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Alpinism and Japanese Mountains Culture

— Hakusan Kamikake Path —

In Europe, Judo and other Japanese martial arts are very popular sports. The fact that we salute the opponent before and after each game can be a great astonishment, but it is a first step into Japanese culture: it is not “me” who is strong and wins the game, it is thanks to the opponent that the game takes place where one’s abilities can be expressed… For Europeans it might be a “new” way of seeing things, but I think it is the core of Japanese philosophy of life, which can be found in almost all Japanese culture. We can even find this philosophy in mountaineering:

Why do we climb mountains?

In Europe it is because “we” are here, the human is strong enough to conquer the mountains. It was also in ancient time a way to show God’s greatness, greater than the force of nature. Some devotees risked their life to conquer mountains and make it God’s territory.

However, in Japan, one way of thinking is “because there was a mountain…” : The mountain is here for a certain reason, it is the will of the mountain itself to let human climb, so they climbed by faith, deifying the mountain, and could gain strength or good harvest as a reward.

In Japan, mountains are not only the highest place on Earth, but it is more of all the places closest to heaven. Therefore, historically, mountains have long been deified more than climbed (some were even forbidden to enter, especially women). Mt Ishizuchi, the highest mountain in Shikoku Island, for example has a shrine on his top, from where we can revere the actual highest point (Mt Tengu-dake). The devotees usually don’t go further. Moreover, on the first day of the mountain opening festival (1st July), women are not allowed to enter the mountain…



Mt Ishizuchi: (Left) Tengudake from the top shrine (Right) Whole Ishizuchi from the worshipping Shrine

Esoteric Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 8th century, it matched perfectly with this Japanese mountain faith, and a new movement was born: Shugendo. The mountain's Gods were integrated in the wide range of divinities revered. The practitioners were called whether Shugenja or Yamabushi. Among many of the ascetic practices were included isolation and meditation in the mountain, such as ascending worshipping, sometimes in very dangerous ways... Some of the most extreme Yamabushis even choose to live and practise in the nature...

Horagai, a conch shell, was used during the ceremonies, but also for communication in the mountain. At that time, sacred mountains in Japan were full of Horagai's sound...

In 17th century, Shugendo was officially suppressed as a religion, and Shugenja were forced to follow an official Buddhism movement (whether Shingon or Tendai sect).

Moreover, in 19th century, during the Meiji restoration, Shinto was declared the official state religion and was separated from Buddhism. Shugendo and mountain practices decreased dramatically.

However, Shugendo fitting very well with Japanese religion and culture, it is still practised in some mountains in Japan (mainly are Oomine, Ishiduchi, Haguro...), being part of Shingon or Tendai Buddhism.

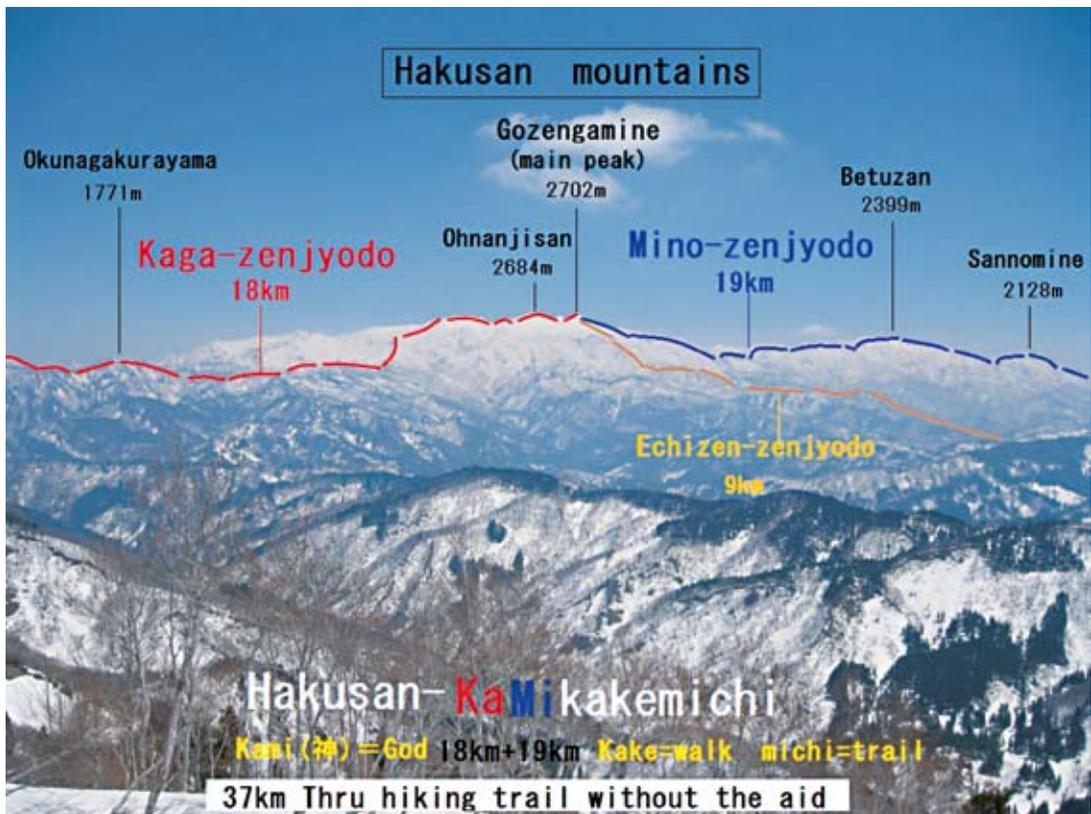


Worshipping at Mt Ishizuchi

Mt Hakusan (White Mountain), a 2,702 m high mountain in Hokuriku region, is one of the three sacred mountains in Japan (with Mt Fuji and Mt Tateyama). It has been deified since ancient time, from the prefectures of Ishikawa, Fukui and Gifu, where it gives life, by water through river in each. After the first climb by a devotee, great master Taicho, in 8th century, a path from each prefecture was established, they were called "Zenjodo", which means "path of meditation".

Although at that time there were many Yamabushi practising on those "Zenjodo", and the sound of Horagai was usually heard in Mt Hakusan, those mountain practices tended to disappear.

Whereas it is said that it is by the "Echizen Zenjodo" that the first devotee, monk Taicho, opened the mountain, it is nowadays the shortest remaining path. A good access to the start points: Ichinose and Betto deai, establishment of "new paths" (Sabo and Kanko) makes it the path that most "trekkers" use. However, there is still 18km left for "Kaga Zenjodo", and 19km for "Mino Zenjodo", whereas unfortunately they are not used much.



National park HAKUSAN MOUNTAINS



The idea of the “Hakusan Ka-Mi kake trail” was to organize an event so as to make those historical paths known. Even if it is called “asceticism”, it is more to make people think about the feeling people had when climbing Mt Hakusan in ancient time than a real religious event... It is not neither a “trail”, since as explained above, the idea is not that “we” do a performance, it is to appreciate to have the chance to climb this wonderful mountain, to admire it from different angles and, maybe, to deify it...

I had the occasion to take part in this very hard trail and walk those ancient paths. With my Horagai I tried to imagine and remember how and with which feeling the Japanese monks used to climb Mt Hakusan, or, to be exact, that Mt Hakusan let them climb...



Play Horagai to express gratitude to Hakusan for letting us climb...