

## The Tateyama Faith

Mt. Tate has been a scene of religious devotion since antiquity. Worship on the mountain has taken many forms over the centuries and incorporated a variety of Shinto and Buddhist ideas, which underlie a set of beliefs collectively known as the Tateyama faith.

### *An unworldly training ground*

Mt. Tate (3,015m) is one of the tallest mountains in the Northern Alps. The volcano towers over the Toyama Plain and is both an icon of the region and a precious source of water. From prehistoric times into the last few centuries of the first millennium, the mountain—itsself considered a deity—was only worshiped from afar, as people believed the souls of the dead resided among its three peaks.

Following the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century, many native beliefs were combined with interpretations of Buddhist teachings. Among the practices that emerged out of this combination was Shugendo, in which *shugenja* (devotees of Shugendo) retreat to remote and often inhospitable places such as mountains to practice spiritual discipline in the presence of deities believed to reside in such settings. In the case of Tateyama, the introduction of Shugendo is symbolized by the legend of Saeki Ariyori, the figure held to have established Mt. Tate as a *shugenja* training ground.

The story goes that Ariyori, a son of the local governor, was led into the mountains by a white hawk. During his pursuit of the bird, Ariyori encountered a black bear and shot an arrow into the animal's chest. He later discovered the bear in a cave near the summit of Tateyama, where it turned into the Amida Buddha and implored Ariyori to commit himself to ascetic practice. Tradition dates Ariyori's revelation to the year 701, and the discovery of bronze items such as staff finials and daggers around the summit, known to have been left by devotees in places of religious significance, suggest Mt. Tate may have been a Shugendo training ground as early as the eighth century.

Mt. Tate was one of numerous mountains throughout the country where Shugendo ascetics practiced, but the volcano's unique, otherworldly landscape led it to be seen as a representation of hell. The mountain's association with death became intertwined with Buddhist depictions of the netherworld; the tree line was reimagined as a border between the worlds of the living and the dead, while small lakes near the peak represented bubbling



pools of blood. *Shugenja* ascended the mountain to confront their sins, cleanse their souls, and attain a symbolic rebirth that was believed to facilitate their passage into paradise after death.

### *A popular purgatory*

For centuries, climbing Mt. Tate and passing through its harsh terrain to purify one's spirit remained an exclusive practice undertaken only by small numbers of committed ascetics. In the 1600s, however, the Tateyama pilgrimage began to gain broader appeal. In a period of peace and growing prosperity, more people had the time and funds required to undertake pilgrimages. Additionally, religious journeys were one of the few forms of travel allowed for ordinary people.

Tales of the "hell" on Mt. Tate and its powers of purification resonated with many, and an increase in pilgrim numbers led the Tateyama faith to develop in a more popular direction. Dozens of pilgrim lodges (*shukubo*) were established in the villages of Ashikuraji and Iwakuraji at the foot of the mountain. These lodges also functioned as temples and priests' residences, and they played a pivotal role in pilgrims' spiritual journeys. Elaborate paintings called Tateyama mandalas were produced to explain the tenets of the faith to the public. The mandalas also played a role in spreading the Tateyama faith; each *shukubo* was assigned a specific part of the country for proselytization efforts. Tateyama mandalas, painted on scrolls that were easy to carry, helped priests expound the faith's doctrine.

In the 1800s, at the height of the Tateyama faith's popularity, up to 6,000 pilgrims are thought to have ascended Mt. Tate in a single climbing season. These travelers were all male, as the mountain was traditionally off-limits to women. This prohibition, however, provided the impetus for an annual ritual that recreated the mountainside passage through hell for women. Every September, female devotees in white pilgrims' garb traversed the Nunobashi bridge in the village of Ashikuraji in a symbolic crossing into the afterlife. This act was believed to have the same purifying effect as climbing the sacred peak.

The ban on women entering Mt. Tate was abolished after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, after which many syncretic beliefs were done away with. Places of worship dedicated to the mountain deities on and around the peak were converted into Shinto shrines, and the Tateyama faith underwent yet another transformation. Some of the elements discarded then have been revived in recent years: a reenactment of the Nunobashi ritual takes place



once every three years, and Tateyama mandalas have begun to be appreciated as works of art.