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# Vertical Pilgrimage: Japanese Mountain Religious Experience and American Big Wall Climbing

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## Abstract

Looking carefully at the most popular contemporary pilgrimage in Japan, the Shikoku *henro*, and Japanese mountain ascetic traditions more generally, we can probe an intriguing mode of sacred travel that I characterize as “vertical pilgrimage.” I demonstrate that religious training centered on holy mountains and rocks can be seminal in the making of a Japanese Buddhist saint and is instrumental in the formation of long-standing pilgrimage institutions. I argue that vertical pilgrimage in Japan, which is structured on ascetic emphasis, repetition, and risk-fueled concentration, can offer theoretical orientations that have real utility in other mountain pilgrimage contexts. To illustrate this analytical efficacy, I introduce the case of vertical pilgrimage on El Capitan in Yosemite, California.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, Shikoku *henro*, *zenjō*, big wall climbing, El Capitan

It is perhaps unexpected that Japan’s most famous and popular pilgrimage, the Shikoku *henro*, includes elements of mountain risk that could potentially threaten life or limb. The *henro*, or the journey to the 88-places on the island of Shikoku, is a 1200km pilgrimage that has strong spiritual associations with the saint Kōbō Daishi. Promotional magazines and television programs tend to leave a lasting impression of happy-go-lucky retirees enjoying the *henro* as a carefree pastime. Nonetheless, ridges, peaks, and cliffs frame sacred locations on the island and constitute holy places in their own right. Upon examination, one can begin to understand the connection between mountain hazards and the structure, development, and meaning of the pilgrimage.

Consider Iwayaji: the 45th temple of the circuit, located in Ehime Prefecture, which is purposefully built around rock-related austerities. Immediately to the right of the main hall, where a sign warns visitors of overhead falling rock hazards, is a remarkably steep and foreboding ladder that challenges pilgrims to climb five meters to a gripping dismount into

a shallow cave in the middle of the cliff-face.<sup>1)</sup> Quite nearby, underneath the main hall, lies the entrance to a foreboding cave, the *Ana-zenjō* 穴禅定, an ascetic practice that requires individuals to traverse the length of a slippery and ominous underground passage in near-total darkness. In the steep valley just uphill from the main hall is a miniature pilgrimage dedicated to the 36 disciples of *Fudō-myō-ō* 不動明王. Buddhist images are arranged on a path that winds from cliff to cliff and weaves through giant old-growth cedar trees. In the uppermost reaches of the gorge, the route traverses a narrow catwalk to the summit of a free-standing rock tower. The climax of the mini-pilgrimage is the potentially lethal *Seriwari zenjō* せりわり禅定. This austerity requires one to ascend chains through a steep and narrow crevice between two free-standing rock monoliths, before gaining a shoulder position on the ridgeline from which the pilgrim must ascend a harrowing ladder to the tower's summit. Collectively speaking, these unique risky vertical challenges can be integral to the pilgrimage experience at Iwayaji.



Image 1: A pilgrim on the Shikoku *henro* pauses thoughtfully after a climbing challenge at Iwayaji. The entrance to the *Ana-zenjō* cave is visible just right of center at the bottom of the image.

In a social scientific sense, how are these types of perilous and other-worldly mountain austerities to be understood? Prominent scholarly voices have asserted that mountain asceticism is the fundamental key to understanding the uniqueness of Japanese religiosity and even Japanese culture more generally.<sup>2)</sup> In particular, Shugendō is a varied and syncretic tradition built on the centrality of sacred mountains and that blend reverence for kami, Buddhist deities, and numerous corresponding avatars (*gongen* 権現). Its practitioners, referenced as *yamabushi* 山伏 or *shugenja* 修験者, seek supernatural powers through austerities on holy peaks. Gorai posits that the:

*study of Shugendō will then make possible not the superficial understanding of Japan which is achieved by the methods of cultural anthropology, but a deep grasp of the fundamental spirit of the Japanese people.*<sup>3)</sup>

Earhart similarly expounds that what is truly “Japanese” with regard to Japanese religion comes from Shugendō.<sup>4)</sup>

