

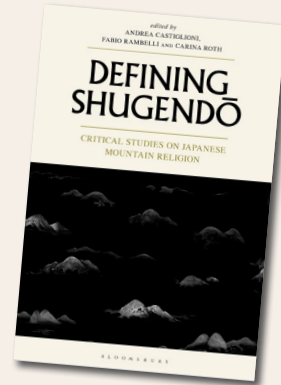
BOOK REVIEW

Defining Shugendō: Critical Studies on Japanese Mountain Religion

Edited by Andrea Castiglioni, Fabio Rambelli, and Carina Roth

Bloomsbury Academic, 2020
287 pages.

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Like a weathered statue of En, the ascetic resting on the side of an old mountain trail with a votive text sealed inside, Shugendō (mountain asceticism) has long existed on the periphery of scholarship despite containing vital insights into the history of Japanese society and religion (p. 130). Compared to Buddhist studies, Shinto studies, or even the study of new religions in Japan, Shugendō has long been treated as a marginal subject. To date, it has mostly been scrutinized through the disciplinary lens of Japanese folklore studies, which is associated with problematic discourses about ethnic national identity (pp. 19–20). Most Japanese people are not even aware that Shugendō exists, let alone that it is a millennium-long tradition still practiced on the slopes and in the shadows of mountains throughout the Japanese archipelago today.

All of this makes *Defining Shugendō: Critical Studies on Japanese Mountain Religion* an essential and overdue contribution. The volume introduces the subject of Shugendō to the next generation of Japanese religions scholars, and presents a game-changing reorientation of the field. The editors have drawn together a diverse group of experts from America, Europe, and Japan to present the most comprehensive historical account of Shugendō in English yet published, drawing the so-called “secret world” (*himitsu no sekai*) of mountain asceticism into the spotlight of contemporary scholarship.

The editors state that their goal with the volume is to “disentangle” Shugendō from folklore studies and “relocate” it “within the broader track of religious and historical studies.” The book thus offers readers a thorough analysis of Shugendō as an understudied Japanese religion, and a “critical reevaluation of the interpretive categories and research topics that have characterized Shugendō studies until recent times” (p. 25). In the words of Max Moerman, the book effectively repositions Shugendō “as a religious tradition central to Japanese culture, during all historical periods, in all geographic regions, and for people of all social classes” (p. 219).

Defining Shugendō is organized into four parts: “Intellectual History of Shugendō Studies,” “Constructed Topologies and Invented Chronologies,” “Imagining the Founder En No Gyōja and Fictionalizing Shugendō,” and “Materiality and Visual Culture of Shugendō.” While each part offers a broad sweep of essays concerning Shugendō and its place in the religious landscape of Japanese history, many chapters are relatively short, giving the volume

a somewhat fragmented, encyclopaedic style. Some chapters gesture towards comprehensive synthesis and interpretation, but readers may be left wondering what the bigger picture is that the book, as a collective, points to. What can the study of Shugendō teach us about society and religion in Japan or in East Asia more broadly? What multidisciplinary insights might the continued study of Shugendō yield?

Despite the thoroughly described, multi-era historical accounts presented, the contemporary practice of Shugendō is mostly omitted from this otherwise wide-ranging volume. If Shugendō is indeed as central as the editors claim, it is unclear why they tend to overlook contemporary practice. There are two notable exceptions: a section in the editors' introduction that characterizes modern interpretations of Shugendō as a matter of prewar ethnonationalism and postwar nostalgic primitivism when narratives of Japanese identity were in transition (pp. 18–22).¹ There is also Suzuki Masataka's discussion of the modern significance of sacred mountains in Japan in terms of government heritage programs, UNESCO World Heritage status, and the recent proclamation of "Mountain Day" as a national holiday (pp. 55–59). Beyond these examples, there is no further discussion in the book of contemporary Shugendō. This reviewer, at least, wanted to know who modern ascetics are, why they are motivated to undergo mountain austerities (*shugyō*), and what this may tell us about Shugendō as a living tradition.

Caleb Carter argues in his chapter that Shugendō-related *engi* (origin accounts) in Mount Togakushi were refashioned by an eighteenth-century monk, but not just to express a nostalgic or romantic view of the mythic past. Rather, *engi* were put to use in order to localize Shugendō and cement its role in new communities for the *longue durée*. Shugendō sites with multiple competing historicities are common in both the historical and ethnographic record.² As Carter observes, such accounts reveal that Shugendō possesses a degree of "temporal elasticity" and general adaptability when figuring itself into new social and geographical environments (p. 86). It might be more accurate, therefore, to suggest that the nostalgic primitivism characterizing modern Shugendō signals the common practice of a religion that constantly reconfigures itself in order to thrive and expand. In other words, modern Shugendō is not merely a simulacrum of a once-authentic tradition. So long as Shugendō is analyzed as an exclusively historical religion, and its contemporary practice is omitted from the record or treated as an aberration, the view that modern practice is inauthentic will dominate Shugendō studies.

Notwithstanding its lack of engagement with contemporary mountain asceticism, *Defining Shugendō* lays out a strong historical and theological foundation that certainly justifies further research, and points to areas needing more attention. More than anything, this volume is a history of the assemblage of Shugendō: its ideas, its deities, and complex temple politics. Shugendō has a long tradition of secrecy, but modern sentiments of transparency are prevailing, and conventions regarding initiation and practice are changing. In the wake of a post-bubble, post-disaster economy, in the enduring aftermath of the triple disaster of March 2011, and now, during an ongoing pandemic, Shugendō seems poised to make its mark on the world. Each of the chapters of *Defining Shugendō* is a doorway to new perspectives on this ancient religion, revealing its quiet but consistent presence in mountains

1 See also Hopson 2017, and Dahl 2019.

2 See Castiglioni 2019, Dahl 2020, and Dahl 2021.

across the Japanese archipelago, and the undeniable influence it has exerted over the course of Japanese religious history.

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