# KANSAI GAIDAI UNIVERSITY

# Black swans in white clothing : outliers and social scientific theory considered through a case study of the Shikoku Henro

# Black Swans in White Clothing*: Outliers and Social Scientific Theory Considered Through a Case Study of the Shikoku *Henro*[1]

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### Abstract

 At a basic level, this article considers the construction of social scientific theory. In particular, drawing from the ideas of Taleb (2007), I examine the place of outliers, or "black swans," in the analysis of a long-standing and evolving social system. Pondering the role of outliers with respect to Japan's most famous pilgrimage, the Shikoku *henro*, I argue that rare behaviors and/or beliefs either cause pilgrimage theories to fail outright or force descriptions to become so open-ended and vague that they no longer fulfill the function of reductive analysis. I conclude that historical methodologies, though limited in producing a more universal description, are better suited to preserve the diversity, even extremity, found with respect to pilgrimage.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, outliers, Shikoku *henro*

## Introduction

 A single incident when I was still a student would help to shape my approach to social scientific inquiry and has led me to the methodological considerations discussed in this essay. During the oral examination for my Master's Degree in December of 2004, I highlighted examples of Buddhist pilgrims to sacred locations in Japan who were seeking enlightenment (悟り) through their journeys. This was/is notably rare in that the vast majority of Japanese pilgrims throughout history and today can be understood to be motivated by more practical, this-worldly benefits (現是利益). A member of the thesis examination committee suggested the enlightenment-seeking perspective was so abnormal that it should properly be excluded from the analysis I was attempting to make. In many ways, his opinion was quite justified; social scientists can rarely say anything interesting about human phenomena in which counter examples cannot be offered. Thus, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars consequently are forced to make theories work as something of a "best fit" for most of the data, while necessarily discounting rarer examples that would seem to run

counter to the overarching theory. Most of the time we feel confident to disregard such individuals, behaviors, or perspectives, especially if they are a very small proportion of the sample, what is referenced as statistical outliers.

In this treatment, I consider major theories with respect to pilgrimage in light of this problem of outliers. I make illustrations with data and narratives from Japan's most famous pilgrimage, the Shikoku *henro*, a journey where pilgrims dressed in white garments circumnavigate the island of Shikoku to visit 88 holy locations. I draw upon the so-called "black swan theory" of Taleb, which considers how human or human-caused outliers can dramatically reshape the course of history. I argue that the problem of outliers causes pilgrimage theories to either fail outright or forces descriptions to become so open-ended and vague that they no longer fulfill the function of reductive analysis.

The *Shikoku henro*, a roughly 1200 km (750 mile) circular route on the island of Shikoku, is generally the first journey Japanese think of when they consider domestic pilgrimage (国内巡礼). The pilgrimage has a fantastic history as a popular form of religious expression, which dates back to at least the Edo period. The *henro*'s legendary origins are said to begin in the late Nara/early Heian period with the prodigious Buddhist priest Kūkai 空海 (774-835 CE), who brought Shingon esoteric Buddhism from China to Japan. After his death, Kūkai would be considered a religious savior and saint, as evidenced by the posthumous title Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師 granted to him by the Emperor Daigo.

The journey to the 88 places of Shikoku has become arguably the most literary pilgrimage of the modern world. A considerable acceleration in the overall number of publications relating to the *henro* since the late 1990s has produced hundreds of published first person accounts chronicling circumambulation of the island. These narratives of the Heisei era literature boom are invaluable resources for the normative study of the modern *henro* and also offer much to wider interdisciplinary discussions of pilgrimage. Outlying beliefs and approaches importantly dominate *henro* literature. As such, the influence of these outliers goes fantastically beyond the mere strength of their numerical proportions. Thus, personal *henro* memoirs can allow us to probe the margins of a vast and multi-faceted pilgrimage system and to consider the implications therein for social scientific theory.