In marked contrast to these views, I argue that Japanese mountain religiosity yields a worthy paradigm of ascetic pilgrimage, which can significantly illuminate phenomena well beyond Japan. Reader and Swanson offer a pointed lament: even though Japanese religious culture is founded to a large extent on pilgrimage, nothing of theoretical significance has emerged from Japan to inform and shape global pilgrimage studies.<sup>5)</sup> Since these aforementioned activities include physical and/or perceived metaphysical ascents and descents, I refer to these mountain religious austerities as “vertical pilgrimage”.<sup>6)</sup> To illustrate the utility of vertical pilgrimage as theoretical orientation, I will introduce the case of pilgrims on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, California, the most famous and hallowed “big wall” on the planet.

## The Sacred Vertical: Mountains and Rocks as Foci of Japanese Pilgrimage

Religious interpretation of Japanese mountains is varied, but at the representative extreme, mountains are viewed as the *axis mundi*: the center of the world and the vertical link between terrestrial and heavenly realms (and sometimes the underworld). The principal texts of Japanese mythology, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (also *Nihongi*), describe Izanagi and Izanami constructing a sacred pillar (*Ame-no-mihashira* 天御柱) linking the earth to the heavens, and this axis is at the center of their wedding ritual.<sup>7)</sup> With Indian Buddhism,

Mt. Sumeru is the sacrosanct mountain, sometimes interpreted as the very body of the Buddha.<sup>8)</sup> In Japan, sites associated with Mt. Sumeru, or *Shumisen* 須弥山, or simply *Misen* 弥山 in Japanese, are significant training locations. With *Misen*, the *axis mundi* is intriguingly localized, being found in numerous locations, including in the Yoshino-Kumano mountain range, in precincts of Mt. Ishizuchi on the island of Shikoku, and on Itsukushima in what is now Hiroshima prefecture.

As seen with the Iwayaji example above, rock canyons, cliffs, stone monoliths, and caves are ubiquitously understood to be *gyōba* 行場, or locations for ascetic practice. Gorai provides a significant list of rock *gyōba* types, including *gyōdo iwa* 行道岩, “rocks which are the path of austerities,” and *kusari gyōba* 鎖行場 (121). *Kusari gyōba* have thick steel chains to aid scrambling and climbing through rock bands and are ubiquitously found throughout the country. Supplementing the chains, other climbing infrastructure can include ropes, ladders, stemples, and cut footholds and handholds in the rock surface. Caves, likewise, hold deep religious significance with symbolism harkening from Japanese mythology and esoteric Buddhism, representing entrances to the underworld (*yomi* 黄泉 and/or *ne no kuni* 根の国), and places of spiritual death and rebirth, respectfully.

A famous example of such a climbing challenge on the *henro* would be the often-underestimated *gyōba* on Mt. Nyotai, just before the last temple, Temple 88 Ōkuboji. While the steepest sections could easily be avoided by ascending to the right or left of a series of rock bands, the original pilgrim route is a structured trial, with many calling it the hardest section of the 1200 km journey. This is one of eight sections of the *henro* trail ominously designated as *henro-korogashi* 遍路ころがし, literally “the place where pilgrims fall down.” In several recently published memoirs, this dramatically steep ascent, with chains and stemples that leads to the knife-ridge summit of Mt. Nyotai, is described as the emotional and physical climax of the entire five-week walking pilgrimage.<sup>9) 10)</sup>

Through the figure of Kōbō Daishi we can see numerous examples of how the sacred vertical creates a Japanese Buddhist saint. Kōbō Daishi is the posthumous religious title granted to the Heian era priest Kūkai (774-835 CE), who traveled to China and returned with the teachings of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism. Kūkai is widely believed to be from Zentsuji in Sanuki province on Shikoku. The legend for nearby Temple 73 Shusshakaji

maintains that as a seven-year-old boy he engaged in *shashingyō* 捨身行, literally “the practice of abandoning one’s body,” on the ridgeline of Mt. Gaihaishi, directly above the temple.<sup>11)</sup> This *shashingyō* is essentially a leap of faith from the highest cliff on the ridge, and the tale maintains that the future saint was plucked from the air and saved by a female angel sent by Shaka Buddha. Gorai has examined the writings of the famous poet-ascetic Saigyō, who once visited the location.<sup>12)</sup> The scholar concludes from the poet’s description that this spot was a site for *meguri-gyōdo* 巡り行道, a prominent Shugendō practice that requires one to traverse the outer perimeter of a boulder, placing the climber in an exposed and precarious position clinging for their life over a dangerous void. Gorai implies that the traversing practice supplanted the more suicidal *shashingyō*, and Saigyō maintains that the Daishi did this circumambulation training on a daily basis.<sup>13)</sup>



