

Mountain Worship on Dewa Sanzan

Dewa Sanzan (“the three mountains of Dewa”), the collective name for Mt. Haguro (414 m), Mt. Gassan (1,984 m), and Mt. Yudono (1,500 m), purportedly has a 1,400-year history as an important pilgrimage site for followers of Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of both Buddhism and Shinto. This esoteric belief system developed after the sixth century and later incorporated into modern-day Shinto.

The roots of mountain worship at Dewa Sanzan

The Shugendo tradition that emerged on Mt. Haguro is thought to be the oldest form of this mountain asceticism. According to legend, it was founded in 593 by Prince Hachiko, the son of Emperor Sushun, the 32nd emperor of Japan. Prince Hachiko fled his home in the capital of Nara after his father was assassinated. A three-legged crow led him to Mt. Haguro, which was then a wilderness. A bodhisattva appeared to him on the mountain, leading him to dedicate his life to worshiping the mountain and the Buddhist and Shinto deities that dwelled there. Reverence for nature is central to Shugendo, and natural features such as rocks, rivers, and mountains are believed to be abodes of the divine.

A journey of rebirth

Shugendo ascetics (*shugenja*) have made pilgrimages to the Dewa Sanzan peaks since their traditions began. The pilgrimage, called Sankan Sando, is symbolic of the journey of rebirth. To wander the peaks is to walk among deities, and each mountain represents part of the journey of life. Mt. Haguro symbolizes the present (this world); Mt. Gassan, the past (the afterlife); and Mt. Yudono, the future (rebirth). Pilgrims return from the multiday trek having achieved spiritual rebirth.

The pilgrimage is rich with this symbolism of rebirth. Before they depart, pilgrims prepare to leave behind their old selves by taking part in a ceremony similar to a funeral at a *shukubo* (pilgrim lodging), as ascetics would have done before embarking on the Sankan Sando. On the pilgrimage itself, they wear traditional white outfits similar to funerary attire worn by the dead.

The pilgrimage starts at a descending stone staircase in the foothills of Mt. Haguro. The descent symbolizes death, the first stage in the journey toward rebirth. Shortly afterwards, ascetics walk across a vermillion bridge spanning a river. Before the bridge was built, ascetics would wade through the river. The ease of this river crossing represented virtue; the more manageable the crossing, the purer the life. From there, ascetics begin to prepare for rebirth by purifying themselves in the river, beneath a waterfall. This waterfall was artificially constructed, purportedly by Tenyu Betto (1592–1674), the 50th chief priest of Dewa Sanzan, to set the scene for ascetics to wash away their past. He is also known for building paths to make the mountains more accessible.

Mt. Haguro

After purifying themselves in the river, ascetics begin the ascent of Mt. Haguro. Numerous crude carvings, including of sake cups and lotus flowers, decorate the stone steps leading to the peak. According to legend, they were carved by Tenyu to encourage ascetics to stay focused and in the present. Other stories suggest they were carved by ascetics.

A shrine is located on each of the three mountains. Traditionally ascetics visit all three shrines, but because heavy snowfall prevents access to Mt. Gassan and Mt. Yudono in winter, it is possible to worship all three deities of Dewa Sanzan at Sanjin Gosaiden, on Mt. Haguro. The mountain has less snowfall and is accessible year-round. Ascetics attempting the entire pilgrimage pray at this first shrine for protection and prosperity during their journey. The thatched-roof Sanjin Gosaiden dates to 1818 and is a nationally designated Important Cultural Property.

Mt. Gassan

After climbing Mt. Haguro, pilgrims scale Mt. Gassan, the toughest part of the Sankan Sando. Tsukuyomi no Mikoto, the moon deity, is enshrined here.

This peak represents the afterlife. Its broad expanse of alpine wetlands, harsh mountain terrain, and lava rock covered in deep snow create an otherworldly atmosphere. Its popularity among ascetics has been attributed to the rugged environment. *Shugenja* value self-sufficiency; they undertake physically demanding training amid Mt. Gassan's deep snows and harsh winds and have historically relied on its diversity of plants for sustenance.

Mt. Yudono

Mt. Yudono is the final part of the pilgrimage. The mountain represents the future and rebirth. The pilgrimage ends at the sacred main shrine at the foot of the mountain, Yudonosan Jinja Shrine (*hongu*). Pilgrims must undergo an exorcism rite before they can worship here. Photography is strictly prohibited.