

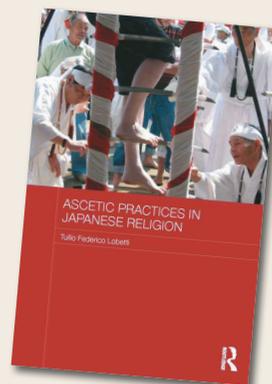
BOOK REVIEW

Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion

By Tullio Federico Lobetti

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xviii + 174 pages.

Reviewed by Ugo DESSÌ



Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion was originally written as a PhD thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the University of London. Tullio Federico Lobetti's book is a fascinating journey through the world of Japanese asceticism, a topic that occupies a peripheral position in the study of Japanese religions and is certainly worthy of more scholarly attention. Lobetti's book is based on his extensive fieldwork conducted among groups of ascetics in different parts of Japan, and aims to clarify three key issues: the applicability of the term "asceticism" to the Japanese context; the religious and social dimensions of asceticism; and the identification of common themes in Japanese asceticism (p. 2).

Lobetti addresses the first issue in chapter 1, in which he explores a wide range of cultural perspectives on the human body. The author argues that the common Western misunderstanding of asceticism as self-denial has been heavily influenced by the modern body/soul dualism. He suggests, however, that an inter-linguistic use of this term is possible insofar as one focuses on points of cultural convergence such as "the dignified and powerful figure of the ascetic," and "the determinant role of the body in religious practice." This emphasis on the body, Lobetti claims, should not lead us to conclude that ascetics in various traditions are mere "self-centred individuals" (p. 23); rather, the interplay between the ascetic and the social context is both fluid and ambivalent.

In chapter 2, Lobetti introduces the distinction between ascetic acts and ascetic practices, and illustrates three different modes of practice: the "occasional borrowing of ascetic acts," and "practices taking place outside" or "within an institutional religious body." The first mode is often found in religious festivals (*matsuri*) and includes practices such as fire-crossing (*hiwatari*) and climbing the ladder of swords (*hawatari*). The second mode is illustrated through reference to the cold practice (*samugyō*) at Mt. Ontake and the ascetic practices at Mt. Nanao. The third mode of practice—fully institutionalized religious asceticism—includes the Haguro *akinomine* within Shugendō and the *rōhatsu sesshin* within Sōtō Zen Buddhism, and is characterized by a "richer and more structured practice taxonomy." For Lobetti, this impacts positively on the efficiency of the ascetic acts in terms of the two basic elements of the ascetic practice, that is, "performativity" and "transformative power" (p. 60).

Chapter 3 deals with the “agents” of ascetic practices. In this respect, Lobetti distinguishes between the asceticism of laypeople and that of religious professionals, an example of the latter being the well-known one-thousand-day practice of the Tendai “marathon monks” at Mt. Hiei (*kaihōgyō*). The second part of the chapter focuses on the “why” of ascetic practice, which basically revolves around the pursuit of some form of benefit or power, and acquires different meanings for different persons. In turn, the author notes, these benefits are pursued by ascetics “either for themselves or for other people” (p. 87).

In chapter 4, Lobetti explores the spatial and social context of Japanese asceticism by introducing the twofold typology of “extra-ascetic society” and “intra-ascetic society” (p. 92). In the second part of the chapter, the author engages in a comparative analysis of ascetic practices performed within a Shinto and Buddhist context, respectively. He convincingly shows that “ascetic acts are not necessarily the direct expression of religious doctrine,” and that the appropriation of religious meanings and the hermeneutic of the body enacted through performance take place on different planes (p. 116).

Finally, chapter 5 sheds light on the “constants” of ascetic practice: the human body, the intentional production and endurance of a certain amount of pain and physical exhaustion, and a bodily hermeneutic that serves the scope of interpreting the sensations arising from ascetic practice (p. 119). For Lobetti, these sensations are articulated by practitioners in terms of “loss” and “gain,” and make possible a progressive process from impurity to purity that envisions the “perfect body” as its ideal end. As Lobetti puts it, pain acts as a “malleating power” that will eventually allow the ascetic to “manage death.” In this way, practitioners aim to realize the ultimate paradox of the experience of “death-in-life,” which is exemplified within the Japanese religious tradition by the self-mummified Buddhas (*sokushinbutsu*) (pp. 126, 131). Based on his findings, Lobetti provides a new definition of asceticism as “a structured and defined process of reversal of the flow of the body of the practitioner, and having as a consequence the production of power” (p. 136).

It is very difficult to do justice to the richness of this book within the limited space of a short review. Lobetti’s work is to be commended for both the value of his research data, which in many cases have been collected through “extreme” fieldwork (the author himself performed several of the harsh practices analyzed in the book), and his thoughtful use of typologies for the clarification of this somewhat elusive religious phenomenon. I could only find a few minor points of criticism: the expression “Japanese religion” in the title would seem to imply that there is a “unified” religion in Japan, which is in contradiction to the variety of religious forms found in the Japanese context; given the relevance of the idea of gratitude to both Japanese asceticism (pp. 86–87) and Japanese religious culture at large, something more on this topic would have been welcome; the book ends rather abruptly, and perhaps a few additional pages with the author’s conclusions would have allowed it to be more easily digested by readers; and at some points, as the author himself seems to acknowledge (p. 129), the explanatory potential of his “philosophical anthropology” is not fully convincing. Despite these minor reservations, Lobetti’s book is a welcome addition to the literature on Japanese asceticism and ascetic practices in general, and will be extremely useful for scholars and advanced students in the fields of Japanese religions and comparative religion.