Image 3: A bell at the inner sanctuary of Shusshakaji illustrates the boy Daishi’s leap of faith from a cliff. The cliff in the legend is directly above the location of this bell.



Image 2: Climbing chains for religious training on Mt. Goken above Yakuriji ascend a treacherous overhanging section of loose rock. A fall here would likely be fatal; indeed, a 21-year old man fell to his death in this area in 2017.<sup>14)</sup>

In the *Sangō Shiiki* 三教指帰, Kūkai writes of doing ascetic practices at two locations in Shikoku: on Mt. Tairyū and in a cave on Cape Muroto.<sup>15)</sup> Pilgrims regularly visit a craggy section of Mt. Tairyū—that includes climbing chains—with the understanding that Kūkai performed his austerities at this location. The cave is found at the base of a cliff on a promontory that extends far into the Pacific Ocean.<sup>16)</sup> Pilgrims on the *henro* and adherents of Shingon Buddhism understand that this training was seminally transformative in the saint's life. Importantly, we can see that Kōbō Daishi/Kūkai is drawn to spiritually powerful natural rock locations, but also that his practices there further sanctify these places. In addition to these celebrated examples, there are numerous other legends concerning the Daishi and the sacred vertical, including those of Iwayaji and Temple 85 Yakuriji, which is framed with the dramatic rockfaces of Mt. Goken.

Institutionally speaking, important recent scholarship has argued that Shugendō practices and its infrastructure helped to create the Shikoku *henro* in its early-modern and modern forms. Before the distinct 88-temple structure, early references in *Konjaku Monogatari* 今昔

物語 (compiled around 1120 CE) and *Ryōjin Hishō* 梁塵秘抄 (compiled between 1127-1192) speak of an ascetic practice on the island that follows the *heji* 辺地, or coastal road.<sup>17)</sup> Gorai maintains that *heji* around Kumano and Shikoku are actually “extended *meguri-gyōdo*,” thus linking movement on a single stone and that on an entire island or peninsula.<sup>18)</sup> The *heji* in Shikoku is generally understood to be the precursor to the path of the *henro*. In addition to the austere origins of the walking route, Hasegawa has recently argued that lodging structures built for *yamabushi* would subsequently become the sacred sites, or *fudasho* 札所, dedicated to Kōbō Daishi.<sup>19)</sup> Such spiritual reorientation or evolution of the sacred vertical has likely happened at various locations in Japan. Intriguingly, Earhart similarly notes how Shugendō was crucial to the development of religious practices and confraternities associated with Mt. Fuji, even though these structures would eventually be replaced by a mountain-specific ascetic tradition.<sup>20)</sup>

My recent ethnographic work looking at individuals who are devoted to continually repeating the *henro* (sometimes dozens or hundreds of times) reveals a continuing link between the temple pilgrimage and mountain training. In particular, five of my *henro* informants are connected to confraternities centered on Mt. Ishizuchi, which is located near seven of the 88 temples. The austerities on this mountain include some of the longest climbing chains in the country, with lengths of up to 60 meters. One informant from Saijō-city in Ehime prefecture has completed the Shikoku pilgrimage 245 times, is a formally certified high-ranking *henro* guide (*dai-sendatsu* 先達), and runs his own guide-association (*sendatsukai* 先達会) with roughly 90 members. This prominent *henro* leader also serves as a *sendatsu* for Mt. Ishizuchi, the peak of which he can see from his home. When asked how he envisions himself and his religious status, the guide simply states that he is a “*hijiri*.”<sup>21)</sup> Historically speaking, *hijiri* are an older and more original type of austere wanderer, like those on the *heji*.<sup>22)</sup> The label of *hijiri* suggests a high degree of autonomy, and the designation neatly incorporates his varied pilgrimage activities under a single identity. I have also interviewed one remarkable full-time ascetic who sustains himself entirely on alms (*fuse* 布施/*settai* 接待), but who alternates between doing ascetic practices in the mountains and circumnavigating the 88 sacred locations.<sup>23)</sup> Though he estimates having walked the circuit 30 times, for him the *henro* serves as a sort of frame for a broader wilderness-based ascetic lifestyle. With a sense of resolve, the mendicant explains that he remains fully committed to continuing on this austere path until he dies.

