H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire. *Shugendo Now.* Montreal: Enpower Pictures, 2009. DVD. 91 minutes.

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Published on H-Japan (December, 2010)
Commissioned by David G. Wittner

Shugendo Now

Shugendô Now is one of several recent documentaries on Shugendô including Kitamura Minao's *Shugen Hagurosan aki no mine* (2005) and Sandra and Carina Roth's *Where mountains fly* (2010). While each of these documentaries has its merits, *Shugendô Now* is the most accessible, especially for those hoping to use it in an English-speaking classroom. Its broad appeal is enhanced by the beauty of the cinematography, which makes the documentary truly outstanding. *Shugendô Now* covers two aspects of contemporary Shugendô practice: (1) life in the village as illustrated by the activities of Tateishi Kôshô, a modern-day *yamabushi* and environmental activist living in the Kumano mountains, and his devotees; and (2) practice in the mountains demonstrated through the annual ascent of Mt. Ômine organized by the Shugendô temple, Kinpusenji, and its abbot, Tanaka Riten.

The film cuts back and forth between these two sides of contemporary Shugendô as it follows a wide variety of individual practitioners (though not necessarily in that order): Kôshô and his wife, Rika; Inoue Ryô, Kôshô's apprentice disciple and an aspiring musician; Okuno Atsuko and Sasamoto Kazuya, who moved from Chiba to Kumano to follow Kôshô's footsteps to become organic farmers; Sakata Yutaka, one of Kôshô's male followers at whose home Kôshô holds monthly prayer services; Suzuki Akiko, one of Kôshô's female followers who found solace in the mountains from the stress and alienation caused by her office job in the city; Fujie Noritoshi (a nightclub owner from Osaka), Miyamoto Yasuhiko (a cement-factory owner also from Osaka), and Ôzaki Hiroshi (a Tokyo businessman), all three of whom participate in the ascent of Sanjôgatake; Iwagishi Shinsei, a *shugenja* who supports himself through the performance of appeasement rites and through part-time consulting work based on his engineering degree; and the young participants of a three-day camp for children at Kinpusenji, staffed by Shinsei. Through these interwoven stories, we begin to understand one of the film's central messages: mountain practice and life in the village (or the city) are interrelated. The lessons learned in the mountains need to be implemented in ordinary daily activities.

The documentary deliberately avoids an analytical approach, which might easily become pedantic, but subtly points to tensions embedded in Shugendô practices through its poetic narrative and skillful cinematography. The striking aesthetic qualities of the film–from the hypnotic music of Manu Delago and the color-popping close-ups of small animals, plant life, and urban facades to mood-setting wide-angle panoramas (misty mountain forests, Kôshô pelted by the spraying force of a waterfall)–balance action shots and interviews. Thus viewers forget momentarily that they are watching am educational documentary. As the director, Jean-Marc Abela, notes on the accompanying Web site: "We present to you a film that doesn't explain it but embodies it" (http://www.shugendonow.com/).

Nevertheless, the film delicately comments on two areas of tension: Shugendô's relationship with the environment and its complex attitudes toward gender. For instance, central Shugendô practices occur in the mountains and involve strenuous ascents of sacred peaks. In Shugendô, mountains are regarded as sites of rebirth and purity. Rituals of repentance such as being suspended off rocky cliffs (as during the group ascent of Sanjôgatake chronicled in film) are supposed to induce spiritual renewal. Sacred mountain sites incorporate waterfalls as places of purification. Often mountains are also the sources of streams, and it has been asserted that the control of mountain territory by Shugendô institutions is used to protect the sources of water, important for wet rice field cultivation in the valleys. In continuation of this tradition, Kôshô is clearly engaged in environ-

mental activism. He cultivates his own organic vegetables and rice, inspiring his followers to attempt the same. He leads local clean-up projects to rid nearby waterfalls and mountainscapes of waste. The ecological message of Shugendô has also affected more casual practitioners. Mr. Miyamoto, the cement-factory owner, has developed a more environmentally conscious attitude toward his business as a result of his participation in the yearly ascent of Sanjôgatake.

Yet there are also tensions generated by the intersection of the realities of daily life and the ideals of the tradition. Cement factories unavoidably produce pollution. As Miyamoto-san puts it, "they are bad for humans, animals and trees," yet he continues to run his business despite this knowledge. Shinsei derives income from conducting memorial rites for insects at an insect-extermination company (which, in contrast to bee keepers for whom Tateishi conducts similar rites, relies on killing insects rather than caring for them). Tanaka Riten, the abbot of Kinpusenji, notes the success of advertising the annual ascent to Sanjôgatake among the general public; yet this has led not only to a spike in participation but also to discontent among the more seasoned ascetics who complain about the lack of etiquette among the newcomers–illustrated by scenes in which the participants are shown smoking during a break in the mountain forests while the *yamabushi* silently look on or in which a physically unfit participant appears to treat the ascent like an ordinary hike and is admonished by the *yamabushi* for holding up the group.

And despite his environmentalist activism, Kôshô supports himself and his family by crafting conch-shell trumpets (*horagai*), which have their traditional place in Shugendô practice. However, nowadays conches are harvested, for the most part, far from Japan in the Indo-Pacific Ocean of Southeast Asia and are widely protected as an endangered species. The film visually points to the fact that the conch harvested for its shell, which Kôshô cuts and fits with metal mouthpieces, once was a living organism by juxtaposing that scene with the shot of a snail slowly creeping across a leaf.

