

BOOK REVIEW

Japanese and Mountain Religion

By Hiroki KIKUCHI, Tokyo: Kodansha, 2020*

Noriko FUJIME**

There are many mountains throughout Japan that have become objects of worship. A unique religious system, which is neither Buddhism nor Shinto, has developed in each region, and the mountains have become the object of worship. This form of religion is unique in the history of world religions.

The author of *Japanese and Mountain Religion*, Hiroki Kikuchi, was born in Tokyo in 1968 and received his doctorate in literature from the University of Tokyo. At the time this book was published, he was an associate professor at the Historiographical Institute at the University of Tokyo, and is now a professor. He specializes in Japanese medieval history and religious history, and his other books include *The Original Form and Development of Medieval Buddhism* (Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2007) and *The Road to Kamakura Buddhism* (Kodansha Sensho Metier, 2011).

In the book, *Japanese and Mountain Religion*, the author considers “mountain religion” in the context of the lives of the people who live at the foot of the mountains, and is cautious about viewing mountains as something otherworldly. This is because thinking of mountains and people in isolation makes it difficult to consider how they affect and are connected to each other. One of his most important thoughts in this book is that mountains are connected to the realm of human life.

In the past, when discussing mountain religions, some researchers fixed the image of ancient mountain asceticism and assumed that the history of mountain asceticism was a continuous one that has continued to the present day. In addition, “sacred mountains” centering on high mountains that would not easily attract secular people were often the focus of discussions, which sometimes ended up in individual case studies or discussions of small regional models one after the other. Furthermore, in some cases, the collection of such case studies has been substituted for a comprehensive discussion of the history of mountain religions in Japan.

This book does not focus on individual sacred mountains in detail, but rather aims to outline the outlines of mountain religions based on their relationship to the major social changes that covered the entire Japanese archipelago, including religious influence from the continent in ancient times, the progress of a decentralized medieval society toward the formation of a unified power, and the modernization of religious society in the early modern period with the establishment of

* 菊地大樹著『日本人と山の宗教』講談社, 2022, 298 page, ISBN 9784065206201

** Staff, Graduate School of Science, Osaka University

Email: fujime-n@office.osaka-u.ac.jp

Published online: March 28, 2023

the shogunate and domain system. The author aims to outline the contours of mountain religions, taking into account their relationship to the major social changes that covered the entire Japanese archipelago, from the establishment of Bakuhun society to the modernization of religious society in the early modern period. By carefully comparing various examples with the historical background, such as inside the Buddhist world and politics, from ancient times through the medieval and early modern periods, the author enables a discussion that is not bound by existing theories.

The book consists of the following five chapters.

Chapter 1: The Original Image of the Religion of the Mountain

Chapter 2: The Transformation of the Mountain Religion

Chapter 3: Mountain Religion and Medieval Kingship

Chapter 4: The Expansion of Mountain Religions

Chapter 5: Establishment and Modernization of the Mountain Religions

The author first poses the problem that the top of a mountain was not always the object of absolute faith. Then, after historically relativizing the awareness of mountains, it focuses on the importance of the world at the foot of the mountains.

Many people tend to assume that mountain ascetics (Yamabushi) perform rigorous ascetic practices deep in the mountains, isolated from society. In reality, however, they were engaged in safe mountain forest ascetic practices without taking any risks. For them, the foothills at the boundary between the mountains and people's settlements were their base, and they were deeply connected to politics and society. Ancient mountain ascetic practices, strongly influenced by Buddhism, developed at the foot of the mountains.

The practice of mountain asceticism is not about reaching the summit. As religious people, their actions must always be with the people to be saved in mind. Therefore, the most important religious activity for them was to connect the mountains with people, using the boundary area as a foothold. This area became commonly referred to as "Satoyama" in the Middle Ages. The term "mountain religion" tends to be thought of as a belief in the mountaintops, but in reality, it was a belief centered on the Satoyama.

In the Heian period, ascetic practitioners began to challenge deep and high mountains. Eventually, some practitioners began to stay in the high mountains even through the winter season, but the foundation of mountain religion continued to be based in the Satoyama. With this base as a contact point, mountain religion developed from the Middle Ages onward, especially in relation to the secular world. From the Edo period to the modern era, a detailed religious history of the mountains and people developed. As the secular society that incorporates the Satoyama has changed over the course of history, the nature of mountain religions has naturally changed in tandem with this change. The emphasis of this book is not to fix mountain religions in the image of a specific time and place, or to define them as the basis of Japanese culture, but to consider them as a complex dynamic that has changed historically and spread geographically.

Regarding mountains in modern and early modern times, the foreign missionary Walter Weston is credited with the rise of mountaineering in Japan at the end of the Meiji period. People's interest in mountains shifted from mountaineering with religious significance to mountaineering as a sport and leisure activity, and they began to see the value in reaching the summit. With the influx of modern Western mountaineering, mountain religion for the modern Japanese has become a lost homeland, a place to return to, or a symbol of an outmoded pre-modernity. People felt nostalgia for mountain religion and culture, but did not actively seek to understand its reality. Today, however, they enjoy mountain climbing to reset their daily lives and to refresh their minds and bodies. Not that they may be aware of it, but this is similar to "Nyuubu", the ascetic practice of Shugenja, in which they repeat "pseudo-death" and "rebirth".

The author points out that death and life are separated from everyday life, and speculates that it was the modern religion of the mountains where all irrationality could be contained. Modern society has come to conceal in the “other world” what cannot be explained rationally. For example, “death” has become less visible as bodies are left to medical professionals, funeral directors, etc., and “life” or childbirth, has become so detached from daily life that it is now commonplace for births to take place in hospitals.

When people today emphasize the sanctity of mountains, they must keep in mind that their image is based on a history distorted by modern rationalism.

At the end of his book, the author describes his experiences in the mountains of Tokushima Prefecture. Many villages that have existed since the Middle Ages are scattered across the mountain slopes, but when he visited one village, there was only one old woman living there at the time. He could see through the window of the abandoned house that it was littered with household items from the 1970s. Most of the inhabitants of the village had gone down the mountain, making his interviews extremely difficult.

Tokushima Prefecture is considered to be one of the areas with a high concentration of medieval stone memorials called “Itabi” (tablet monuments), with some dating back to the 14th century and earlier. This indicates that they were maintained as living areas, albeit intermittently, until the present day. The author realized that the historical landscape that has united mountains and villages since the Middle Ages is coming to an end.

The relationship between mountains and humans has changed over time. At the same time, however, the ancient awe of the mountains still lies at the root of their hearts. This book is effective in helping us to grasp once again the origins of the Japanese people and their mountain beliefs.

Although the book is intended for the general reader interested in mountain religions, the discussion is backed up by a historical methodology and thought. By reading this book, which comprehensively discusses the history of people, mountains, and the religions cultivated there, readers may understand why so many Japanese are fascinated by mountains.