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Shugendo: The Way of Power

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This is the journey for making the video *Shugendo: The Way of Power*
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In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and has been widely regarded as a bad move. - Douglas Adams

Chapter 1: Reflecting on the Path

I can’t remember when I first became interested in Japan and Japanese Buddhism. For as long as I can recall, I had a problem with hypocrisy in Christianity. The religion I learned in Church seemed to justify some of the greatest horrors that have ever been seen in human history. I came to dislike intensely the ideas of Christianity, its almost inherent divisiveness, and its requirement of “faith,” which to me was merely belief without previous evidence.

I developed and my understanding matured. Eventually I discovered Zen Buddhism and began to practice it seriously in high school. Guidance from teachers at the Cedar Rapids Zen Center aided my practice of meditation, which became a practical tool for me to overcome my Attention Deficit Disorder. As my practice evolved and I cultivated a better understanding of the wild and multifaceted nature of Zen in the United States, I began to wonder about the roots of the Japanese tradition. In 2007, I went to Japan to study abroad and learned about Buddhism under Antioch University’s program.

While in Japan, I studied Japanese Buddhism extensively, which I discovered is quite multifaceted and highly contextualized. For example, I learned that the way the U.S. understands Zen Buddhism, through the teachings of D.T. Suzuki, is not quite the way that it is practiced in Japan because the cultural context differs. Japan has a cultural
heritage of radical discipline and rigid hierarchical social structure beneath its religious thought that is largely missing in American forms of Zen.

While in Japan I learned about the practices of Shingon Buddhism, an esoteric form of Buddhism that I discovered as a student of Religious Studies at Iowa State, and Kōbō-Daishi Kūkai, whose journey around the island of Shikoku left lasting relics of both natural and created wonder peppered throughout the ritual landscape—the well dug by Kūkai in a single night, the miraculous interlacing of tree boughs to form a bridge where Kūkai needed to cross. These folk stories arose along the journey between and amongst the temples and are critical to the ritual process of Shingon on Shikoku. I also learned during my experiences the ways in which Kōbō-Daishi Kūkai’s idea of sokushinjōbutsu, becoming Buddha in this very body, are actually applied in the everyday. This was only really communicated to me when I saw and performed the practices for myself with highly skilled and trained masters.

My discoveries made me question my high school practice of Zen.

I also learned about the historical connections between Zen and Shingon, which I found very interesting in terms of practice. In fact, many Japanese Buddhist traditions are connected, not only intertwined with one another, but also with Shinto and other folk practices. Traditions like Shinto are so embedded in the culture of Japan that the idea of being Japanese and being Shinto are indistinguishable, and sects of Buddhism mix and mingle freely with ideas of region, tradition, and family. This multifaceted nature of religion and religious identity in Japan challenges Western ideas of religious identity. As religious studies professor Nikki Bado frequently points out in her classes,
“In the West, religion tends to function as a label, and we tend to be comfortable only with one label per forehead.” The concept of only one label per person just doesn’t exist in Japan as a form of religious identity.

Once I learned the fundamentals of Shingon practice and was tested by the monks at Kōya-san at a *jukai* rite of initiation, I became a practicing Shingon follower. Shingon itself has many dimensions of religious practice, one of which is connected with *Shugendō*, an ancient mountain folk religion that has seen renewed vigor in modern urban Japan. Finding its resonance with the esoteric nature of reality fascinating, I naturally had to explore. While I am not officially a follower of *Shugendō* (formally called either a *Shugenja*, one in training, or a *Yamabushi*, one who lies in the mountains), I have completed some of the most basic rituals. The mountain entry ritual at Ishizuchi-san and attendance at the Buddhist inspired *goma* fire ritual at Taisanji are important parts not only of my video, but important examples of my experiences and interests in Japanese religions.
Chapter 2: Fording the River: Crossing the Barriers to Documentary Work

Documentary film has been around for well over 100 years, and the cost of production has dropped precipitously in the last decade. But when we look at documentary films that have significant educational value to the humanities, we have relatively little to show. Now a revolution in technology and scholarship is occurring that suggests video will be an active part of our academic future.

When creating the video Shugendō: The Way of Power, I encountered many challenges, ironically most of which had little to do with the actual fieldwork in Japan. I will take you through the process, so that you will understand some of the difficulties that face scholars in Visual Ethnography today, and what that implies as we cross into a visually focused 21st century paradigm.

When I began this project, I had little but the idea of filming folk sites around the 88 Temple Shikoku Pilgrimage, a 750 mile route that recreates the life journey of Kōbō-Daishi Kūkai. Kōbō-Daishi, a cultural hero in Japan similar to figures such as Leonardo da Vinci or Galileo in the West, was renowned for founding Shingon Buddhism, creating entire movements in art and culture including the Japanese writing system (kana), and developing new engineering for dams and bridges. His legend has affected Japan so greatly it's hard to find institutions that have not been influenced by him. So when I presented this idea to my committee chair, she said OK—an answer that would consume my life for the next two years.

