

AN HISTORICAL STUDY OF MT. HAKU SHUGENDŌ

Popular religiosity in Japan has developed through an amalgamation of Buddhism with the native beliefs of the people. One of its most representative examples is Shugendō (mountain worship or asceticism). Therefore, in order to acquire a deeper insight into the religious life of the Japanese people, a study of Shugendō, including its historical aspects, would seem particularly helpful.

Since Shugendō was prohibited at the beginning of the Meiji Era -- and only afterwards revived -- and is essentially a religion aiming at secrecy, literary sources are rather scarce. Based upon some source materials hitherto unpublished, and combined with field research, a study was made of the following two areas :

1. The origin of Mt. Haku asceticism
2. The decline of Mt. Haku Shugendō and the rise of Kamakura Buddhism

1. The Origin of Mt. Haku Asceticism

There exist several accounts of the origin of Mt. Haku Shugendō. By way of comparative study it should be possible to trace its historical development. The three central places where Mt. Haku Shugendō is practiced are called bamba and correspond to the places from which the ascent of the sacred mountain is made. It is at the Mino bamba in Gifu prefecture that one of these histories is preserved. It is called Taichō Daishi denki (The Biography of Priest Taichō) and, as the title suggests, focuses upon the life of Priest Taichō, who is the founder of Mt. Haku Shugendō. There is no date on the as yet unpublished copy of the history, but its original should go back at least to the Nanboku-chō (Northern and Southern Courts period in the middle of the 14th century). In that biography several points are mentioned which are particular to the Mino bamba, and through investigation we are able to elucidate the development of this bamba.

A first conclusion is that Priest Taichō was a mountain ascetic at Mt. Ochi in Fukui prefecture and that he first climbed Mt. Haku in 717. This date can be given as that of the beginning of Mt. Haku Shugendō, and we can call this first stage that of kannabi beliefs. The word "kannabi" means "low mountains" and "kannabi beliefs" refers to the beliefs of the people of ancient times who thought that in the low mountains near the place where they lived the spirits of the ancestors dwelt whom they worshiped. They buried their dead at the foot of these mountains and needed religious people to take care that the spirits of the dead, dwelling in the mountains, did not cause their descendants too much suffering. Priest Taichō must have been one of them. In this way, Shugendō was derived from these

ancient kannabi beliefs, and the mountain worshipers of that time developed into yamabushi (Shugendō ascetics).

A second conclusion is that, contrary to the established opinion that Priest Taichō first climbed Mt. Haku from the Echizen bamba in Fukui prefecture, he did probably so from the Mino bamba. This is thought to be an important point for the understanding of Shugendō.

2. The Decline of Mt. Haku Shugendō and the Rise of Kamakura Buddhism

Mt. Haku Shugendō flourished at the beginning of the Kamakura Period (early 13th century) and declined at the end of the Muromachi Era (the time of the warring countries from the late 15th to early 16th centuries). One reason for the decline was that Shugendō was caught up in the turmoil of that period, combined with the fact that Mt. Haku Shugendō itself used armed force and that there were also specifically religious problems involved. It was, indeed, precisely in that period that Kamakura Buddhism (Pure Land Buddhism, Shin Buddhism, Zen, and Nichiren Buddhism) made its inroads into the area until that time dominated by Shugendō. As to why in some areas (specifically, to the north of Hachiman town) only the Shin sect of Pure Land Buddhism was able to take root, and why, for example, Zen Buddhism did not succeed, we can not say for certain.

Investigation of this problem reveals that purely religious factors played a dominant role in this phenomenon, although we should also take into consideration the fact that the Shugendō shrines were burned down and, consequently, its organizational structure was destroyed. But why did the Shugendō practitioners turn to the Shin sect instead of to Zen? A plausible reason is the existence of several points of resemblance between Shugendō and Shin Buddhism.

A first point is that both are quite similar as to origin. Shinran, the founder of the Shin sect, and the yamabushi came from a common social background. Before Shinran founded his sect, he was a so-called dōsō, a monk of lower rank at Mt. Hiei. Also the yamabushi came from this rank and, as a consequence, also practiced nenbutsu. Although there was a difference in meaning given to the recitation of nenbutsu, it was after all not too difficult for the Shugendō practitioners to conform their doctrinal interpretation to that of the Shin sect.

A second point worthy of mention is that there were many itinerant monks (yugyōkaikoku-teki hijiri) in the Shin sect who became involved with Shugendō, making the transfer to Shin Buddhism much easier for the populace.

One final factor at work may have been the fact that in both the Shin sect and Shugendō the priests were allowed to marry, while the Zen monks were obliged to lead a celibate life.