

The Sacred Kumano Pilgrimage World Heritage: the origin of tourism in Japan is related to cultural landscape

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Abstract:

In Japan, due to nature-worship as part of Shinto belief and mountain retreats of esoteric Buddhism, certain natural sites have been revered as being sacred. This is not only the backdrop of ancient pilgrimage in the Kii Mountain Range, but also the key to understand the potential of this World Heritage landscape for sustainable tourism. For this reason, this paper emphasizes to notice and balance various aspects of the region for its future success as a high-quality tourist destination.

1. Introduction

The Kii Peninsula in central Japan, stretching over parts of Mie, Wakayama and Nara prefectures, has a scenic mountain range covered with lush green forests, crossed by clear streams. Not too far from the ancient capitals of Nara and Kyoto, and provided with revered shrines and temples, it has always been a popular destination for pilgrimage, one of the earliest forms of tourism, both in Japanese and world history. The Sacred Kumano Pilgrimage route has three major sacred spots, where various beliefs merge in a mountain worship called *Shugendo*¹ (McGuire 2013). By touching on its historical roots, the goal of this paper is to explain what this area makes actually so unique, what should be scrutinized — and how its cultural landscape and World Heritage status could be further used for sustainable tourism.

2. Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes with a long history as a mountain retreat

Major spots are the famous Shingon Buddhist temple complex *Kōyasan* in the North, *Kumano Hongu Taisha* in the centre and *Kumano Sanzan* towards the Pacific Ocean in the South (Figure 1). Mount *Ominesan* is a further sacred spot. *Kōyasan* has been founded as a remote mountain retreat by Kūkai (*Kōbō Daishi*) in the 9th century. His choice was not by accident. He looked for spiritual alteration and “a place for the realization of the Buddhahood” (Grapard 1982: 202). Grapard explains the progress of sacred space in Japan. First, it all started with single sacred sites of

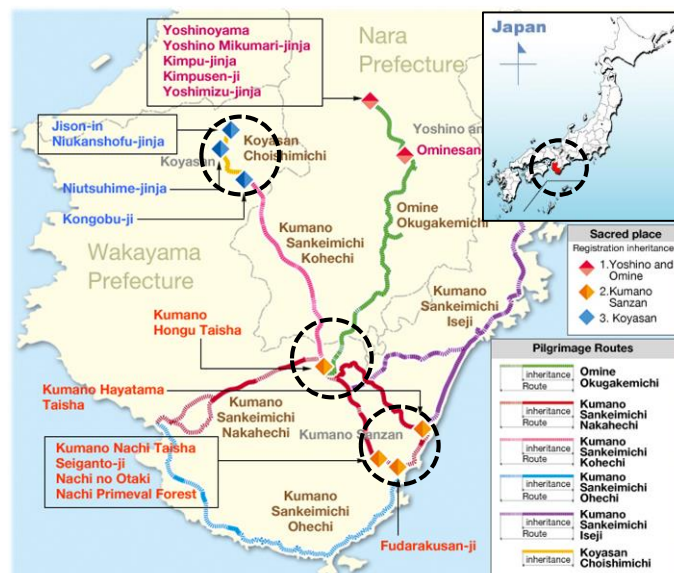


Figure 1 Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range (紀伊山地の霊場と参詣道)

(<http://www.sekaiisan-wakayama.jp/english/sisan/sanzan.html>)

¹ Shugendo (修験道) is a syncretic tradition with elements from Buddhist, Daoist and Shinto sources. Goal is spiritual refinement by mountain trekking with lack of food and sleep, supported by purification ceremonies (ibid.)

earliest Shinto shrines (Sonoda 2000). However, with dynamic interaction of Shinto and Buddhism introduced from China and Korea, such sites gradually expanded into a "sacred area." Sacred areas were for pilgrimage, representing a Buddhist mandala in the outside physical world (Grapard 1982). It was a training ground for early Shugendo practisers (see



Figure 2 The Buddhist Monk Kūkai (774-835) on his way through deep forests when looking for Kōyasan (source: Wikimedia Commons)

footnote 1). Mountain sceneries like the Kii Mountain Range were regarded as the *Pure Land*, where the Buddha resides. And this area has many *Sugi* trees (*Cryptomeria japonica*), which are deeply related to nature-worship in Japan (Omura 2004). It is this religious background we have to understand if we seek to develop this area for future tourism. While we cannot go back into the old days, it is vital to combine the tradition of mountain worship and sacred pilgrimage with new cultural tourism in a smart and balanced way. A sound understanding and respect of tourists for the sacred landscape is a prerequisite for achieving this goal.