The question was begging to be asked; there are 88 temples on Shikoku Island that have been the focus of some previous studies, mostly in Japan and Europe. But
what happens between the temples? What are the folk practices embedded in place, and how do people live “with” Kōbō-Daishi? Unfortunately, this would be the last occasion I would have to think about these questions for a long, long time. This is probably the point at which most people would realize this process would neither be short nor simple and give up to write a more traditional thesis, but I guess I am too stubborn for my own good. So, I did what anyone in this situation would do, I started at the beginning and asked myself what I needed to get this project off the ground.

Money.

Yep, I bet that didn’t surprise anyone. It would take money, and lots of it, to properly film the Shikoku Pilgrimage. I went online and found a webpage run by David Turkington, an American who is an experienced Shikoku Pilgrim, and got estimates of the cost for lodging, food, gear, and so forth. The cost of the pilgrimage alone came to well over $11,000. With additional expenses such as travel and the cost for interpreters and guides, it came to nearly $100,000—from what I could discover, a realistic number for a “from scratch” feature length high-definition documentary, and this didn’t include the equipment we would need.

Nikki Bado, my thesis committee chair and academic mentor, and I started pursuing funding methods to garner the funds needed to begin this project. As a goal, $100,000 seemed completely unrealistic to us. It was an amount of money we could not imagine any group or combination of groups would be willing to fund—especially given that we wanted to produce a documentary on Japanese religion, with no examples of previous documentary work, and retain exclusive rights. Groups like Documentary
Education Resources wanted exclusive rights without actually funding anything. They would only give us non-profit status—which we already had since we were with Iowa State University—so that we could begin to ask others for funding. Groups like the Sundance Foundation wanted examples of previous documentary or film work, which at this point neither of us had. We had no practice with modern professional cameras, let alone having recently made previous films for them to examine.

Eventually, we did manage to find three potential funding groups that met our criteria. They funded in amounts that were reasonable, above $10,000; they let the author retain exclusive rights, and they didn’t exclude us because of the focus on Japan—a small but crucial victory on a long road.

While the funding sources were now potentially good, we realized that a $100,000 budget was impossible to get in one cycle, so I went back and removed any line item in the budget that wasn’t absolutely needed, and managed to trim our needed budget to a mere $60,000 with equipment. With a mock budget in place, we were ready to begin to ask for funding.

Nikki and I began the process of writing letters of inquiry and grant applications. There is no good way to relate this experience on paper. Every word is important, every little fact, and “and,” “of,” and “a” is digested for how the review committee will perceive it. Is that word too desperate? Does it convey the importance of the work just right? It took many months to get just right, but letters of inquiry and grant applications were finally sent. In many cases, these were not actual applications, but letters of inquiry letting them know we were interested in applying. The whole project hinged on getting
funded. We made requests to the University for seed grants and matching funding, but these relied primarily on getting at least one of the outside grants we requested.

The waiting period had begun.
Chapter 3: Preparing to Depart

We chose to use this time to learn skills that we would need on the field to do the video recording. I had seen other documentary films on Japan in the past, and they almost always fit in two categories: documentaries by art house filmmakers, or documentaries by scholars. Filmmakers seem to get lost in the art of making the film, as in the Japan section of *Baraka*, and scholars sometimes produce boring footage that has an almost endless capacity to avoid asking or answering important and fundamental questions, as in the film *Arukihenro*, which is visually arresting, but fails to really capture the transformative properties of the *henro*, or pilgrim, experience.

I knew I had to learn the skills of filmmaking from someone with enough experience in ethnographic film who would challenge me to produce video that would be both high in quality visually as well as scholarly. After all, I didn’t want a film that looked like a family cook out. I also did not want an artsy piece that more suited a museum than a religious studies classroom. My target audience for this piece was the classroom, probably religious studies, or anthropology, or folklore. And I found my inspiration in one of the few excellent documentaries made on Japanese folk religion: *Shugendō Now!*, which was produced by a team consisting of a scholar of Japanese Religions and a professional videographer.

At a school as large as Iowa State it should not have taken almost two months to find someone who had experience in visual ethnography. Nikki asked a network of colleagues in different departments—anthropology, sociology, philosophy—but no one seemed to know of anyone who would qualify and might be willing to work with in
Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies student. Through a rather circuitous route, one I was not really privy to, Nikki eventually found Dennis Chamberlin in Journalism who instructed me on video and photography. I knew that I would need to develop a whole new skill set in an unprecedented time, but this is what needed to be done to carry out such an ambitious ethnographic project.

My first training was creating a film on Judaism in Ames. It was often a mess: not enough lighting, too much lighting, disorganized filming environments, but it was all part of learning what not to do. For me the best way to learn the mechanics was to practice in an environment in which I could get critiqued, and have exactly what my problem was explained to me. Directions in lighting and focus allowed me to improve my techniques at a breakneck pace. In one semester I went from having a little knowledge to being able to produce a video that I wouldn’t be embarrassed to show to the public—a testament to what a productive environment and good teachers can do for a student!