The role of outlying phenomena in the investigations of social science is the subject of Taleb's text *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. He offers a strong critique of what he believes to be a tendency in social science to discount or rule out data falling outside of the most frequent observations (xxvii). He argues that the study of human

phenomena should begin precisely with these often-considered irrelevant examples, because the most significant changes in social systems nearly always come from the margins. The existence of paradigm-altering outliers, or what Taleb refers to as "black swans", seems supported by examples from pilgrimage studies, such as the dramatic restructuring of the Hajj under the influence of Muhammad and his supporters. If human behavior is rendered with a Gaussian-style bell curve (as seen especially in Finance and Economics), Taleb's outliers would be found in the "tails" of the distribution. These tails are outside of two standard deviations from the mean, so one could say that any data that are detectable in five percent or less of observations would qualify as outlying data.

As a brief example of potential *black swan-pilgrims*, consider the relative numbers of walking pilgrims who do the route in a single journey, or *tōshiuchi* 通し打ち in the specific language of the Shikoku journey. For comparison, we have reliable quantitative data from three separate survey-studies of the *henro* conducted by Satō Hisamitsu, Kochi Prefecture's Department of Planning and Promotion, and Waseda University's Dōkūkan Research Association. Cross-referencing these three data sets suggests that less than four percent of all pilgrims walk the route in a single journey (Satō, *Henro⋯Shakaigaku* 229; Kochiken 8; Osada, Sakata, and Seki 245; 271). Yet *tōshiuchi*-walkers dominate the *henro* memoirs, perhaps numbering as many as three out of four accounts. I have considered in detail 16 first-person, written accounts of Heisei era pilgrimages to Shikoku. 13 of the 16 texts are the tales of pilgrims hiking all 1200 km of the route in a single trip. In his study, Reader similarly notices the dominance of walkers among *henro* accounts (188). One naturally wonders what impact such a minority of pilgrims can have on the social system, given such a prominent voice through literature. Outside of continuous walking, other unusual characteristics accessible in recent narratives include the ritual use of a musical instrument, sleeping outdoors, extremely young pilgrims, the solicitation of alms (托鉢), use of full-time photographers, extensive media coverage, and attempts to create real-time postings of the experience on the Internet to allow others to share in a *virtual-henro*.

Beyond unusual performance characteristics, these sources also highlight an incredible range of themes in relation to the experience. Some themes are standard representations of the pilgrimage's traditional associations with Kōbō Daishi, Buddhism, and death. Some are reinterpretations of traditional themes with a personal or modern twist. Other accounts seem oblivious to these traditions and boldly form themes around the author's own interests and predispositions. While at times this thematic malleability appears to leave little

commonality, the texts all seem to coalesce around the magnitude of the experience and the impact it makes on the pilgrim. In short, every account describes the journey as a sort of transformative epic adventure. However, even this representation is most likely a minority or outlying perspective, as many or most pilgrims to the island travel in organized bus tours where challenge and uncertainty is positively minimized. Thus, there appears to be a large gap with respect to intensity between the experiences described in the average published narrative of the contemporary *henro* and the experiences of pilgrims more generally. This further complicates the already difficult business of creating overarching social scientific theory with respect to this journey or pilgrimage generally.

## Methodological Fault Lines of Pilgrimage Study

Bowman suggests that the academic study of pilgrimage has formed largely along fault lines. On one side, there are scholars of a descriptive bent, mostly composed of historians, and on the other, there are those of a more analytical bent, represented mostly by anthropologists (Bowman 20; Coleman and Elsner 198-201). Coleman and Elsner further elaborate on Bowman's assessment. In characterizing the descriptive side, they state:

> In effect, such a historical approach, while accepting that general features of the phenomenon of pilgrimage exist, would want to explore the precise nuances and differences of each individual instance of pilgrimage at different moments in its development. (198)

Historians, I would add, are often dealing with texts that use the terms pilgrimage or pilgrim, or their rough equivalents in other languages. This avoids the tricky a priori assumptions that are necessary in the field to simply distinguish what behaviors and informants are the principal objects of inquiry.[2]

