

**Implications of the Changes
in Japan's Water System for Shugendo**

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Water has multiple, sacred, and central role in Shugendo, Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Between 1872 and 1945 Shugendo as a practice didn't exist due to restriction on religious freedom. In the same time period and throughout the 20th century industrialization charged forth. One of the consequences of this process was the deteriorating quality of water. Today's environmental efforts often focus on rehabilitating the water system or at least attempting to stop the decline. In this paper I will suggest that the two movements could support each other. The re-emergence of Shugendo, with its focus on water purity could support the environmental protection and vica versa. The latter could strengthen former. In this paper I will describe the diverse relationship between water and Shugendo, the current status of and recent efforts on improving Japan's water system. What will emerge is the possibility of cooperation between different segments of society with the same goal: make water purer in Japan.

Shugendo is a mountain religion. Its main practices and concepts are focused to mountains. 75% of Japan is covered in mountains, the rest is plains. Mountains are considered sacred, but not all of them. Similarly water is considered sacred, but not all types of them. The majority that is sacred are in the mountains. Indeed a mountain is often sacred because of the quality of its water sources.

One reason mountains are identified wit water and sacralized together is that if you don't have water you cannot have rice. Rice is Japan's main staple. It is a water intensive plant. The slopes of lots of mountains and plains have been converted to rice paddies. They need to be covered regularly with water in order to grow rice.

The most important practice for the Yamabushi, the practitioners of Shugendo, is the ascend to and trekking through the mountains. According to their belief, through this highly

ritualized activity they can attain buddhahood in this lifetime. They do this through austerities practiced in a ritually and physically pure state. Looking at it from another perspective, they are gaining special powers by following the practice. This is another reason for the requirement for ritual purification. The following describes the central method for this.

"The next category of asceticism which is considered indispensable to the acquisition of power is cold water. To stand under a waterfall, preferably between the hours of two and three in the morning and preferably during the period of the Great Cold in midwinter, is believed to be an infallible method of gaining power. If not a waterfall is conveniently to hand, the practice of *mizugori*, by which wooden buckets of cold water are tipped over the head and body at stated intervals of time, is considered almost as efficacious." (Blacker 91)

The Nachi waterfall, "located at the southernmost tip of the Kii peninsula directly to the south of Kyoto, the Kumano region is one of the most important cultic areas of Japan." (Grapard 1999, p 571) It became the emblem of Shugendō. It has been associated with Shugendō for at least 1200 years based on available texts. It is sacred for both Tendai and Shingon based Shugendō. The Kii peninsula has vast numbers of mountains and waterfalls, most of them regarded as sacred. Water coming from above is looked upon as having flown down from heaven. Therefore it is suitable for purification purposes.

"The Nachi waterfall at Kumano was even at that time considered a powerful means of accumulating power. This celebrated waterfall is now, especially after heavy rain, of such weight and force that to stand beneath it is a scarcely credible feat." (Blacker 91)

The southernmost major island of Japan is Kyushu. On its northeastern part one can find the Kunisaki peninsula, and at its center Mount Hiko. This is the center for Tendai based Shugendo. An important ritual there includes going down from the top of the mountain along a river to the sea to pick up sand and water and to carry back up along another river to the top, along the river of purification. These are just two of the many rivers on and around Mount Hiko. There used to be 49 sacred caves on Mount Hiko, but today not all of them known. The most famous is the Crystal Cave there. The water flowing from it is the source of the Hiko river.

An analysis of the Kunisaki peninsula proved that the poorer the water quality in a given area the larger number of shrines it has. The logic behind this finding is that if one has good water one does not need to ask for it and build a permanent shrine for this purpose..

Many ascetics made the highest possible offering: jumping off the cliff or burning them or going by boats, taken by the current to the pure land of Bodhisattva. We see from all of the above that waterfalls fill an important role on religious practice. The availability of waterfalls or at least pure cold water is essential for ritual purity, which in turn is required for the ritual ascend of mountains.

The Shugendo initiation ceremony also includes sacred water. After an extended period of studying the monks receive new names. As part of the ceremony they cut the last remaining 3 patches of hair from their otherwise already shaven head. Then these spots are touched upon by consecrated water. We see in this example as well, the importance of availability of pure water. This practice is similar to a custom initiated in India. There and in Japan too, people pour water in certain statues, representing a kind of enthroning.