It was not just Dennis with whom I had begun working closely to master needed skills. Zora Zimmerman was also instrumental in teaching me about the interviewing and collection skills considered necessary in folklore and fieldwork, important skills if I wanted to stand any chance of actually locating the information that I sought. She stepped in when the Anthropology Department had lost key professors and were unable to teach many of its graduate level cultural anthropology courses. I needed to sharpen my eyes, because the camera is just one lens that I was required to master to gather vital pieces on Shikoku, and working with people in Ames allowed me to flex my
interviewing skills. I practiced how to get people to open up when they may not be comfortable exposing personal information. For instance, one of my projects was to work with the Ames Jewish Community and have them let me film a ritual. Due to some disagreements within the community, I had to let that part go, but we negotiated and they allowed me to film other aspects of their facilities, even though they were somewhat reticent to let me do so.

After collecting my footage, I now had to edit. Here is where I already had some practice. I began pruning out the bad shots, the stuff that just doesn’t seem to fit, and the scenes that are visually just plain boring, taking about two hours of footage and ending with twelve minutes. Sadly, I didn’t have enough time to render the final film at the University computer lab. It just took way too much time to render the footage to be practical doing it outside my own home. Because we needed more computing power if we were going to be moving forward, I invested in a more powerful graphics processor for my desktop PC and installed Adobe Première. This was a large personal expense, but I felt it was worth the investment, since I also am an avid computer gamer and saw it as killing two birds with one stone. This gave me a home platform where I could do future editing without needing to be in the University’s computer labs, constrained by its closing times as well as the need to sleep. I could now just let my home computer run overnight.

This began my exploration into the wide wonderful world of camera equipment. Our first budgets had simple professional equipment, the very expensive Sony Professional HVR-HD1000U, but my recent work got me thinking about a move to HD
film. I knew I wanted to film in HD eventually, so why not do it with current standards? However, the HVR-HD1000U I anticipated using for our project didn’t meet the standards for HD required by any of the broadcasters I researched.

I went to the Internet and googled Les Stroud. I had been watching his show *Survivor Man* on the Discovery Channel, and thought, “here is a guy who has faced all of the same problems I anticipate having to cope with—the wet environment of tropical rain forests, dealing with trips and falls, and dealing with the low light of night time.” I was hoping that his video equipment would suggest a set of equipment that was both rugged and light. I looked but couldn’t find remarks on HD equipment on his webpage. I decided to send an email to him, and was pointed to a video where he discussed his equipment choices. His favorite camera was the Sony HVR-Z7U Camcorder. So that is what went into our budget even though it cost $7000, something which would become a big problem as I attempted to balance our budget with the changes in equipment.

Shortly after my communication with Les Stroud, Dennis showed me something interesting, how an episode of *House MD* had been shot on a Canon 5D Mark II, and recommended I check it out as a potential alternative to traditional digital video cameras. The Canon 5D Mark II exceeded the video quality of the Sony cameras; it met HD broadcast standards for HD channels like PBS and the Documentary Channel, but it didn’t meet the really high standard of Discovery HD, which actually specified particular cameras at the time. Discovery HD’s Gold standard required extremely high-end equipment, shot in a 4:4:4 color space. The 5D Mark II hypothetically can shoot video in 4:2:2, but the QuickTime wrapped h264 format it records in limits it to a 4:2:0 color
space—a real downer, but not a showstopper since color space isn’t something most of the people we talked to knew anything about. I had some reservations, but needed to compare the whole feature set.

However, the best part of the 5D Mark II lay in other features. The camera body weighed less than a pound, while other prospective cameras weighed three to five pounds. This substantial weight reduction was making the 5D Mark II seem like the best tool for the job, since I knew I would have to be lugging this thing up a “great many a mountain.” The lenses were highly controllable, so I would be able to control the depth of field, allowing me to pull attention to my subjects better, as in a portrait. The 5D Mark II was also a full frame camera, allowing me to shoot in dark environments without the need to use supplemental lighting. All this, and it came in at around $4000 for the camera, lenses, and a few extras.

Budget salvation was at hand by moving to a DSLR.

Sadly, it also meant that I would have to learn a whole new set of skills, and there wasn’t a course specifically on making DSLR video. While Dennis’ classes presented opportunities to learn basic photography, our University lacked DSLR equipment for me to practice with. I would have to find some way to get a camera early enough for me to gain experience while still under Dennis’ supervision and guidance. Luckily, Nikki received a small grant from the University that was initially earmarked for internal travel in Japan. We were able to reassign it to camera equipment, enabling us to start the process of becoming familiar with our equipment before traveling to Japan.
As all that was going on, more good news arrived. We heard back from some of our proposals. One request didn’t make it. The hard economy had hit them particularly badly, and they were not offering any new grants this year. But another, the US-Japan Foundation, replied with enthusiasm and vigor. They welcomed us to submit a proposal, and here again it was a long, and even more desperate, version of the letter of inquiry writing process.
Chapter 4: Burning Hoops of Fire

A situation that often felt like “hurry up and wait” began to play out. We would submit a draft to the University Foundation and get edits a few days later. This was done over and over again until “everyone and their grandmothers” thought that it was perfect. Not a short process by any means, it had taken a whole month of solid work to get the proposal in shape and done on time.

