

Shugendo Ascetic Outfits

The Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage, known as Sankan Sando, is a journey of rebirth undertaken by ascetics of Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of both Buddhism and Shinto.

The Shugendo ascetics (*shugenja*) traditionally wear special outfits similar to funerary attire worn by the dead (*shiroshozoku*). This attire symbolizes the death of their past and the spiritual rebirth they undergo while walking among the deities living in these sacred mountains. When they emerge from the multiday pilgrimage, they are spiritually reborn.

Shiroshozoku consists of a white costume worn under a checkered robe. It is practical as well as symbolic. The loose-fitting white pants (*hakama*) are gathered below the knee to prevent the hem from catching on rocks. Calf coverings (*kyahan*) protect against insect bites. The cloth head wrap (*hokan*) is symbolic of the crown that the Cosmic Buddha is depicted wearing. The cloth is practical too. It warms the face on a cold day and can be used to wipe off sweat on a hot day. This cloth can also serve as a tourniquet if an injury requires compression. The split-toe footwear (*jikatabi*) separates the big toe from the others, like a thong sandal. This design allows for better stability when climbing mountainous terrain. A walking stick (*kongozue*), which assists with the climbs and descents, completes the outfit. The stick has an eight-sided base, with each side representing a different Shugendo attribute, such as resolution, devotion, training, and salvation.

Many modern-day ascetics still wear these outfits. Ascetic practices at Dewa Sanzan are performed under the guidance of a local Shugendo practitioner.