## Structures of Vertical Pilgrimage: Ascetic Emphasis, Performance Repetition, and Risk-Fueled Concentration

Seeking to outline broader universal structures for a unique class of religious phenomena, I see three specific areas that have analytical potency. The first is a basic view of pilgrimage as ascetic practice. My previous work looking at written accounts of the Shikoku *henro* shows that ascetic terminology is used quite universally in conjunction with the journey.<sup>24)</sup> I have demonstrated that the language related to pilgrim austerities spans across a significantly wide spectrum,<sup>25)</sup> but that it can commonly include basic elements highlighted in recent scholarship by Lobetti, including pain, challenges, and bodily effort.<sup>26)</sup> For *henro* pilgrims, something as simple as spending the afternoon walking in a rainstorm can be perceived as ascetic practice or the entire journey and all of its facets can be understood as functioning as a single austere path to enlightenment.<sup>27)</sup> Contemporary evangelists, such as Miyazaki Tateki who wrote the so-called “bible” of walking pilgrims, have advocated passionately for ascetic-orientations on the journey. Indeed, Miyazaki’s own passing demonstrates the genuine risks on the training path: he tragically fell to his death while doing *henro* trail maintenance alone in the mountains near Matsuyama.<sup>28)</sup>

Ascetic mountain pilgrimages are often aimed at the highest level of self-actualization. Miyake states, “the object of mountain austerities is to become a Buddha in one’s human body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏),”<sup>29)</sup> and the “object of worship and the practitioner himself become one and the same.”<sup>30)</sup> The process of total transformation can include complete non-dual associations with a remarkable range of phenomena, including with Fudō-myō-ō, Dainichi Buddha, the central pillar of the universe (*axis mundi*), and/or the entirety of the universe itself.<sup>31)</sup> With *henro* lore as well, the pervasive concept of *dōgyō-ninin* 同行二人 (“two people, one ascetic practice”) creates a non-dual association with Kōbō Daishi. Further, in the context of this ultimate transformation from humanity to divinity, death and rebirth themes are also ubiquitously within with these ascetic pilgrimages.<sup>32)</sup>

The significance of repetition has often been underappreciated in pilgrimage studies, but it is especially critical to an understanding of these phenomena. Those who often repeat these practices tend to create the culture and religious standards surrounding the pilgrimage. For

example, the ultimate ascetic and saint of Mt. Fuji, Matsudai Shōnin, is said to have climbed the mountain hundreds of times.<sup>33)</sup> Kōbō Daishi is understood by many pilgrims to be both still living and in continual circumambulation of the 88-sites of Shikoku. As if following the Daishi's saintly example of unending austerities, there is an entire class of perpetual pilgrims, including those who have driven the 1200 km circuit more than 700 times and others who have spent upwards of 10 years continually walking the pilgrimage. Repetition of sacred journeys helps to create a religious identity that extends well beyond the confines of a sacred mountain or a single temple circuit.<sup>34)</sup> Various Shugendō lineages and also the Shikoku 88-Place Pilgrimage Association directly link numbers of completed journeys to authoritative status in their respective *sendatsu* systems. Likewise, it is important to note that this strong desire to continue pilgrimaging can be understood as a sort of compulsion. This impulse is easily seen in the well-worn expression *Shikoku-byō* 四国病, or “the Shikoku Sickness,” a term that implies a sort of addiction to the sacred travel.

