

Yama asobi: mountain play

Mirrored
In the dragonfly's eye—
Mountains
~Issa

The temples at the base of the mountain are just starting points, but the tourists don't know this. They gather and cluster, follow each other around the lake and take photographs of the rock garden, and disperse once more to reenter the cement and neon world of modern Japan. But beyond the crowds and the beaten path of the temple circuit, there are trails leading up and away, trails dotted with Shinto shrines that lead higher and higher until you can see out above the city.

Two-thirds of the Japanese archipelago is mountainous, and this topography shaped the development of Japanese religion and folklore. *Kami*, gods in the Shinto religion, are believed to descend to the earth at mountaintops, and mountains are sometimes considered the physical body of a *Kami*. The earliest Shinto holy places were often stunning locations at the top of a mountain, marked simply by a plaited straw rope or a *tori* gate. In ancient times, farmers took pilgrimages to the mountains at the finish of harvest festivals for *yama asobi*, or mountain play, to commune with the gods. The image of Fuji-san, its base shrouded in mist, is ubiquitous in traditional art. Its very prevalence suggests the power with which mountains have historically compelled the Japanese imagination.

Japanese mountains are crisscrossed with pilgrim paths and hiking trails. Hiking has evolved from a sacred duty, or one followed by traveling poets such as Issa, quoted above, to a weekend pastime. The authors of the Lonely Planet guide, *Hiking in Japan*, write that Japanese hikers commonly greet each other as they pass with a friendly

“*Konnichiwa*” and recognize a camaraderie between strangers that does not exist in city life. Groups of older women often hike together in a garrulous crowd, and many travelers on longer trails stay overnight at mountain huts, sleeping at each other’s elbows on *tatami* mats. There is a contemporary culture of hiking in Japan that has sprung quite naturally from Japan’s history of mountain travel to provide an escape from daily life in the city.

I spent last fall in Tokyo, and in my limited travels I got a glimpse of the possibilities offered by every temple and mountain. It was a wicked tease, really: hiking takes too much time when one follows the busy schedule of a student and weekend tourist. I visited Kyoto for three days and traveled alone for the first time in my life. In a youth hostel in the western part of the city, I talked to the seven other women sharing my room and heard about a wonderful hiking trail that connected three or four beautiful shrines. I didn’t have time to explore it, though. I was in Kyoto for such a short time that I elected instead to stay within the bounds of the city, and I enjoyed Kyoto very much. But there still lingered a regret that I had known of something beautiful, very much removed from the tourist track, that I had decided not to explore.

I would like to take a backpacking trip across Japan’s hiking trails. I would stay in youth hostels and mountain huts and travel to places that have been impossible to visit because of lack of time and money. I would purchase a Japan Rail pass, which would allow me to travel along the length of Honshu, the main island, and even continue to Shikoku or Kyushu further South. In the Tokyo region I would visit Nikko National Park and Oze, Japan’s largest marsh, and travel to the Chubu area to hike the Central Alps. In the Alps, I am particularly curious about Ontake-san, which is a live volcano often traversed by white-clad pilgrims. The shrine at the top of the mountain is very holy to the

Shugendo sect of Buddhism, which mixes Buddhist and Shinto beliefs into a mountain faith that practices asceticism and enforces strict physical training. In the Kansai Region, I would like to stay at Koya-san, a Buddhist mountain sanctuary, where one can sleep on the temple grounds. I have never experienced temple life, and this would be a wonderful opportunity. I would also like to travel the paths of Daimonji-yama, where one can see views of Kyoto and Osaka before the trail leads deep into the mountains. There is also a path that connects two tiny villages, Kurama and Kibune, only a half hour from Kyoto, but one would not know a city was so near; the isolated villages are said to feel like a world apart. Mountain travel is not complete without a visit to an *onsen*, or hot spring, which are considered relaxing and medically curative—despite their strong sulfur smell!

My long interest in the anthropology of Japan motivates this travel proposal. I plan to enter a PhD program in the cultural anthropology of Japan after taking a year off, and I have been studying medical anthropology since my sophomore year. Because much of Japanese ritual is directed toward improving health and ritually cleansing both body and mind, this backpacking tour of Japanese shrines and hiking trails offers a unique opportunity to learn about the ways in which Shinto and outdoor activities interact with health practices. For example, in many temples and shrines one can find small statues of the Jizo Buddha, the protector of *mizu-ko*, or aborted fetuses. Certain shrines are used particularly for prayers concerning health, and *onsens*, visited often by mountain travelers, are widely used for medical purposes. I am looking forward to talking to people and learning from them (and practicing my Japanese!), but most of all, I hope to experience a different side of Japan, one not only removed from tourist traffic, but one that delves deeper into the intersection of sacred and profane in Japanese life.