The mountain forests themselves are not only symbols of a pristine environment: during the film's finale, we see a terraced landscape of former rice fields turned into cedar timber plantations after World War II. The lyrical narration only hints at the destruction waged by the war and the ecological impact of this monoculture on the fauna and flora of the mountains. The eerie silence enveloping this industrial forest is palpable because it contrasts with Manu Delago's lively beat underlying the preceding reprise of the main characters. It is this subtlety that gives the film its thought-provoking depth and prevents it from getting bogged down in tedious preaching.

The film uses a similar strategy to problematize issues of gender. Many of the male participants are shown to thrive in the all-male environment of the ascent to Sanjôgatake. As the film suggests, many participants have potentially troubled backgrounds, be it due to their occupations (e.g., a hostess club owner) or their ethnic heritage (e.g., an ethnically Korean cement-factory owner). The men are struggling to come to grips with their emotional lives, their social relationships, and their hectic work schedules. An all-male ascent provides a safe environment to face personal issues–illustrated in a climactic scene through the overlaying of Mr. Fujie dangling off a cliff and images of his family life in Osaka. Yet the film also shows that the all-male practice actively excludes women and that this exclusion is contested–as indicated by a shot of the graffiti ("Is this religios [*sic*] or just plain male chauvinism?") on the sign explaining the boundary of the prohibition against women. Indeed, Japanese activists have periodically challenged the prohibition, particularly after UNESCO designated the location as a world-heritage site. But despite the inclusion of the graffiti, the filmmakers avoid taking sides in the debate. They again display their skill at subtle commentary. The shot of the graffiti is preceded by prolonged shot of the dilapidated lettering on the gate marking the boundary of the prohibition as the participants recite the *Heart Sutra* (which encapsulates the teaching of emptiness). The character *nyo* ("woman") in *nyonin kinsei* (women excluded) is conspicuously missing from the inscription, making the observant viewer wonder if we are witnessing the result of mere decay or of active vandalism–and ironically turning the prohibition against women into a prohibition against all of humanity.

The subtle subversiveness of the film also takes the form of making the narrator female and thus symbolically taking a woman to the summit of Sanjôgatake along with the female viewers of the documentary. As a woman, I must admit that the sequence set on Sanjôgatake (including the ritual suspension from the cliff and the passage through a dark, narrow crevice) made me feel like a voyeur. I was keenly aware I was visually entering a place that I would not be allowed to enter physically and seeing someone I was not supposed to witness. This feeling is generated by camera's perspective, which often shows the point of view of the participants–walking in a single file along mountain paths, climbing up cragged boulders, or squeezing through a dark cave–rather than

the perspective of a third-party observer.

Furthermore, the documentary does not only chronicle the activities of the male practitioners on Sanjôgatake but also shows Kôshô's female followers, from his wife to several middle-aged women devotees. They commission healing rituals, chant along during *goma* fire rituals, wander the mountains on their own or in small groups, slide down waterfalls under Kôshô's direction, or blow their own conches. Their practices appear less regimented (and perhaps commodified) than the all-male ascent of Sanjôgatake though they are clearly no less demanding–as illustrated by the story of Rika's accident while walking through the mountains (she lost several teeth and broke multiple bones).

These deliberate juxtapositions make this film a useful tool to stimulate discussion in the classroom. It forces students to critically confront their expectations of Shugendô as it is lived and practiced in contemporary Japan. Having used the film in two different courses, I can attest that it generated lively discussion among the students and piqued their interest in contemporary Japanese religions.

Nevertheless, I have found that students needed some additional background on the history of Shugendô, the symbolism of the Womb and Diamond World mandalas (which appear without much further explanation in the film), as well as the basic geography of the Yoshino-Kumano region. For instance, without knowledge of the concept of the mandalization of the Yoshino-Kumano mountain range–the Yoshino area being associated with the Diamond World Mandala and the Kumano area with the Womb World Mandala, both of which intersect at Ômine like a Venn diagram–students will not understand why the mandalas repeatedly appear in the film. In fact, the film's use of the mandalas as transitions is quite clever. As the film segues from Kôshô's temple located in direction of Kumano to the pilgrimage activities at Ômine, we first see the Womb World Mandala and then the Diamond World Mandala–a hint at the mandalization of the landscape. The mandalas further allude to the division into female (Womb World) and male (Diamond World) places of practice–Kôshô's world is inclusive of female practitioners, unlike the exclusively male space of Sanjôgatake. When the direction of the transition is reversed, the order of the appearance of the mandalas is reversed as well.

Likewise, a basic explanation of the economic exchanges integral to religious rituals in Japan–including those performed by Kôshô and Shinsei–would help the students understand how modern-day *shugenja* support themselves. My students did not intuitively understand that Kôshô's farming, the gifts he receives from devotees, Shinsei's part-time job as a consultant, the performance of prayer rituals (appeasement rites, *goma* rituals, exorcisms, etc.), and Kôshô's manufacturing of conch-shell trumpets all demonstrated how a contemporary *shugenja* made a living. Fortunately, the filmmakers plan to produce a study guide for the documentary, which will be available online on the accompanying Web site. This should make the documentary an even more successful teaching tool.

Instructors eager to use the film in the classroom will also be pleased to hear that the filmmakers are currently editing the documentary into two 45-minute versions, each of which will more conveniently fit into a single class period–thus facilitating in-class screening more easily. One, entitled "The Forest Of Mountain Learning" after Kôshô's Sangakurin temple, will show Kôshô's activities and those of his followers, whereas the other, entitled "The Lotus Ascent," will focus on the ascent of Sanjôgatake. For viewers who prefer a more linear narrative that does not weave back and forth between locations, the two-part version may have its attractions. I am personally curious to see how the reshuffling of sequences will affect the above-mentioned central message of the film, namely that mountain practice and life in the village are interrelated.

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Citation: Barbara Ambros. Review of Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire, *Shugendo Now.* H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31986

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