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## *Shugendō Now*

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# A Review of the documentary film *Shugendō Now*

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*Shugendō Now*. A film directed by Jean-Marc Abela and produced by Mark P. McGuire. Montréal: Empower Productions, 2009, 88 minutes, Japanese with narration; English, French, Spanish subtitles and narration, Individual use: CAD \$20.00; Public/Educational use: CAD \$150.00.

This provocative and rather unconventional film opens up a fascinating corner of Japanese religious practice to a general audience. A well-executed documentary, *Shugendō Now* includes compelling footage and avoids heavy-handed voice-overs, presenting viewers with conceptual juxtapositions that should provoke discussion in or out of the classroom. The film is quite accessible, and viewers may choose to play the voice-overs and sub-titles in English, French, Spanish, or Japanese.

As the title clearly indicates, the film's topic is contemporary Shugendō, but for many potential viewers, that may bear some explanation. Appropriately enough, the filmmakers, Mark McGuire and Jean-Marc Abela, begin with their own gloss (and I quote from the English sub-titles): "The Yamabushi are those who enter the mountain to seek experiential truth. They perform austerities and ritual actions adopted from Shamanism, the kami tradition, Esoteric Buddhism and

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Daoism. This syncretic tradition is called Shugendō, ‘The Way of Acquiring Power.’” “The mountain” mentioned in this rather romantic definition refers here to the Ōmine range, and specifically to two sites within it, Kumano and Mt. Ōmine (1719 m, also known as Sanjōgatake or Kinpusen, alt. Kimbusen). Collectively, the Ōmine mountains tend to be viewed as the cradle of Shugendō, which coalesced as an organized religious movement during the Kamakura period (1185-1333). History is not discussed in the film, however, and geography is treated only in the most impressionistic fashion. At different points in the narrative, we are given our locations through slow pans over reproductions of landscape paintings, and through shots of the Womb-realm and Vajra-realm mandalas. The filmmakers are to be commended for leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions, but at times their approach is problematic, as it is here. Since the twelfth century or so, the Ōmine mountains have often been interpreted as mandalas, but how many viewers will know this, given that it is not explained in the film? Some viewers may justifiably feel unmoored in terms of context, while others may draw generalizing conclusions from what are really quite specific data.

The big question—and it is a good one—that *Shugendō Now* raises is how religious practice in the mountains fits into the contemporary lives of religious practitioners. Through much of the film, this question remains implicit, though it is spelled out clearly enough on the DVD jacket. And yet the filmmakers make their point quite clearly through visual and aural techniques. They routinely intercut footage of the mountains with ultra-urban scenes, and they combine footage from one source with soundtracking from another (for instance, nature-shots may be soundtracked with traffic noise, or a cityscape with sutra-chanting). These strategies pose questions about how two categories of place, activity, and experience relate to each other, but they also push an answer rooted in the principle of non-duality. Happily, the film provides enough material for viewers to generate their own interpretive

solutions, and for those interested in showing this documentary in the classroom, the film should provide fertile ground for discussion among students.

Although *Shugendō Now* introduces a number of yamabushi and other individuals, it is mostly focalized through three men, Tateishi Kōshō, Miyamoto Yasuhiko, and Fujie Noritoshi (note that names are given in Japanese order, surname first). Fujie-san, the youngest of the three and the newest to *Shugendō*, owns a nightclub in Osaka. We are treated to scenes of his life at work and at home with his family, as well as to footage of his first outing as a yamabushi. Fujie-san participates in the spring “Lotus Ascent” of Mt. Ōmine, a group pilgrimage that is open to society’s male rank and file. (Mt. Ōmine, as becomes clear in a brief scene partway through the film, is closed to women.) For Fujie-san, the Lotus Ascent means an entry into a radically different physical and social space, though what kind of leverage that may give him in his daily life is a question that the film leaves open to our speculation.