Finally, a unique and essential component regarding the meaning and impact of vertical pilgrimage is the centrality of risk-fueled concentration. *Zenjō* 禅定 is the Japanese term for the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, and it implies mental concentration on a single object, as in the form of a meditative state. It is one of the six perfections (*paramitas*) that a bodhisattva is obliged to cultivate, according to basic Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. However, as seen with the example of Iwayaji above, *zenjō* is often used simply to describe climbing (or sometimes traversing or descending) the sacred vertical. For instance, the long chains ascending Mt. Ishizuchi are called *kusari zenjō* 鎖禅定. Concerning practices on the Yoshino-Kumano pilgrimage, Swanson translates an official publication from a major Shugendō temple, Shōgo-in, which explains that in *zenjō* one is free of distractions “as a man cannot think of money or sex while negotiating a dangerous climb, so he must be single-minded and pure.”<sup>35)</sup> In the context of the climbing practices, the head priest explains to Swanson that the dangers create a perfect, undistracted clarity of mind, and that “the purpose of Shugendō is to realize this state of mind and cultivate it in everyday life.”<sup>36)</sup> Perhaps in contrast to sitting in meditation in a temple, vertical risks are employed to accelerate this concentrated state of single-mindedness. In sum, Japanese mountain religious contexts establish rock climbing as a curious and distinct ascetic act.

## The 1000m Vertical Pilgrimage: El Capitan and Yosemite Big Wall Climbers

Climbing in Yosemite has been characterized as pilgrimage from the early accounts of John Muir (1838-1914) to the present-day, and these austerities intriguingly demonstrate hallmarks of the sacred vertical in Japan. Yosemite National Park in California is 3100 square kms and includes high peaks of the Sierra Nevada range, massive old-growth Sequoia trees, and the deep chasm of Yosemite Valley with forbiddingly steep granite walls on three sides.<sup>37)</sup> Muir, the naturalist, mystic, and solo mountaineer, has inspired each subsequent generation of Yosemite climbers. This saint of American wilderness conservation wrote of the holy land stating, “no temple made with hands can compare with Yosemite. Every rock in its walls seems to glow with life.”<sup>38)</sup> He likewise records several near-death encounters while climbing in this wilderness holy land.<sup>39)</sup> Muir’s voice is not alone in seeing sacred structures in the stone, as seven of the major granite domes in the area have the word “cathedral” in their name.<sup>40)</sup> Royal Robbins (1935-2017), the so-called “high Lama” of rock climbing in Yosemite Valley,<sup>41)</sup> famously referred to climbers on the park’s highest faces as “pilgrims of the vertical.”<sup>42)</sup> “Pilgrims of the vertical exhibited a passion that seemingly paralleled other pilgrims,” explains Taylor, “all risked life for their spiritual quests and all romanticized death.”<sup>43)</sup> This view of Yosemite’s heights as the sacred vertical continues in the language of contemporary climbers the world over, who almost universally refer to the valley as “our mecca” or “the center of the universe.”<sup>44)</sup>

The holiest of holy mountains or *axis mundi* at the middle of the rock climbing cosmos is undisputedly Yosemite’s El Capitan, the crystal-studded granite monarch of the park that towers 1000m above the valley floor. “Big walls” are simply the tallest rockfaces on the planet, and El Cap—as it is affectionately known—is home to the world’s most famous big wall routes. A handful of early pioneers, including Warren Harding (1924-2002) and Royal Robbins, pushed the limits of human potential with the first climbing routes on the wall in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the famous Nose route, the Salathe Wall, the North American Wall, and, in tribute to the mountain mystic saint himself, the Muir Wall. Climbing El Capitan has taken as long as 45 days and has been done in as little as one hour and 58 minutes.<sup>45)</sup> An average ascent time in 2020 would likely be about three to four days. While fantastic technical skill and mental fortitude are required simply to begin, once on the wall,

huge amounts of labor are expended for hauling all necessary supplies with rope and pulley systems. The risks of the endeavor are well understood with 30 climbers having lost their lives in 25 separate accidents.<sup>46)</sup> Perhaps for those who challenge these walls, Daniel Duane best captures the personified, divine character of El Capitan, calling the rock simply his “ten megaton Old Testament God.”<sup>47)</sup>



Image 4: The central portion of El Capitan.

