***Takemairi* Mountain Pilgrimages**

Yakushima islanders have a tradition of making pilgrimages to holy mountains in the spring and/or autumn, depending on the village. Known as *takemairi*, this annual practice is said to have started around 500 years ago. Village representatives pray to Ippon Hoju Daigongen, a Buddhist avatar of a mountain deity, for bountiful harvests, good fishing, and protection of the home. Each village has its own pilgrimage ritual and route. These typically consisted of climbing one of the Maedake outer mountains and then one of the higher Okudake inner peaks, such as Mt. Miyanoura, Mt. Nagata, or Mt. Kurio. Nowadays, some villages have simplified the route to climbing only the Maedake mountains.

Origins

In the late 1480s, during a period of frequent earthquakes on Yakushima, Nichizo Shonin, a priest of the Nichiren school of Buddhism, retreated in a cave atop Mt. Nagata for seven days and recited the Lotus Sutra there. It is said that no tremors have been felt on the island since. From then on, the indigenous Shinto deity Hikohohodemi no Mikoto (also known as Yamasachihiko) was venerated as a manifestation of the deity Ippon Hoju Daigongen, and the latter's name was inscribed on stone altars and monuments that dot the *takemairi* route. Thus both Shinto and Buddhist deities are worshipped on the *takemairi* pilgrimage, an example of Shinto's fusion with Buddhism after the latter was brought to Japan from China in the mid-sixth century.

Modern-day Pilgrimages

The *takemairi* pilgrimages formerly consisted of a three-day, two-night ritual, but have been scaled down over the years to a one-day event due to the availability of vehicles and the depopulation and aging of communities. Around 20 of the 24 villages on Yakushima still conduct *takemairi* rituals, and it is considered an honor for a villager to be selected to participate. The largest village, Miyanoura, organizes a *takemairi* pilgrimage in spring and autumn. Participants begin by praying for a safe pilgrimage at Yaku Jinja Shrine at 3:30 a.m., then drive to Ippongahama Beach, where they undergo a purification ritual using branches of the *sakaki* tree (*Cleyera japonica*). Afterwards, they fill bamboo containers—measuring 10 to 15 centimeters long and 3 to 4 centimeters in diameter—with beach sand cleansed by the waves. The sand is said to symbolize sea salt to give to the mountain gods. Around 6 a.m., participants clad in white *happi* coats and conical bamboo hats (a type of uniform worn to differentiate them from other hikers and to express their pursuit of enlightenment) depart for the summit of Mt. Miyanoura,

an eight-kilometer trek one way, to visit a small shrine in a cave where Ippon Hoju Daigongen is worshipped. In addition to the sand, participants bring bounty of the sea and the fields, including salt, rice, and *shochu* liquor, as well as money to offer the gods. The style of worship is generally Shinto, including hand clapping, but also incorporates Buddhist elements such as collective recitation of prayers.

The Village Shrine, an Alternative Place of Worship
Yaku Jinja Shrine is a central Shinto shrine on Yakushima with a history of over 1,000 years, regarded as the main shrine on the island. Its location in Miyanoura village makes it an accessible place of worship compared to shrines on the mountain summits. Yaku Jinja venerates seven deities of the mountain and sea, including Hikohohodemi no Mikoto, also known as the Buddhist deity Ippon Hoju Daigongen. The shrine's location at the foot of the mountain allows islanders to pray to the mountain gods year-round, not only during pilgrimages. A New Year's Eve festival features a *wadaiko* drum performance symbolizing a battle between the deities of good and evil. On December 31, a mountain deity of good is said to descend from Mt. Miyanoura to the village to expel evil spirits from the people, but is interfered with by the deity of evil. A lit torch swung during the performance signifies the victory of the deity of good, who can then cleanse the people of any demons.