We also had to get our final budget ready for submission. While we could make minor revisions, this budget would set the grant categories in place. We would need to make clear exactly why each item was chosen and for what purpose. Equipment could not be part of the US-Japan Foundation funding request. So instead we asked for money to employ an interpreter/guide, lodging, and food. It was all pretty straightforward—justifying the support needed to stay in Japan for the length of time necessary to do the pilgrimage as well as a guide/interpreter for the trail, a must considering that my Japanese was remedial at best. We made this choice because we were confident in our ability to get this grant, and figured that, should it be the only funding we get, equipment such as lights, audio recorders, and gear would not be as critical as securing our ability to complete the pilgrimage.

There was an almost constant chicken and egg effect going on in the background, and not just in terms of the budget. To accomplish all we had set out to do, we would have to get a six-month cultural visa, rather than the more usual three-month tourist visa. After all, it would take me about three months just to walk the Shikoku Pilgrimage, let alone do any of our other research. To get a cultural visa required a sponsor in Japan
as well as financial support. And to get financial support (i.e., our grant), required a home base, an official address in Japan. Nikki was able to work professional contacts that eventually helped us find sponsors at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, under the assumption that we would obtain actual financial support from someone else. We both became Visiting Research Fellows at the Nanzan Institute, which gave us an address in Japan so our granting agencies and the Japanese government would know that we had a legitimate base of operation.

We packed as much as we could in the fewest boxes and used the cheapest shipping method available to us in Iowa. We had to ship cheaply because the University deemed it a personal expense, which they would not cover. Regardless of the cost, we shipped via UPS in two large boxes each weighing approximately 80 pounds. They contained almost everything we would need for our six months in Japan. One of the biggest challenges was shipping my desktop computer and monitors. We would need them to handle the large videos that I got while on the trail, and the only machine I had that was powerful enough to manage them was my desktop. A desktop computer is an awful amount of weight to ship, and the need to secure it tightly against the bumps and bruises of handling was critical.

Finally, we found ourselves on a sixteen hour jet flight to Japan. After doing our best to pack and ship everything securely, Nikki wound up paying over $2000 to get our things to Japan. We prepared for lodging in Tokyo ahead of time, and knew exactly how to get from Narita airport to Nagoya, sending our bags ahead as we were advised. We had been planning this trip now for over a year, and had planned to an agonizing level
of detail. Now all that preparation and red tape was behind us. We got to Nagoya and into the Paulus Heim house with little difficulty, our shipped luggage came on schedule, and we were only without our equipment in Nagoya for a couple of days. Everything was good. We met the faculty at Nanzan and were eager to start exploring the land of the rising sun.
Chapter 5: Our New Home in Japan

Our first months in Japan were quite uneventful. It was mostly planning for our up-coming research. I spent the first few weeks just setting up our office—the computers and network that we would be using needed to be prepared and secured, a relatively simple process compared to the previous hell of budget meetings and grant proposals. This gave us a chance to actually breathe, explore the local area, and hire my interpreter/guide, which through a large circle of ironic twists, ended up being David Turkington—the American specialist on the Shikoku Pilgrimage I had contacted so long ago.

When I started asking around the Nanzan Institute about Japanese interpreter-guides, everyone told me that my search was going to be tough: our budget was only $10,000, and high-level interpreters were not going to go on pilgrimage, EVER. They make enough money to refuse most jobs that would require that level of effort. Fortunately, one of the faculty at the Institute connected me with David Moreton, who had a reputation for assisting people interested in the henro trail. I emailed Moreton, and he reminded me that we had actually communicated before through Brian Victoria, the professor in charge of the Antioch Buddhist Studies in Japan program. Victoria recommended that I email Moreton before our grant writing even began to get an idea of people on Shikoku who could assist in our research.

After meeting with Moreton in Tokushima City on Shikoku, he recommended I try to recruit David Turkington as my interpreter-guide, because everyone else he knew would be wildly out of our budget—if we could find anyone at all. Moreton did say that,
if we got Turkington, while his skills may not be as good as a seasoned professional interpreter, his Japanese would be sufficient to get me around and set me up with more formal interviews that Moreton would be able to do later. Plus, Turkington was always looking for ways to get back on the trail, so we might be able to convince him to work for us for so little money.

To our great relief, Turkington agreed. With my guide and interpreter set, everything else went off without any grief, and I began to explore our base in Japan. One of the best places to get in the Japanese mood was Yagoto Koshoji, a beautiful old Shingon temple in the heart of Nagoya’s Shōwa ward, and a great place to relax, as well as listen to sutras.