The second main character, Miyamoto-san, is a self-made concrete tycoon of Korean descent. He offers no comment on how he became involved in *Shugendō*, but like many yamabushi, he appears to participate regularly in group pilgrimages, while leading a regular life as a layman for most of the year. That said, Miyamoto-san is quite clear that his involvement in *Shugendō* has helped him to “realize the importance of nature, more so than the average person,” and that this has led him to reassess his chosen profession. As a result, a voice-over explains, he is “bringing together partners to invest in technologies that will clean up the industrial process.” We do not discover what those technologies may be, but the camera lingers on Miyamoto-san’s large SUV then cuts to a shot of him climbing Mt. Ōmine, and we find ourselves wondering about just what the connections between *Shugendō* and environmentalism might be.

Most viewers will probably find the third character, Tateishi Kōshō, the most interesting. Charismatic and deeply counter-cultural in his inclinations, Kōshō trained as a Buddhist monk at Kinpusenji, a large temple in Yoshino with long and strong ties to Shugendō. Since then, Kōshō has set out on his own, and has developed his own center of worship, the Sangakurin, in Kumano, where he combines traditional mountain practices with an environmentalist agenda. While Fujie-san is a novice and Miyamoto-san a more dedicated practitioner, Kōshō is an ordained religious specialist with parishioners of his own. We see him conducting rituals on behalf of his followers and having fun with his family; we hear him discussing his religious practices, and telling of his efforts to clean up local pollution problems. Not least because he is so charming, Kōshō's advocacy of a lifestyle rooted in self-sufficiency, sustainability, and religious practice is likely to inspire viewers. In fact, we watch him interact on-screen with a young couple who have decided to move to Kumano to live off the land, in part due to his encouragement. Kōshō provides a riveting example of what a yamabushi can be—a beloved member of his community, a religious leader, and an environmental activist—but he is also quite exceptional.

No film can (or should!) do everything, but it is worth noting that *Shugendō Now* does not include the voices of three major groups. First and most problematically, women play only very minor roles in the film. Rika, Kōshō's wife, and several other women do drift in and out of scenes around Kumano, and in a three-minute passage devoted to her, Rika relates the hair-raising story of a bad fall she took while on a solo trip on the Kumano pilgrimage trail. However, we have little sense of how Rika's religious life plays out today, or how women do (not) fit into contemporary religious practice in the Ōmine range. In fact, women are quite active in Shugendō nowadays, even in Ōmine, but they are less visible than their male counterparts and their position can be quite ambiguous. Although the camera lingers on angry graffiti at a gate

marking one of the boundaries in the “no-women zone” around Mt. Ōmine, the issue of the gender-based ban receives no commentary here but silence. To my mind, this is a serious lack, made more troublesome by the fact that it is women who deliver the voice-overs, as though to suggest that a “feminine” interpretive agency is at work in a film that has been made mostly by men.

Second, with the exception of some short shots and soundtracking from one of the senior monks at Kinpusenji, men who fill high-level posts in Shugendō and closely related Buddhist organizations do not play a major role in the film. Nonetheless, these men lay down and transmit orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and therefore do much to structure the experiences of even casual participants in Shugendō activities. By steering away from informants with high status within Shugendō hierarchies, the film presents a decidedly non-institutional view of Shugendō, though this may not be obvious to many viewers.

Third and finally, although members of the film crew do appear peripherally in several scenes, they never face the camera, nor do they speak of or for themselves. I suspect that this is an aesthetic choice as much as anything else, but the question of what it means to yamabushi to be observed, and to be observed by foreigners, might well be worth some discussion.

All told, I highly recommend this film for inclusion in university collections and for private use. It is my understanding that the filmmakers are currently working on two 45-minute cuts, which will be easier to schedule into conventional university courses than the current 88-minute version. In either format, the film would work well in courses on East Asian and Japanese religions, as well as on Buddhism, the environment and religion, and even new religions movements. Most likely its primary strength will be its potential for generating discussion among students, though it could also fruitfully be used as a target for

analytical writing assignments. It should not be imagined, however, that this film provides an introduction to the history, sociology, or even the major practices of Shugendō. In most classrooms, it will work best with other lectures and readings.