Shugendo displays a unique syncretism with Shinto and Buddhist traditions. Shinto shrines are always connected to water. The first thing one sees upon entering the torii, the gate, leading to the shrine is running water. There one is supposed to rinse the mouth and hand. This is necessary to reach ritual purity, a condition required for getting closer to the center, to the Kami, around which Shinto is organized. Without water the Kamis could not exist or at least their abode could not be approached by humans.

Kamis are powerful entities one makes offerings to. There are literally thousands of them. Deity/divinity resides in heaven, but the Kami resides elsewhere, in the realm of the unseen. It might be in the dark or underwater, on the floor of the ocean, in trees, rocks, waterfalls, in mountains. They require daily offerings, such as food, sake and specialties produced locally. The major ritual activity of offering, related to the yearly cycle is called Maturi. These offerings can include water offerings too. This offering was called Aka, (etymologically related to aqua, agua.)

Waterfalls are used not just for purification purposes. At the same time the Yamabushi envisioned the divine entity taking the form of the waterfall. In the mystical sense this translates to getting informed by the waterfall without looking at it. They considered the waterfall the natural form of the Kami or Buddhist entities. This follows the notion that you cannot represent reality as you see it, but only as you know it. This area can be referred to as geognosis, knowledge of the earth. A kind of interpretation: this is the world for Yamabushi, who are interested in arcane secrets, deeper extraction of meaning.

En No Gyoja, historically known as En No Ozunu, is considered the patriarch of Shugendo. He lived in the 8th century CE but became important retroactively in the

medieval period. He is usually depicted as with two demons working for him: water and fire. This connects the very root of the tradition to water.

The founder of one of the two major sects of Shugendo, Shingon was Kukai, also known as Kobo Daishi (774-835). Shingon's headquarter is the Daigoji temple, located in the Daigo mountain range. Halfway up the mountain there is sacred spot for its water. The water is especially valuable if drawn just before dawn. A second generation disciple of Kukai, Shobo (832-909) was also regarded as founder of Shingon. He was known for his hardcore ascetism and as rainmaker. Thus the history of virtually all founders of Shugendo and at least one of its centers has strong connection to water.

Rainmaking was one of the major social functions of the Yamabushi, the Shugendo practioners. "Tradition claimed that Kukai performed the first ritual for rain at the Shinsen'en garden in the capital in 824, though there is no proof." (Grapard 1999, 536) There is however a text attributed to him that he supposedly wrote after the successful ritual:

"As the venerable monks chant the sacred scriptures, light clouds appear in the sky, and as the practitioners of meditation hold firm to their concentration, rain clouds gather on the horizon. Then, sweet nectar of rain, that sublime ghee obscures the skies and comes to wash mountains and valleys. Waterfalls gush forth from high peaks and soaks wild animals, while the rain fills the fields enough to drown water buffaloes." (Grapard 1999, 537)

Or to quote a somewhat romanticizing source to show how Kukai was supposed to produce water:

"Saint Kobo, the founder of the [Shingon] Sect and the builder of Mount Koya's monasteries, is the rainmaker par excellence.... Where he was treated with kindness he would plant his staff in the ground and from the spot would gush forth a well of clear and sweet water which has never failed to this day: but where his request was refused or grudgingly met, a fresh bubbling of stream would turn forthwith into a muddy torrent which could never again be used for drinking water." (Bownes 120)

One of the art forms the Yamabushi practiced is landscaping painting. It is interesting to note that the direct translation referring to this art form is "mountain water."

A final simple connection between the Yamabushi and water: their treks are demanding and they need to have regular water. It is heavy to carry around, so they only have a limited amount on them. But water, particularly finding and keeping track of good water sources is on the mind of mountain ascetics on their long travels.

With this we possibly exhausted the listing of connections between Shugendo and water. This was an exhaustive list including: mountains as sacred water sources, food/rice production, purification under waterfalls, trekking along rivers, shrines dedicated to procuring better water, traveling to the Pure Land, initiation ceremony, Kami abode, water offering, waterfalls as deities, the founders' association with water, rainmaking, landscape painting, and last but not least drinking.