All was well, and we were settling into our home when at 2:46 JST on Friday, March 11, 2011 the Great Tōhoku Earthquake struck Japan’s northern shore. We were only two days from beginning our filming; Dennis Chamberlin was in the air on his way to Japan, and suddenly everything came to a standstill. Up to this point our plans were to film the Penis and Vagina festivals at Tagata and Ogata Shrines, then use a taxi service to film the 88 temples of the Shikoku pilgrimage. Dennis had not arrived, and we didn’t know where he was. While it was unlikely that any harm had come to him, our biggest concern was that his flight was canceled, or that he would not be able to make it to Nagoya. The tsunami that resulted from the 9.0 earthquake had closed the two largest airports in Tokyo, including Narita, the airport Dennis was scheduled to come into.
As the events of that day went on, we learned of problems at the Fukushima Dainichi Nuclear power plant. People from Tokyo were afraid and extremely concerned about melt down and radiation threats. We felt safe in Nagoya, because even if the plant exploded like an atomic bomb, we were far enough away that we would be out of harm’s way, but we were mostly worried about possible evacuation orders from the U.S. embassy. It was possible that our visas could be revoked and we would be ordered to leave the country. Our biggest item of worry was not Fukushima; it was the possibility of relocation orders for parts of Tokyo and northern Japan. We thought that if the Japanese government needed to evacuate parts of Tokyo because of Fukushima and the tsunami, Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagoya would be the filled with refugees. Ironically, the population of Nagoya dropped during the crisis as young people left for Osaka to look after family that had fled there.

Dennis finally called saying he had arrived in Tokyo. However, he was extremely delayed getting into Nagoya, making me wait several hours at the station for him to arrive. Dennis explained, “the shinkansen, Japanese bullet trains, were not running normally.” The Fukushima nuclear plant was responsible for generating 30% of Japan’s electricity, and the train systems were mostly in a state of brown outs, with only a handful of trains running. Japanese trains are notorious for running on time, and the shinkansen doubly so, so when Dennis’s shinkansen was late we knew that the situation was extremely bad. However, the seriousness of the situation was not reflected on the faces of the people on the street. The lives of the people in Nagoya seemed to go on without missing a beat.
But this critical situation did cause us to cancel some of our plans. Not because we were particularly worried about our safety, but because we could not invest in plans that we could not be certain we could follow through with. For us this meant we would no longer be able to take the taxi around Shikoku. In hindsight, it was a good thing we canceled the taxi, because as events progressed and we began to ask questions about what we needed to know should we have to leave, Dennis’s department chair recalled him. Dennis was forced to return to the U.S. within the week, giving us only enough time to film the fertility festivals at Tagata and Ogata Shrine. This was a sad situation because we all looked forward to working on this project, and the events that followed the earthquake were actually interesting in their own right.

We filmed the Penis and Vagina festivals without any more problems. The rituals were very exciting, and I thought they were very busy and quite well attended. Later, we discovered that the crowds were only one-third of their normal number because all the American soldiers who would normally attend were helping with tsunami relief.
Chapter 6: *Walking with Kōbō-Daishi*

Shortly after the festivals, I went to Shikoku to meet with David Turkington and begin my seventy days walking the pilgrimage route. The first few days went without much headache. Turkington and I met for the first time and began the pilgrimage on Shikoku Island at Tokushima, where the first several temples are located. We did not deviate much from the expected route.

It wasn’t until we arrived at Taisanji, Bekkaku number 1, that we ran into our first lesson, and what would become a pivotal part of my video thesis. The two of us encountered an elderly man named Hatanaka-san, who overheard us talking about Shugendō and wanted to invite us to the *goma* fire ritual that was going to occur the next day. We told him we had to continue with the pilgrimage and weren’t going to be around. He offered to come get us with his car the next day just so we could attend. Hatanaka-san also took us to see the bridges at Iya and Mt. Tsurugi, important for both their folk history and importance to Shugendō. My filming of this colorful *goma* ritual wound up becoming a central part of my video thesis.

Everything went well until Hatanaka-san kept Turkington and me up until very late singing karaoke in some lounge in a small town somewhere—which wasn’t in itself really a big problem, because he had been taking care of everything. But, he then took
us to a hot spring hotel at Iya so we could experience the *onsen* (Japanese bath houses), bridges, and local sites. While we knew this was going to happen, we were a long way away from the *henro* trail (the walking route of the Shikoku Pilgrimage), nearly 90 kilometers or 56 miles. Although this doesn’t seem like much of a distance, at the rate we were walking, about 15km a day, it would take a week to get back on the trail. This was a bit of a concern since Hatanaka-san seemed to forget that we had deadlines and walking and budgets that needed to continue on schedule. It wasn’t until we went to see the bridges that things started to go down hill. Hatanaka-san kept suggesting one side trip or another, and it just kept getting later and later at night. Finally, it occurred to us that we were a captive audience. We were a long way away from the trail, with no way back other than Hatanaka-san—at least not without spending a large sum on travel back to the route.

After this little adventure, Turkington and I decided not to allow people to take us places further than 40km away from the trail. I almost always had 10,000 yen, which would enable us to get back on the trail by taxi. We had to be careful not to get caught up in the excitement of the moment and lose control of the situation. We did not blame Hatanka-san for this “learning experience.” After all, he just wanted to show us a good time, and we agreed to go along. It was apparently exciting for him to have two willing foreign scholars he could talk to.

