

A Review of the Documentary *Shugendō Now*

Shugendō Now. Directed by Jean-Marc Abela. Produced by Mark P. McGuire. Montréal: Empower Productions, 2009, 88 minutes. Japanese with narration. English, French, and Spanish subtitles and narration. Individual use C\$20; Public/Educational use C\$150. Free copies for review, upon request.

Shugendō Now is a well-made documentary that sheds light upon a religious tradition that has received some attention from the scholarly community, but not as much as various other forms of Japanese religious expression such as Zen Buddhism, Japanese Confucianism, some types of Shinto, and various forms of New Religions. As such, it serves as a much-needed corrective that is highly suitable for high school and college classroom use, with a few caveats.

Shugendō is frequently characterized as a religious system that focuses upon ascetic activities performed among or on sacred mountains in Japan. It draws for its worldview and practice from a variety of sources, including esoteric Buddhism, Shinto, Daoism, and indigenous shamanistic practices. The goals of Shugendō practice include seeking personal enlightenment and the gathering and distribution of sacred power to benefit the larger community through various ascetic exercises and rituals.

The film's DVD is divided into three sections. The first is titled "The Lotus Ascent," and focuses upon a group of *yamabushi* embarking upon a pilgrimage through the historical heartland, with its sacred mountains, of Shugendō practice and development. *Yamabushi* (literally, "those who rest in the mountains" or "mountain warriors") are ascetic practitioners of Shugendō. The second section is titled "The Forest of Mountain Learning," which focuses on a famous Shugendō temple and its current head, Tateishi Kosho, as he goes through the daily routines of providing services of all kinds for those who come to the temple. The third section is titled "Frequently Asked Questions," in which ten questions are asked and generally answered regarding various aspects of Shugendō belief and practice. Running throughout all three sections are the larger questions of "How does Shugendō practice fit into the contemporary world? Why would anyone now practice this old blend of Shinto, esoteric Buddhism, Daoism, and shamanism?" Any or all of the three sections could be profitably employed in the classroom to address these and other questions as detailed next.

"The Lotus Ascent" is intriguing in its construction. The filmmaker basically allows the camera and the *yamabushi* to show what the mountain ascent is about, with minimal narration or voiceover. The viewer follows the *yamabushi*, frequently in long stretches of silence, as they prepare themselves and then climb. At one particularly interesting point, the camera focuses in upon a sign that indicates that women are not allowed to proceed further. The narrator offers no vocal comment about this, but it provides a perfect opportunity for classroom discussion. This reviewer thinks that students require some background preparation in Shugendō worldview before viewing "The Lotus Ascent"; otherwise, too much of it could be puzzling due to its minimalist narration.¹

"The Forest of Mountain Learning" provides more narration and more explanation from

the filmed practitioners of Shugendō. The setting in the temple allows the viewers to see a different side of Shugendō, in which the *yamabushi*, in this case Tateishi Kosho, dedicates himself to serving the needs of his community, both natural and human. We see him performing rituals for the blessing and benefit of people, and we see him performing rituals for the protection and preservation of the natural world. In one case we see him taking care of bees, and in another preparing dinner. However, he is famous locally for his opposition to a corporation's dumping of used tatami mats in the nearby mountains, and the documentary shows several people expressing their appreciation for his efforts, which were successful. Tateishi Kosho presents a fascinating character; his high levels of energy and his ability to move between the sacred and mundane worlds is riveting. His wife, Rika, also is presented as she discusses her personal journey to embrace Shugendō (and marry Tateishi Kosho). These two people demonstrate in their words and their actions why Shugendō creates and sustains a happy, meaningful life for them, and why it possibly can for others, even in the modern world. As with "The Lotus Ascent," however, this would best be shown after students have already been exposed a bit to Shugendō study.

The third section, "Frequently Asked Questions," as the name implies, is not a unified presentation, but rather a series of short clips that may or may not be thematically related to each other. These questions address some of the basic information not explicitly narrated in the other parts of the documentary, such as explaining what a *kami* is, how priests make a living, the significance of the clothing and some of the rituals, and in probably the most personal (if seemingly the least relevant) clip, how to make Tateishi Kosho's tofu noodle recipe. This last, though, humanizes even more the man who is the center of this community and is well worth taking the time to watch. Some of these clips may be helpful in preparing the students to view the other two parts of the documentary, but it could also be argued that it might be better to save them for last, allowing the students to try to work some things out for themselves.

Shugendō Now presents a well-crafted, engaging portrait of some aspects of Shugendō thought and practice. The overall lack of narration is an advantage, in this reviewer's opinion, as it allows viewers to really observe what is happening without an authoritative narrative voice shaping their perceptions. This in turn means that students might have more questions about or insights into the film, since they are not herded into one or another interpretation while viewing. The film itself is visually appealing, with plenty of shots from a variety of angles of natural phenomena and the people who interact with them. Of course, experts in Shugendō will find things that are omitted or represented in a way that may not be fully satisfactory, but choices must be made with limited time and resources, and all in all this serves as an excellent, thought-provoking, and beautiful introduction to Shugendō thought and practice.

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NOTES

1. For short, informative articles that explain various facets of Shugendō, see Royall Tyler & Paul L. Swanson, "Shugendō & Mountain Religion in Japan"; Miyake Hitoshi, "Religious Rituals in Shugendō: A Summary"; Gorai Shigeru, "Shugendō Lore"; Royall Tyler, "Kofuku-ji and Shugendō"; Wakamori Taro, "The Hashira-Matsu and Shugendō"; Sawa Ryuken, "Shugendō Art"; H. Byron Earhart, "Mount Fuji and Shugendō"; and Susan Tyler, "Honji Suijaku Faith," all in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 16, nos. 2-3 (June-September 1989).