



# Journal of Religion & Film

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Volume 17  
Issue 1 April 2013

Article 28

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4-1-2013

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### Recommended Citation

Thumas, Jonathan (2013) "Shugendo Now," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 28.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/28>

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# Shugendo Now

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Shugendo Now* (2010) directed by Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire.

## **Keywords**

Japan, Asceticism, Mountain, Retreat, Non-duality, Tantric Buddhism

Shugendo is a traditional form of Japanese mountain asceticism thought to have long since reached its peak of prominence. Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire's *Shugendo Now* offers a 90 minute exploration of this tradition as it has survived into modernity. Through intimate camerawork and memorable characters, the film explores how Shugendo and its eclectic adherents have continued their mountain practices, deeming the tradition relevant, and where not, innovated by its devout following. The directors show how the *yamabushi*, practitioners of Shugendo also called *shugenja*, are not merely pieces of history, but rather propagators of an intricate and thriving tradition which has grounded itself among the most relevant of world religions.

Producer Mark McGuire's dissertation research on Kii peninsula Shugendo provided much of the background for the film. Of principle consideration is how lay practitioners who commute from the city are able to reconcile their time in the mountains with their secular lives in the city. A series of narratives follows this two-fold life in both lay people and Kimpusen-ji initiates, as they ascend mount Omine during the Lotus Ascent climbing period. This is juxtaposed with the story of Kosho, an independent yamabushi who has reinvented the tradition, placing heavy emphasis on the environment and activism.

Using the two primary interchanging narratives, the directors consider issues faced by a traditional religion undergoing reinvention for modernity. A prominent change in the tradition is a new environmental mandate in Shugendo, put forward during the film by Kosho. It would seem that for some yamabushi, Shugendo allows for a profound relationship with the natural world. For Kosho, the role of the yamabushi is not only to walk the mountains, but also to make connections with nature for future generations. In bringing this element of Shugendo into public awareness, Kosho advocates what he calls "eco-pilgrimage" as a form of eco-tourism, in order to

connect environmental ideology with religious practice. Considering Kosho's tendency towards innovation, it would seem that this is a relatively new interpretation of the tradition, but during a voice-over, Kimpusen-ji monk Tanaka Riten explains how, "the deep connection with nature...has been there from the beginning."

Another change to Shugendo shown in the film includes a shift in the ideal for asceticism, as the majority of practitioners seem to be worldly laypersons, rather than professional ascetics. While this changes the dynamic within the tradition, it is implied that this could be the best way to keep Shugendo alive, even if the prevalence of uninitiated neophytes begins to cause the more seasoned ascetics to become uninterested. The presence of diverse practitioners outside of the religious institution then allows for innovative interpretation with different reasons for practice. Entirely new practices appear as well, as seen with Kosho's environmental reinvention. The film gives insight into the opening of a tradition which has been veiled in secrecy through its esoteric ideology, which has formerly focused on transmission to initiates rather than public appeal for propagation. Formerly a group of anonymous ascetics, Shugendo is being pressured to open up in order to insure its continuation.

While *Shugendo Now* highlights some new elements of Shugendo, many of its older traditions have remained. One scene in particular shows a "100 day ascetic," explained to walk the arduous trail up mount Omine back and forth for 100 days. Indeed, not all time honored practices are lost to mass public participation. Another example of this is shown through a segment with a woman-boundary gate just before the entrance to mount Omine. To be sure, women still practice Shugendo, as is seen with Kosho's wife and a number of his devotees, but Omine has remained a place for serious religious practice, implying for adherents that women

must not enter. Due to this ongoing ban, the film may be the closest most women will get to climbing Omine, considering the intimate documentation of the Lotus Ascent.

In taking on a religious analysis of *Shugendo Now*, the esoteric or tantric Buddhist understanding of non-duality is a theme profoundly expressed throughout the film. Early on, we see Kosho reciting to the camera in song: “there’s just one when you thought were two,” plainly proclaiming this esoteric doctrine. Additionally, the directors subtly integrate multiple contrasts throughout the film, with examples of such dualities including traditional versus contemporary, city life as opposed to mountain life, or weekend lay practitioners paired with the ornately clad shugenja. The question is constantly stressed: are these things truly different? As the film progresses, we can see that for practitioners, these are not separate things. Faced with mountain and city life, one lay devotee explains that these, “must be considered one in the same,” understanding that the pleasure and tension respectively felt in the mountains and city are found in both realms. The filmmakers allude to how this central notion of non-duality is something which continues to pervade contemporary Shugendo, pushing the invalidity of dichotomies, with their only purpose being to bring an awareness of being. In a segment where the characteristics of different phenomena are discussed, we are told that, “each...is actually the same color, the color that is no color.”

In addition to its worth as a viewable and enjoyable film, *Shugendo Now* will be of great help to instructors teaching religion and modernity, Japanese religions, anthropology, or environmental studies. For those interested in using the film in this way, the enhanced classroom edition separates the film’s primary sections into two 45 minute segments titled, “The Lotus Ascent” and “The Forest of Mountain Learning.” Scholars intending to learn more about or teach Shugendo and contemporary Japanese religions will find this alternative presentation useful as it

allows full consideration of each narrative. Additionally, a question-and-answer feature with the directors is included in the classroom edition, answering frequently asked questions regarding Shugendo and the ethnographic filmmaking process.

Perhaps one of the more helpful aspects of the classroom edition for teachers is the accompanying study guide for instructors, which includes a comprehensive background introduction to Shugendo. In addition to this is a contextualizing essay for the Lotus Ascent segment, as well as pertinent questions to stimulate classroom discussion. The guide also includes a glossary of terms which assists those who may be unfamiliar with ideas or terminology related to Shugendo and Japanese religion.

In portraying Shugendo as a living tradition, *Shugendo Now* has set the stage for further scholarship on Shugendo and has undoubtedly fueled the building interest that appears to be developing around this tradition. The directors have provided insight into the state and continuity of Shugendo asceticism, all the while showcasing the striking natural scenery, intricate art and religious structure associated with the tradition. To be sure, this film is a welcome contribution to the study of East Asian religions and the growing field of Shugendo studies in the West, and will likely continue to aid in the development of work surrounding this complex living tradition.