A couple of times Turkington and I attempted to ditch Hatanaka-san, but he seemed to have an uncanny ability to find us. We came to the conclusion after some hints were dropped, that Hatanaka-san “may or may not” do some “business” with the
Yakuza, the Japanese mob. At first he talked about how he used to work “security” for the government. I thought he might have been a defense department worker. A friend of mine who works for the U.S. Department of Defense used to say he worked “security” because it was easier than telling people what he actually does, since most of his work is classified. This theory about Hatanaka-san changed when he said he had to get some money for doing a phone job for the Yakuza.... At that point Turkington stopped translating and the two of us decided that the less we knew about his background the better. After all, that part of Shikoku was known for being a place where the mob goes as part of the Japanese witness protection program.

At the end of our little escapade with Hatanaka-san, we were back on the road toward Temple 12, filming sites and being tormented with the weight of my pack. Hatanaka-san eventually left us on the trip up to Temple 12 because the walk was just too much for him, and the eighteen pounds that I was carrying at this point finally taught me that I was not anywhere close to being in shape enough for my pack. It took us all day, and when I reached the top I left my pack with Turkington so I could run to the Nōkyōshō (Stamp House) and get stamps for my book, which indicates each temple I visit. The Nōkyōshō closed at exactly 5:00pm and we only had a few minutes before they closed. One of the people we met on the way up, a young man whose name I never learned, was staying at the same lodge as us, had gotten a ride to the lodging, and invited us to travel with him. It was late and we wouldn’t have made it to the lodge in time had we walked, so we accepted his kind invitation. After this little event,
Turkington convinced me to ship some things back to Nanzan so that my pack would be lighter, and I pretended that it was a tough choice to make.

On the way down from Temple 12, we went through a small village just outside of Kamiyama. As the story goes, no one was certain who exactly started the trend, but this village has had so many people leave in recent years that there were no children. Many of the village’s older residents felt that the town had grown lonely, and the only way to make the town less lonely was to build some new children. So all over the town, large human sized dolls were erected to replace the missing children. The city government jumped on this trend and even started using the dolls themselves in areas where drivers were not careful enough. They put dolls of police officers escorting children to remind people to drive carefully in these areas. This was an interesting distraction from the pain of walking and a real eye opener to the shrinking/aging population in small towns in rural parts of Shikoku.

After we made it to the town of Kamiyama, we met with Naoyuki Matsushita, an editor for Buyodo, a travel guide publishing company, and a friend of Turkington’s. Matsushita was an exceptional resource. He connected us with a farmer who told us about a well that Kōbō-Daishi dug by simply striking the ground with his staff, and gave us the folk story that went along with that particular well. Matsushita also told us about another magic well that if you look in
and see your reflection, you will die. The danger of seeing your reflection was all but impossible now since the well was housed inside a small shrine building, and without ambient light you would never be able to get enough light down the well to get a reflection. Matsushita also took us to the Kamiyama folk festival, where we got to watch and film many traditional Bunraku plays, one of which is highlighted in my video. Like folk stories about the wells, these plays are one of the ways in which traditional stories and values are passed from one generation to the next.

We continued our walk around Shikoku, but for brevity’s sake I will not burden you with every great sight and sound, because each step is worth recording and discussing. A week after Matsushita left us at Kamiyama we arrived at Cape Muroto, on the very southeastern tip of Shikoku. Muroto is a charming respite between the rugged and rocky landscape on the two coasts, where many pilgrims in the early days lost their lives to terrain and dangerous weather, such as typhoons caused by the Kuroshio Current and the Kuroshio Counter-Current in the Pacific.

We were slogging through the first major rain of the year, a typhoon that dissipated off the coast before it hit, so it wasn’t officially numbered. As we were walking to find our lodging, a young woman waved us down on the side of the road. Yuu “Yuki” Watanabe asked us if we were henro, which started a conversation about who we were, why we were there, and what she did for a living. Surprisingly, she spoke exceptional English, which she had spent a year overseas learning.
She told us to call her Yuki since that was the name she went by when speaking English, which made Turkington jokingly comment about the humor in choosing another Japanese name for speaking English. Yuki replied she borrowed the name from a famous Japanese figure skater that she liked. As the typhoon stormed down upon us throughout this whole conversation, Turkington and I were relatively dry in rainwear protecting us from the elements. Yuki was wearing a T-shirt and getting soaked. Turkington and I asked her if she would rather talk later, since it was raining. Yuki was reluctant to stop chatting, but since she was shivering she couldn’t hide her discomfort.

We met later that night at our lodging and discussed the various folk sites around Muroto. This was one of the more important locations for the events of Kōbō-Daishi’s life. Muroto is second only to Zentsūji, Kōbō-Daishi’s birthplace, in importance, because it was the place where he gained enlightenment and where he performed most of his early training. Yuki helped us locate and film the Nanafushigi or “seven wonders” of Muroto and even narrated the stories connected with some of the locations. This was one of the most informative happy coincidences along the trail.