In contrast, the analytical side of the fault line has sought to cast pilgrimage as an unbounded phenomenon (Coleman and Elsner 198-200). Many scholars of this perspective are influenced by the tradition of Durkheim and, thus, view pilgrimage as both a social process and a product of social forces. Before I consider some of the most prominent analytical models below in greater detail, I would generally state that, in contrast to these often surprisingly clear visions of pilgrimage offered by pilgrim-writers, scholarly visions of pilgrimage have drifted into realms so vague and non-reductive that their status as a theory might be called into question. Indeed, some overarching statements related to pilgrimage

might be so general as to be non-falsifiable.  In this way, what appears to be unbridled enthusiasm for the category perversely destroys it; pilgrimage, it could be argued, can be loved to death by some adoring scholars.

## Theoretical Visions of Pilgrimage

Victor and Edith Turner provide an analytical vision of pilgrimage that, in contrast to later models, is both reductive and falsifiable.  The Turners' model of pilgrimage, as presented in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, is built on two poles of structure and anti-structure.  Pilgrims exist within the social anti-structure they referred to as *communitas*.  *Communitas* is not exclusive to pilgrims but is also found in other liminal or quasi-liminal groups of determinant identities, such as hippies or "Hell's Angels". *Communitas* "combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship" (250).  Pilgrimage is characterized by respite from life's obligatory structures and by freedom from orthodoxy, freedom in religious practices, and freedom of interpretation.  The social anti-structure of *communitas* is ever-present to a greater or lesser degree in pilgrimage (as it is in society), and it propels the further evolution of a pilgrimage system.  Since conventional bonds and roles are shaken by *communitas*, the Turners explain that anti-structure is often considered dangerous by the protectors of social order, and *communitas* can even lead to the wholesale restructuring of symbolic elements of the pilgrimage system, such as when Muhammad restructured pre-Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (28; 251).  While this model stresses the seemingly amicable side of pilgrim camaraderie, the very bonds of *communitas* are formed in a revolutionary spirit that threatens the status quo.

By directly theorizing about specific structures with respect to pilgrimage and attempting to explain it in relation to society as a whole, the Turners offered premises that were testable and hence vulnerable to contrary data.  The anthropologists Eade and Sallnow point out that contest and conflict are observable in pilgrimage systems even among pilgrims.  Perhaps Victor Turner anticipated difficulties with these paradigms.  Some writings suggest that he even hedged his assertions accordingly.  Consider this statement from *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*:

> Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality. Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist's whole system which so illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his

flashes of insight taken out of systemic context and applied to scattered data. (23)
To be sure, Turnerian notions of pilgrimage at times do seem to illuminate some important aspects of pilgrimage systems and, hence, their continued application to institutions like the Shikoku *henro*. For example, Hoshino draws heavily from the Turners' theories and provides a detailed discussion of the modern *henro* from a religious studies perspective. It is, however, an interesting sleight of hand when social scientific theories move beyond simple truth or falsity into a far grayer realm of relevance or irrelevance. This is also a rare instance indeed when a theorist appears to directly encourage scholars to take their ideas out of systemic context.

If I were to choose what I believe to be the Turners' greatest "flash of insight", it would be their recognition that pilgrimage systems evolve over time (*Image* 28; 251). Over nearly 400 years, the Shikoku *henro* has undergone all manner of evolutionary changes. Yet paradoxically, by accepting that pilgrimage systems have a natural tendency to evolve, one has to greatly curtail what one can say about "pilgrimage" in a derived manner, because all observations might be subject to a certain shelf-life. The Turners' observations may have been accurate for the systems they were considering at certain places in time. However, evolutionary development of a pilgrimage system can result from variables that are not essentially social processes. A solid case could be made that the *henro*'s evolution from early modern times to the present is more of a function of technological advances than conflict between structural and anti-structural human elements. Most notably, motorization has allowed a large number of pilgrims to participate who would have previously been unable to due to either physical limitations or time constraints. One could also conceive of any number of evolutionary changes that could alter the homogeneity of a pilgrim population. For example, Akimoto Kaito in his book *88 no Inori* ８８の祈り, or "the Prayer of 88," views himself as completely distinct from all communities and talks of a "spirituality" so individualized that it insulates them from shared identities.

