Princeton University collection exhibit traces of having been purposely cut into pieces. The reason for this is that they were used for a time as insulation for a *fusama* sliding door. Originally, we thought that it would be impossible to restore any of these documents to their original state from such fragments. In the end, out of 157 pieces of paper, we were able to connect sixteen groups into distinct documents.

In all, the collection has 55 medieval (pre-1600) documents, and 64 early modern (1600-1867) documents. As many of these documents are addressed to, or contain the name Sakuramotobō, it is safe to assume that the documents originally came from this *shukubō*.

The vast majority of the Princeton Sakuramotobō documents consists of contracts between the *oshi* and the *danna*. Until now, well over a thousand such documents survive in the case of Kumano, but for Yoshino, only six were thought to have survived until this group of documents was discovered. The reason for this is that in 1868, the new Meiji government decreed that Buddhist temples were to be made distinct from Shintō shrines, and the Yoshino region, with its pronounced religious syncretism, was severely suppressed. In 1872, many old sources were lost

at that time. Nevertheless, in the Princeton collection, some 20 of these contracts exist, with the oldest being fifty years older than other surviving examples.

These documents are quite interesting. Some recount how much the *danna* was to pay their *oshi*. Document 48 reveals that the *danna* were also responsible for regular payments every new year, summer and autumn in addition to paying for their pilgrimage when they visited the mountain. Researchers have long assumed that the *danna* would pay a certain amount in exchange for the services of their *oshi*, but sources which list these amounts in detail are extremely rare. Nevertheless, the way in which these payments are recorded is a little vague, which presents some challenges for analysis.

Here is an image of Furumukai village, in Hanazono, which is a holding of Mt. Kōya. In this village, there were 125 households who were *danna*. When they visited the Mountain, they paid 230 *mon* each. I think that one *mon* equals about one or two US dollars. In addition, according to this contract, they each paid the *oshi* 10 *mon* every autumn and New Year. What is difficult here is the meaning of the word “each” (or *zutsu* in Japanese). Does “each” refer to the amount each household would pay per year to the *oshi*, or the amount all of the *danna* would pay to the *oshi*. Depending on this, the amount that the *oshi* would collect changes drastically. If “each” refers to “each year” then the amount that the *oshi* would receive from the village for the year would constitute only 250 *mon*.

Next let me calculate the amount offered at a rate calculated from each household. The payments for the autumn and New Year would constitute 2,500 *mon*. The amount paid by pilgrims on their visit to the mountain would of course vary according to how many of the *danna* were able to participate. For example, if 10 households went on a pilgrimage it would be 2,300 *mon*, if 20 households, it would be 4,600 *mon*. Based on these calculations, the *oshi* would receive from Furumukai village somewhere between 5,000 to 9,000 *mon*.

Is such a figure a reasonable amount? Here, I analyzed other records. In the Sakuramotobō collection, there is a document which recounts the sale of a *danna* consisting of 55 households. This bill of sale is for the revenue from these 55 households for a period of six months. The amount of the sale is 2,400 *mon*. This means that the person who bought these rights for half a year could expect to receive 2,400 *mon* from 55 households. If one were to calculate this rate for a whole year, and 125 households, the figure would be 10,900 *mon*. This figure is quite close to that which can be estimated from how much Furumukai village paid, namely a range of 5,000 to 9,000 *mon*. I think that it is safe to say that the “each” (*zutsu*) of these documents therefore refers to payments by each household, and not the *danna* as a whole. Also, interestingly, the income of the *oshi* clearly increases with an expansion of the number of pilgrims visiting the mountain. Undoubtedly *oshi* tried to entice as many of their *danna* as possible to go on a pilgrimage to their mountain.

As I mentioned earlier, one *mon* equals 1 to 2 dollars. Thus, one *oshi* could collect around 10,000 to 20,000 dollars in income from one village. If *oshi* had *danna* from multiple villages, their income would be correspondingly higher. In Kumano, some *oshi* had *danna* contracts with over a hundred villages, so it is easy to imagine that some *oshi* of that time were quite wealthy.

There is another very interesting record among early modern documents. It is a menu of the food for the pilgrims. This source is quite interesting as it allows us to easily imagine what was provided to the believers. Thus, the Princeton collection of Sakuramotobō documents not only reveals Yoshino *shugendō* practices, but also provides valuable evidence of how people actually lived in these holy areas.

New Trends in the Study of Medieval Japanese Documents

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