3. A World Heritage Site for a decade, but still facing challenges

In June 2004, the Kumano area has been designated as "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range" ranked as a World Heritage (cultural landscape). Cultural and natural heritage are key to tourism. The UNESCO World Heritage Centre defines heritage as "our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritages are irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration."²

Looking at the successful designation of the Spanish pilgrimage trail Santiago de Compostela as a model, Shugendo priests of Mt. Ominesan and local officials started a campaign to achieve the same extraordinary status for the Kumano area as well (McGuire 2013). Usually, World Heritage nomination means further appreciation of the region and promises increased tourism. However, such a designation does not automatically lead to a successful output. If we look on sources provided by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention centre, one might wonder why there are no detailed zoning plans showing how the overall area is to be preserved *and* developed (information reviewed online, see footnote 2).

In this context, McGuire (2013) explains his own critical observations. When examining the area accompanied by a Shugendo priest, he noticed that less famous but former sacred spots "have been smashed into gravel by road construction". Other disappointing findings were illegal dumped garbage, such as tatami mats gathered from debris of the 1995 Kobe Awaji earthquake (McGuire 2013: 339). The "tatami mountain" was later relocated to a legal dumpsite; however, these

² For further information about the World Heritage Centre, designation criteria for the Kumano area and about World Heritage sites in general see: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1142/>

examples show a lack of consideration to the overall (sacred) environment located between the famous tourist spots itself. Holy temple complexes might be the major destination spots, but they are embedded into a splendid mountain landscape. And it is this beautiful scenery with its pilgrimage trails that makes the overall area so attractive. This is one important point to consider. Another is the local community of the Kii Mountain Range and their needs. For instance, locals have made use of timber in the mountain forests for centuries, without destroying it, as these are for the most part man-made forests, which need thinning and other maintenance. So it's only natural when local residents become upset by new World Heritage regulations forbidding logging on their ground (McGuire 2013). It is a strange situation that infrastructure development, such as road building, with impact on the environment seems to be fostered by involved prefectures, while less powerful local fisherman and foresters are asked to refrain from their traditional practise. It gives the impression that there exist competing visions of how the area should develop from now on.

4. *Tourism prospects and aspects for future success*

While still facing problems how to harmonize preservation, local needs and an increasing tourism – numbers doubled in the past 10 years since the WH nomination –, there are signs that the area is on a good way. For instance, the local Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau aims at sustainable tourism with small groups and improved international guidance. They also work on improved visitor facilities and trail signs in both Japanese and English language. On their webpage they state: "By focusing on low impact visitors, we aim to create a sustainable tourism destination that will help preserve the UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Landscape of Kumano for future generations³."

Apart from such reasonable practical improvements and hospitality, to the author, one point seems to be most crucial: The Sacred Kumano Pilgrimage World Heritage area, even though now being a major tourist destination, should be preserved as a holy cultural landscape. The splendid sacred atmosphere is the very reason why these temples, shrines and pilgrimage trails developed and prospered over a period of 1,200 years. So we might ask then, what is the point to preserve such an area? Of course this involves physical preservation by law and ordinances with regard to historic buildings and its environs, and of the overall mountain landscape. However, it should go beyond such common measures. Visitors and tourists of the sacred sites should be guided, educated and, in addition, offered a special training in spiritual awareness building. They should get the chance to *feel* the sacred atmosphere along their way through the woods and temples. This is not self-evident. For instance, the author visited the Kumano Sanzan in summer 2005, the Nachi Kumano Taisha and Nachi falls. At this



Figure 3 *The Daimonzaka Nakahechi trail with 800 year old Sugi, leading to the Kumano Nachi Taisha and Nachi falls (photo by author)*

³ See Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau: <http://www.tb-kumano.jp/en/about/>

place, we may notice a particular sacred atmosphere when approaching the site using the "Daimonzaka Nakahechi" trail. The path is accompanied by ancient Sugi trees up to 800 years old (Figure 3). However, most tourists, mainly Japanese, used the car to drive up the hill and reach the building complex without physical exertion. They indeed missed the special experience of approaching the shrine through passing the ancient forest. While we don't want to force everybody to follow our own ideas, it seems to be important to build up a sound awareness for the value of this area, where pristine nature, religious culture and mountain gods merged into a fascinating landscape. To enable visitors a deep experience, we have to do everything possible to open up their minds to the spirituality of the site.

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