Evolutionary tendencies in any system greatly curtail a social scientific theory's ability to function going into the future, unless it is composed mostly of a description of how the changes themselves take place. With the Turners' explanation of the process, it is unclear why things such as the liminal character of pilgrimage or *communitas* would be somehow insulated from changes. Furthermore, if pilgrimage systems evolve over time, one might naturally expect that conceptions of pilgrimage are similarly non-static ideas. This is a point that is quite demonstrable through the historical study of pilgrimage literature. Nonetheless,

it could be argued that no subsequent pilgrimage theories rival the Turners' in terms of the force of their analytical assertions, even if these structures are often found to be false and/or irrelevant. Unfortunately, the promising utilities offered by the ideas come at the expense of accuracy when applied to various contexts.

An apologist might say that social science has always been a rough business. The best we can hope for is an approximate explanation or one that works for a majority of data. Acceptance of a theory or characterization because it mostly works risks committing the grave error that Taleb is so concerned about: the neglect of outlying and/or seemingly anomalous data. Coleman and Elsner have correctly noted that a single powerful pilgrim can leave an indelible mark on a pilgrimage (204). If pilgrimage systems are evolving and if individuals can have such an impact, then one would do well to respect and represent those pilgrims that do not fit tidily into an overarching model. A powerful contrary pilgrim has the potential to be an exceptionally important pilgrim, especially when given a platform to express her views.[3] A case in point might be the Turners' own evolutionary example of Muhammad uprooting the pre-Islamic symbolic significance of the *Kaba*. History here tells of once outlying participants who eventually rose to power and radically changed the experience. Additionally, my research, at least anecdotally, supports the notion that people who view themselves as special or unusual pilgrims often disproportionately seek to draw attention to themselves and their journeys (see Shultz, "Pilgrim Leadership" 66-79).

It is perhaps unsurprising that many of the Turners' critics and respondents would abandon more limiting descriptions of pilgrimage in favor of inclusiveness. Eade and Sallnow ambitiously set out to create a "new agenda for pilgrimage studies" that is aimed at uprooting deterministic models of pilgrimage (2-3). Expressing how representational difficulties challenge such theories, Eade and Sallnow write:

> If one can no longer take for granted the meaning of a pilgrimage for its participants, one can no longer take for granted a uniform definition of the phenomenon of pilgrimage either. (3)

However, their treatment does not stop with a mere deconstruction of the notion of pilgrimage; they assert that contest is its most essential characteristic. Eade and Sallnow state:

> Pilgrimage is above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, for both official co-optation and the non-official recovery of religious meanings, for conflict between orthodoxies, sects, and confessional groups, for drives towards

consensus and communitas, and for counter-movements towards separateness and division. (2)

Pilgrimage as an arena of competing discourses obviously recognizes heterogeneity over and above homogeneity. Reader explains that certain structures related to the *henro* imply hierarchies rather than undifferentiated equality (29). This includes the tradition of the pilgrim's calling card, or *osamefuda* 納め札, which are color-coded based on the number of circumambulations of the route the pilgrim has completed. Several diary accounts I have considered likewise suggest a perceived inequality between walking pilgrims and motorized pilgrims.[4] Despite providing evidence that seems to refute the equality thought to typify *communitas*, the contest model of pilgrimage is virtually inapplicable, as contest and competing discourses are not unique characteristics. Coleman and Elsner pointedly state, "…while all social practices are open to contestation, not all have the look of pilgrimage" (202). Thus, in freeing pilgrimage from burdensome definitions, this model likewise undermines the category's analytical applications. Eade and Sallnow's paradigm is non-falsifiable if competing discourses are inherent in all social systems. It also contains little in the way of utility, since it provides nothing to allow us to distinguish "pilgrimage" from anything else.