While likely around 50% of parties fail in their attempt to climb El Capitan,<sup>48)</sup> for those who enjoy success, the compulsion to return can be significant. The famous big wall climber and author Andy Kirkpatrick has described this voracious drive to return repeatedly and increase the challenges, despite former successes.<sup>49)</sup> Mo Antony famously pronounced the need to “feed the rat,” as if some insatiable vermin lurks inside, only satisfied when consuming vertical adventure.<sup>50)</sup> To quickly gain a picture of this compulsion, consider the outliers: indications are that at least four living climbers have scaled El Capitan 100 times, including Steve Gerberding,<sup>51)</sup> Steve Schneider,<sup>52)</sup> Hans Florine,<sup>53)</sup> and Erik Sloan.<sup>54)</sup> While attempting what would have been his 107th ascent of the rock, Tim Klein died on June 2, 2018 in a tragic 300 meter fall off the Salathe Wall tied together with his partner Jason Wells.<sup>55)</sup> Indeed, one-day ascents and speed records appear to have contributed to increased

risk-taking in recent years. Free solo climbing is ascending without ropes, using only one's hands and feet. Alex Honnold destroyed all previous standards by completing the first free solo of El Capitan in three hours and 56 minutes on June 3, 2017,<sup>56)</sup> a feat that could only be accomplished by rehearsing the route again and again. As with regular periodic Shugendō initiations or the deep urges associated with “the Shikoku sickness,” a profound longing to repeat this austerity seems to grip many big wall pilgrims.

Digging deeper, we find plentiful descriptions of a hyper-focused state of concentration brought about though the challenges and implicit risks on the big wall. In a famous piece touting the “climber as visionary,” Doug Robinson finds an apt case study with Yvon Chouinard during the first ascent of the Muir Wall. Chouinard, an El Cap pioneer and founder of the outdoor company Patagonia, explains a deep transformation in the final section of the climb:

*With more receptive senses we now appreciated everything around us. Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief... This unity with our joyous surrounding, this ultra-penetrating perception gave us a feeling of contentment that we had not had for years.*<sup>57)</sup>

Robinson sees a direct link between ascetic elements and this higher consciousness



stating that, “he [Chouinard] was tempered by technical difficulties, pain, apprehension, dehydration, striving, the sensory desert, weariness, the gradual loss of self.”<sup>58)</sup> Further, the author understands that the practice is a “system” with “ingredients” that, if copied, will lead anyone to such a state. Seemingly unaware of Japanese mountain religious traditions, Robinson curiously believes climbing is a Western equivalent to Eastern ascetic practices, and that climbing appears “well suited to liberating the individual from his concept of self.”<sup>59)</sup>

Image 5: Climbers appear as tiny dots on the ridgeline, just above the Dolt Tower feature, roughly one-third of the way up El Capitan's Nose route.

Other vertical pilgrims connect the dangers on walls with an ideal state of hyper-awareness, and new discourse has emerged to describe this condition. Dean Potter (1972-2015), who set numerous early speed records on El Capitan by advancing a bold new style that minimized the use of ropes, explains his perspective: “Something about death consequences brings out the heightened consciousness.”<sup>60)</sup> He further elaborates:

*I can trigger heightened awareness though putting myself in harm’s way and focusing on my breath. That simple focus on the breath—that meditation I do—brings out the higher senses. That’s the majority of my art.*<sup>61)</sup>

Potter, who would eventually crash and die while flying across Yosemite Valley in a wing-suit, became an archetype in a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling book for a new type of “superman” who had mastered the vast potential of flow.<sup>62)</sup>

For contemporary climbers, flow has come to dominate discourse related to hyper-concentration in climbing,<sup>63)</sup> and the term seems remarkably kindred to the Japanese interpretation of *zenjō*. The positive psychologist Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as a state of total absorption in an activity to the extent that one loses a sense of time and even ego consciousness. Very early in his seminal work on flow, Csikszentmihalyi recognized rock climbing as an ideal activity for the production of these types of experiences.<sup>64)</sup> Flow states are understood to be “optimal experiences”<sup>65)</sup> that are integral to both deep and lasting human happiness and maximizing human potential.<sup>66)</sup> Curiously, the psychologist notes that because flow is so profound, one can become addicted to its pursuit.<sup>67)</sup> Likewise, deep flow experiences in one area of life are often thought to facilitate the development of flow in other endeavors, echoing the *yamabushi sendatsu*’s call to take the lessons of *zenjō* back to the everyday world.