We are now ready to cover the socio-historical aspects. Shugendo was formally abolished in 1872 when the Meiji government issued a decrees dismissing Shugendo. This came after years of insistence that any given sacred locality, such as shrine/temple complexes have to associate themselves only with one religion, either Shinto or Buddhism, preferably the former. The political motivation behind the act was unifying Japan, creating a

unique nation, with as little Buddhist influence as possible. Thus Shugendo, being based in both was technically forced underground. It got slowly reestablished only after World War II, in 1945, when a new constitution was drafted by the United States establishing freedom of religion.

Mr. Grapard's article with a telling title ("The state remains, but mountains and rivers are destroyed") summarizes the history of Mount Hiko. Despite a number of changes both in the political and the religious system, Shugendo was practiced uninterrupted for several hundreds of years. The first major setback of some sort was when the Edo government in 1613 regulated Shugendo and required each temple to affiliate itself with either of the two main sects of esoteric Buddhism. The major blow came when the aforementioned 1872 government decree banned Shugendo. "The modern state could not tolerate a discourse on sacralization that did not mesh with its totalitarian notion of territory.... Otherness was reduced..." (Grapard, 2005, 90) This process resulted in the separation between landscapes and communities. Rapid industrialization helped deforestation, baking of river banks, overall "destruction of the Mount Hiko's mountain community."

To put the historical events in another context Karl A. Wittfogel, father of the "hydraulic society" theory had this to say about Japan:

"Irrigation farming was practiced ... in Japan to further cultivation of rice. ... The fact that irrigation farming was small-scale (hydro-agricultural, as I call it), had far-reaching socio-historical consequences. Small scale irrigation favoured the development of a multcentred society, an institutional system that, on the basis of

rainfall farming and with many variations, spread through feudal Europe."

(Wittfogel 2)

He explained the relatively late centralization of demography with the small scale nature of irrigation. We can extrapolate from this that power was not as centralized in Japan as it was in China.

A case study focusing on Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake from the 1960s concluded that its story

"illustrates most of the "collective choice" problems that beset water use conflicts.

We can see clashes between upstream and downstream interests, between locality and nation, between development and preservation, between bureaucracies and the citizenry at large, between government agencies themselves, between different parts of Dhiga, and between different categories of uses whose relative power changes over time." (Nickum 159)

Nowhere here or in the essay itself was any religious consideration even mentioned. But we can learn from this piece that "the River Law of 1896, amended in 1964, declares the water in rivers to be public property." (Nickum 146) This lack of clear ownership makes jurisdiction, planning or any kind of action the subject of a complex and often slow process. This certainly doesn't help the goal of improving the water quality.

A more recent, 2 year old, talk gave an overview of the history and importance of water transportation on Lake Biwa and its connecting Yodo River. It emphasized an aspect that so far was not mentioned in this paper, how rivers and lakes were used for travel and transportation in Japan up till very recently. He finished the historical overview in the 16th century, but closed his presentation with these words: "I wish to express my sincere hope

that the beauty of lakes and rivers in not only Japan but also around the world will be preserved for a long time to come." (Prince 1)

Another article from Mr. Grapard shares the major elements of a "cost-benefit analysis of building dams as opposed to keeping existent irrigation systems linked to agriculture." (Grapard Life, 19) In all the examined dimensions the latter comes out as more a beneficial solution. The bottom line, quite literally: "keeping paddy fields is not only a matter of keeping traditional kind of landscape, it is a major economic matter, which becomes a political matter, and it is, ultimately a matter of general social and cultural concern. The benefits are overwhelming." (Grapard Life, 22)

I believe that I proved that water, the irrigation system, the transportation system were all important part of the economic landscape. In a country like Japan, where so much emphasis is placed on beautification of object aesthetic value should not be left out from major decisions, such as how to revitalize the water system. Even the numbers related to economy show that keeping the traditional water system is advantageous. Therefore all parties should have the same interest as the Shugendo practitioners, making water purer.

Let me close this paper with the hope that the minister's words will be heard by those who have the power to help. Yoriko Kawaguchi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, said at the 3rd World Water Forum: "Civilisation was born with water. Water is indeed the basis of life. Yet mankind has not been wise enough to live with water.

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