In the context of the *henro*, I would argue that contest is highly moderated by an underlying decorum, which may well derive from common cultural patterns. First, this decorum promotes a tendency to avoid public discussion of religious beliefs (or lack thereof). In 2003, I interviewed Sakuma Mayumi, a pilgrimage tour guide, who has led more than 1000 pilgrims by bus to Shikoku and to sites of the 100-temple Kannon pilgrimage.[5] She highlighted that she could not recall a single argument related to beliefs or ritual practices among any of the pilgrims she has lead through the years (Shultz, *White* 55-56). Sakuma clarified that the pilgrims under her care simply did not discuss faith in the context of their pilgrimages. This is an interesting observation particularly in light of research done by Frey on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Frey's ethnographic work suggests that pilgrims on the Camino are much more open to discussing their personal faith, which might potentially yield more contestation between various perspectives (31-45). Previously, I have shown numerous instances where a pilgrim-author's polite superficiality betrays his/her true opinions with respect to others in the pilgrimage environment (Shultz, *Characters*). Thus, even when opposing views are manifest on the *henro*, they may not evoke a contrary discourse.

This underlying decorum additionally seems to promote a high-degree of standardization

in pilgrim dress and ritual practices.[6]  These customs can be both promoted and embraced independently of their religious symbolic meaning.  This is discernable in secular presentations of the *henro* in popular literature.  An issue of the Kansai-area women's magazine *Savvy* represents the *henro* on the cover as a part of the "New Japan" and as something fashionable for young women to participate in.  Despite the magazine's secular take on the pilgrimage, it carefully explains ritual forms in great detail with no recourse to how these forms relate to personal faith.  I have introduced some rather outrageous pilgrim personalities who are supported by temples and priests in large measure because they adhere to an acceptable baseline of ritual standards (see Shultz, *Characters* 147-185).  Finally, several recent pilgrim authors, including Sugimoto Ryūbun (a Shingon priest) and Satō Takako (a high-profile pilgrim evangelist), appear to warmly embrace pluralism and secularly oriented pilgrims with the thought that the lengthy journey will provide conversion opportunities.  Thus, much of their efforts lie in simply convincing the reader to give the experience a try, as opposed to taking a stricter stand on issues of personal faith.  With examples such as these, there is evidence to suggest that acceptance in Shikoku would seem to hinge more on what one does, rather than what one believes.

## Sacred Travel and the Individual

Presentations of pilgrimage in terms of both *communitas* and contest beg fundamental questions in relation to the phenomenon's social character.  The sources covered below are by nature skewed towards individuals, but the narratives they tell also demonstrate how freestanding some pilgrims can be in carrying out pilgrimage practices and in the construction of their religious views.  Another important primary consideration is that Kōbō Daishi/Kūkai, the central figure of the pilgrimage, is presented in Shikoku lore and folktales as a highly independent seeker and, at times, a solitary mountain-cloistered ascetic practitioner.  Elsewhere, I have considered how the Daishi of Shikoku folklore can be characterized as both socially challenged and a champion of originality and non-conformity (see Shultz, "Shock Treatment" 37-38; Shultz, *Characters* 162-164).

The inherent representational problems presented by attempting to describe highly independent pilgrims in broad terms are well illustrated by efforts to classify the tremendous number of pilgrimages in Japan.  Kitagawa attempts to construct overarching categories for sacred travel.  He describes three broad types: (1) pilgrimage to sacred mountains, (2)

pilgrimage based on faith in certain divinities, and (3) pilgrimage based on faith in charismatic persons (127-136). The Shikoku *henro* is considered a pilgrimage of the third category, while journeys to Mt. Fuji and the Saikoku 33-place Kannon pilgrimage, a lengthy pilgrimage in western Japan, would be representative of the first and second categories respectively. Interestingly, Kitagawa clarifies these distinctions with an appeal to the concepts of *jiriki* 自力, or self-power, and *tariki* 他力, or other-power. Pilgrimage to a sacred mountain is described as largely "a soteriological path based on self-power," because of an emphasis on ascetic and physical discipline－though faith may be present (135). Kitagawa continues:

> The second type, namely, the pilgrimage based on faith in certain divinities, tends to be more individualistic and also lacks rigorous ascetic emphasis because its soteriological path relies on the saving power of divinities (tariki). (130)

With respect to the third category, he describes a near hybrid of the first two, where the charismatic figure acts as both deity and guide. *Tariki* elements are immanent, as opposed to transcendent, with the other-power having the character of a fellow pilgrim (135-136).