Scholarly descriptions of mountain asceticism in Japan ubiquitously assert that these practices aim for the highest level of self-actualization and the production of supernatural powers. Considering vertical pilgrimage in Japan, we see ritual structures and corresponding doctrines that intend to quickly advance the practitioner, often by subjecting him/her to physical dangers and challenges related to rocks. We can easily see that the sacred vertical is likewise integral to famous pilgrimages like the Shikoku *henro* and can be a vital element in the biography of a Japanese saint. Nonetheless, far from being uniquely Japanese, the fundamental characteristics of vertical pilgrimage are easily understood to be an intriguing

analytical blueprint to consider the quest for peak experiences in other mountain pilgrimage contexts, such as those on El Capitan.

#### Acknowledgment

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#### Notes:

- 1) This is said to be the ruins of a worship hall connected to the ascetic hermit Hokke-sennin 法華仙人.
- 2) Royall Tyler and Paul L. Swanson, "Editors' Introduction," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 16, no. 2/3 (1989): 93–100.
- 3) Shigeru Gorai, "Shugendo Lore," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 16, no. 2/3 (1989): 120.
- 4) H. Byron Earhart, "Introduction," in *Shugendo: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion* (Ann Arbor, Mich: U of M Center For Japanese Studies, 2007), 3.
- 5) Ian Reader and Paul L. Swanson, "Editors' Introduction: Pilgrimage in the Japanese Religious Tradition," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24, no. 3/4 (1997): 226.
- 6) As discussed below, this term is inspired by the seminal climber Royal Robbins.
- 7) Donald L. Philippi, *Kojiki* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 50, <http://0.muse.jhu.edu/book/44299>; William George Aston, *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (London: The Japan Society, 1896), Book I, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nihongi:\\_Chronicles\\_of\\_Japan\\_from\\_the\\_Earliest\\_Times\\_to\\_A.D.\\_697](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nihongi:_Chronicles_of_Japan_from_the_Earliest_Times_to_A.D._697).
- 8) Ichiro Hori, "Mountains and Their Importance for the Idea of the Other World in Japanese Folk Religion," *History of Religions* 6, no. 1 (1966): 3–4; Hitoshi Miyake and H. Byron Earhart, *Shugendo: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion* (Ann Arbor, Mich: U of M Center For Japanese Studies, 2007), 141.
- 9) This section is now commonly avoided for the perceived relative safety of hiking along the road.
- 10) Mitsuyo Sato, *Watashi No Ohenro Nikki — Aruite Mawaru Shikoku 88-Kasho* (Suita: Nishinihon Shuppansha, 2005), 284; Amy Chavez, *Running the Shikoku Pilgrimage: 900 Miles to Enlightenment* (Volcano: Volcano Press, 2013), 201–2.
- 11) Shikoku Hachijūhakkasho Reijōkai, "Gaihaishisan Kyojimojin Shushakkaji," Shikoku Hachijūhakkasho Reijōkai, accessed April 19, 2020, <http://www.88shikokuhenro.jp/73shusyakaji/>.
- 12) Gorai, "Shugendo Lore," 134.
- 13) *Byōdō-Iwa* in the Omine Mountains near Yoshino is probably the most well-known location for this dramatic practice.

- 14) "Tozan-Chū Ni Karraku Ka, 21-Sai Shibō Takamatsu Gokenzan," *Nihonkeizaishinbun*, March 24, 2017, [https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDG24H2D\\_U7A320C1CC0000/](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDG24H2D_U7A320C1CC0000/).
- 15) Yusei Arai, *Shingon Esoteric Buddhism: A Handbook for Followers*, trans. Seicho Asahi, Shoken Harada, and George Tanabe (Fresno, CA: Koyasan Shingon Buddhism, 1997), 18.
- 16) I have interviewed one contemporary *sendatsu* who claims to have recreated this practice in the cave.
- 17) Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning And Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 108.
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