About a week after we met with Yuki we reconnected with Matsushita. This time he came equipped with a series of stories to tell and a car! He took us to see the Shikoku chadō, traditional roadside teahouses, which were places he wanted to review for the guidebooks he wrote. He also took us to some sites in which I had expressed interest: Feudal Lord Kazan’s Shrine, bathing pool, and forbidden forest; Bekkaku 5 with Magic Kōbō-Daishi Salt that is said to cure most ailments; a set of half sandals alleged to ward off demons; the site of the bridge builder’s tale; and a shrine to ward off
the anger of a Dragon Woman. Matsushita gave narration for the documentary about the local legends of the bridge builder and Dragon Woman.

Now let us fast forward about a month. We had seen lots of interesting folk sites including but not limited to ancient shrines, local folk heroes, Buddhist artifacts—most of which we were not allowed to film, and a meeting with a café owner on the top of a small mountain who spent nine years apprenticing as a barista and made one amazing cup of coffee! Now, it was May and we met with Matsushita once more, this time to go to Ishizuchi-san for a Shinto Shugendō ritual. Matsushita said it should be quite interesting and a real contrast to the Buddhist flavored goma ritual we had seen earlier. We took the cable car up Ishizuchi-san, one of Japan’s 100 tallest mountains, and then climbed to the shrine along with a group of Ishizuchi-san pilgrims who were also going to the ritual to receive merit and blessings for use at their home shrines. That day was the first day the Shugenja or Yamabushi returned from their sojourn high in the mountain. It’s a kind of ritual homecoming for the Shugenja who have come down the mountain filled with merit and spiritual power and now have the first opportunity to use it for the well being of others.
Chapter 7: There and Back Again

Nikki and I arrived home and I finally got to think about my thesis question, but our documentary had grown in scale by a factor of ten. It would require a whole other round of grant money and probably another year or two of work to produce a high definition documentary on the Shikoku Pilgrimage. I needed a new theme for my thesis. Since I had excellent footage of Shugendō rituals at Taisanji and Ishizuchi-san, I decided to shift the focus of my work to a comparison between them, bringing the topic to a scale that is more reasonable for a thesis. The video of the Shugendō rituals was some of the most interesting footage I had captured during my fieldwork on Shikoku. The situation was just sort of humorous that my thesis topic was so good that it grew too large to actually be used for my thesis, but I know that this material is the kind of thing that people make careers with, not just one project.

I created Shugendō: The Way of Power to counter some of the major ethical concerns in ethnography presented by anthropologist Gary Alan Fine. By using video instead of written field notes to record the events of the rituals, I narrow the gap between event and audience, and reduce problems such as Fine’s “Precise Ethnographer.” This is a situation in which ethnographers create the illusion that their field notes and written descriptions are concrete data that reflect what “really” happened. According to Fine, ethnographers can engage in the “opposite of plagiarism,” making their descriptions seem more authoritative than they actually are, giving

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themselves undeserved credit by not using precise words to describe an event, but rather loose interpretations and paraphrasing.

As a natural part of video, the audience is given information that the camera records more directly. This limits the need for the ethnographer to produce lengthy written “thick descriptions” to try to capture the details of an event in such a way as to elicit an appropriate mental image for the reader. While not entirely without problems, videography puts a kind of “safeguard” between the audience and the ethnographer, limiting the need to trust the ethnographer as the sole arbiter of events.

My comparison of the two Shugendō rituals is actually created and facilitated by materials that are visually recorded. While I do have my own esoteric experiences connected to the rituals at Taisanji and Ishizuchi-san, narrowing the interpretation of the rituals to the materials on the video keeps my analysis more “genuine” and open to the viewer. I am unable to entirely fudge or fabricate facts, since others can review the video themselves and easily counter any weak arguments. This also frees me to focus my attention on interpreting the meaning instead of putting significant mental resources into describing and reciting the activities.

Shugendō: The Way of Power attempts to accomplish its most ambitious goal, to act as a proof of concept. This video possesses all the necessary components required of a thesis within the documentary. Using a comparative methodology, I present two rituals on Shikoku that differ in form, but because of their common background, have the same goals: the well being of all things and a good growing season. The Head Monk at Temple 55 on Shikoku, who is a Shugendō practitioner, supports this thesis with
expert testimony, and to top it off, the audience is witness to the rituals via the video—allowing them to cast their own judgments on my interpretation.

Through all the trials and tribulations of this project, I have discovered some of the barriers to the expansion of documentary film in the humanities. It is rarely the actual fieldwork. The root of the problem is the humanities’ strong reliance on printed publication as the benchmark for measuring success. The problem is that this does not push faculty or students into pursuing innovative multimedia approaches to research and may actually punish those on the cutting edge of such work. Printed books and journals are important in part because we know they stand the test of time; they hold up well in the long run. However, especially in a climate of changing technology, we cannot be certain how well a particular form of media will last. We all have had experiences in which our treasured analog films and VHS tapes no longer work, have never been converted to newer digital technologies, and the information they represent is potentially lost.