As with the Turners' model, Kitagawa's characterizations are extremely susceptible to contrary data, as he is making an inherent claim about how pilgrims relate to the experience. I have shown in detail that, with respect to the *henro*, there is far too much relativity among pilgrims to proffer such generalizations (Shultz, *Characters* 210-213). Among *henro* pilgrim-authors there are prominent examples of strong appeal to self-power to the deficit of other-power and vice versa. With respect to the former, there is the very interesting conception of the pilgrimage as being martial arts training, furthered especially by the kick-boxer and T.V. personality Sudō Genki and the pro-wrestler Shinzaki Jinsei (see Amano). Equally important are examples that are entirely indifferent to any characterizations of Kōbō Daishi/Kūkai. I have introduced pilgrims who seem to attempt to displace Kōbō Daishi/Kūkai's central position in regard to the journey with their own heroically-styled characters (Shultz, *Characters* 147-185). If Kitagawa had sought to construct these categories from the bottom up, starting with data from individual pilgrims, he would have seen how hopelessly convoluted the situation becomes.

## Conclusion

Some might see a bit of irony in highlighting the implication of outliers from Japanese contexts. After all, the common perception is that it is a society built on conformity, as is

expressed in the common cliché "the stake that sticks up gets hammered down 出る杭は打たれる." That is one particular point of intrigue with regard to religion: that Western faiths can be seen in many ways to be more group oriented, while Japanese have a tendency to worship as individuals or as families. Indeed, Scheid explains that basic architecture shows this to be true, as European cathedrals are designed to contain a huge number of faithful at one time, while Japanese shrines [but also temples] generally lack large public spaces (76). People in Japan have had these deeply personal and subjective patterns of worship through pilgrimage available to them from antiquity. Indeed, there is much to suggest that modern Japanese often view pilgrimage as an outlet of personal expression. In this context, the presence of *black swan pilgrims* in white clothes is more readily understandable.

Social scientific theory needs to be both accurate and reductive. The presence of outlying pilgrim behavior and beliefs expressed in mass media, such as highly circulated book publications, makes it extremely difficult to create theories from the mean. This is especially so in a social system like the *henro* that has enjoyed a fantastic history and an accompanying evolution in both patterns of performance and its ideological constructions. In the face of this diversity, the tendency towards unbounded analytical assertions is understandable, but painting pilgrimage in too broad of strokes causes us to lose its sense of distinction and, likewise, has limited utility. Against the backdrop of theoretical failure and decent into analysis painted in gray, stand the rather black and white opinions of pilgrim-authors about the experience. As such, my own methodological preferences have tended towards those of historians, who seek to concisely describe and catalogue the many nuances for the phenomenon's meaning. Through investigation of unusual behavior in a social system, we can become far more sensitive to potential trend shifts, as things continue to evolve. If I could again address my Master's thesis committee with regard to the issue of discounting outliers, this is the argument I would tender.

## Notes

1 This essay draws extensively from the introduction and Chapter One of my PhD thesis (Shultz, *Characters*).

2 In my previous field research in Japan, I came to recognize how exceptionally difficult it is to sort out pilgrims and pilgrimage behavior in temples that were both official pilgrimage locations and massively popular destinations for local faithful and tourists.

3 While there could, of course, be a powerful pilgrim who does not stand in contrast to norms, such an individual is not going to inspire changes in the social system.

4 While this is perhaps mostly walkers considering their pilgrimages superior to motorized pilgrims, I have also heard it said, based purely on the number of circumambulations, that motorized pilgrimage is superior.

5 Ms. Sakuma asked that I refrain from identifying her employer.

6 Mori Masato explains how the rise of bus tours in the post-war period helped to establish and standardize pilgrim costumes in Shikoku.

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