Internet technologies and the latest forms of video may not yet have enough history for us to project how well they will hold up in the long run, and they may involve considerable personal and institutional expense to maintain and upgrade. But the archivability of our knowledge is just not a good enough reason to ignore video and web distribution, especially in the humanities. Certainly in the classroom, there is a place for text and a place for multimedia, and they both must be used properly.
Another common complaint about using visual multimedia in the classroom is that documentaries are frequently woefully obsolete. There are many such documentaries, some of which were produced more than fifty years ago, which are still being marketed around academic circles as if they were “cutting edge.” While they are perhaps still important in some manner as historical markers, the societies studied have clearly changed in that time. For example, Japan has undergone three significant economic movements since 1960, and documentary distributors can’t promote the same video as if many things in the culture haven’t changed. Certainly it is easier to tell when visual materials such as documentaries are outdated. Cues such as hairstyles, fashion, architecture, furniture, and so forth are material and immediate reminders of their temporal context.

There are temporal limitations for text as well, and this is another reason why we need to apply the hermeneutic of suspicion, and look long and hard at our reliance on text as authoritative. Text also becomes obsolete, but it seems harder for us to tell when a book is no longer relevant. We need to keep in mind that both texts and visual multimedia materials such as documentaries need to be updated frequently as societies and cultures change.
Our great regard for text as ultimate authority sometimes also creates a kind of logical disconnect between our scholarship and the changes that occur in religious communities and their practices. We know, logically, that change occurs, but we nevertheless still cite as authoritative discourse outdated material because it is textual. While we should still keep such texts as historic reference, as scholars we need to keep in mind that the authoritative foundations of texts change.

One of the things that privileging text as authoritative—something that basically dates from the Protestant Reformation and the invention of the printing press in the West—does is miss entirely the importance and authority of oral traditions and practices within religious communities. As Nikki points out in her book *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual*, “scholars of religions have difficulty dealing with oral traditions and practices handed down within communities through praxis, a self-disciplinary process that involves the whole person.” This is important because “praxis transforms the way humans think about and act in the world.”

Capturing these practices visually gives us an opportunity to gain valuable insights into “how religions are actually lived by human beings” and “enables us to understand religious authority in a more useful way than deciphering the age of a disembodied text.”

The final problem that I discovered is an apparent lack of ambition to do fieldwork, often a collaborative enterprise, especially in the production of

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3 *Ibid*. 42.
documentaries. Certainly it is sometimes the case that universities don’t make it easy for humanities faculty and students to do collaborative fieldwork—or collaborative work of any kind, really. It is often the case that hiring decisions, promotion and tenure, and so forth are based on the model of single author single work, and collaborative efforts are judged suspiciously. This is not the case in the hard sciences, where it is not at all unusual to have many authors, both student and faculty, at work on a particular research project.

But beyond the difficulties of institutional pressure, it still baffles me that there are so few people willing to actually observe practices and events as they happen. As Nikki points out, so many scholars in Religious Studies were advised to “study a religion that was ‘either long ago or far away—preferably both.’”4 While this “ethnographic distance” was “thought to provide a fortress for scholars,” surrounding us with a mote of “protective objectivity,” it also prevents us from discovering real insights into religious institutions and forms as they are lived by their practitioners. The validity of our scholarship actually rests entirely on how the religion is embodied in real life.

In a panel discussion on the relevance of studying lived religions Robert A. Orsi said:

References to something called “Islam,” I said to my friend, explained nothing, and the political violence in the region (however one interpreted it) was a necessary but not sufficient cause of suicide bombings. It seemed to me simply from reading accounts in the papers that what immediately mattered in the

lives of suicide bombers was not commitment to an unspecific “Islam” but the circles of friends and kin among whom they lived, the memories they held (their own or those they borrowed or inherited from others), their sense of their place in their immediate world (meaning work and school, friends and clubs), the stories they were told by relatives they loved, bonds of commitment and loyalty to particular friends and kin. “Islam” mattered too, of course, not as a set of authoritative texts or doctrines, but rather as it was discussed and practiced, inflected and constituted within these bonds of friendship, family, and memory, within the worlds of work and school—“Islam” as it was imagined and reimagined in relation to all the other things that people imagine, a thoroughly local Islam, immersed in and responsive to local condition and circumstances.5

Without solid fieldwork and firsthand accounts of the localization of religion we would fail to understand much of anything about how most if not all religions really work within their local environments. On top of all that, Orsi is talking about Islam, a religion that is usually represented as having a strong textually driven doctrinal base. But when we move beyond the text into religion as it is lived, the value of fieldwork becomes immeasurable.

It should be every scholar’s goal to “close the gap” between the subject of study and the audience of our work. Multimedia is currently the best tool to bring the most accurate presentation of events to our audience. It does mean that as scholars we will

need to develop a wider collection of technological skills, something not everyone is
going to be in favor of, and we are going to have to refocus our attention on new
methodologies that take into account changes in technology.

Right now is the time to start.

The nature of the Academy is inevitably going to change, and if scholars want to
remain relevant in the future, then they need push the frontier and move into the 21st
century, the age of multimedia.
Bibliography


