

## SACRED MOUNTAINS WHERE BEING OF “KAMI” IS FOUND

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**Abstract.** Since primeval days to date, the Japanese have regarded certain mountains as objects of worship believing that mountains are places where multitudinous gods reside. This belief in mountains as sacred places still lives on and is practiced in the Japanese traditional religion, Shinto, which is based on animism and ancestor worship. Today, this notion of sacredness is generally accepted and understood together with concepts from Chinese philosophies, such as Confucianism and Taoism, and Buddhism, which have evolved over a long time. In Japan, volcanoes or high, well-formed mountains, as well as smaller hills standing close to human settlements, were believed to be sacred places. This paper explores how temples and shrines have been intentionally situated in relation to such mountains in order to create the sacred place as a whole area.

### 1. Introduction

The intimate connection between Japanese culture and reverence for mountains has been widely observed, but the reasons behind it, and its source are much less clearly understood. The *sangaku shinko*, or Japanese mountain creed, is not based on any one particular religious belief or folklore myth. In fact, mountains are venerated not only in Japan, but also in many other parts of the world within different faiths: for example, Mount Sinai is revered in Judaism, Mount Kaliash in Hinduism, and Mount Ararat in Christianity. One mountain may even become an object of worship for multiple creeds. What makes Japanese *sangaku shinko* unusual is how all Japanese, in harmony, unquestioningly, naturally look upon mountains with awe.

There has been almost no religious conflict throughout Japanese history, apart from the historic 6<sup>th</sup> Century conflict between the Soga and Mononobe clans.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the Buddhist Soga clan prevailed over the anti-Buddhist Mononobe. The Soga deliberately used Buddhism politically, on a nationwide scale, but did not damage existing shrines, massacre innocent followers, or attempt to destroy the indigenous nature religions.

Thus, even though mountains embody different beliefs for different groups, they are generally held to be the abode of various *kami* (gods) and, as such, are not to be disturbed. Various forms of god-inhabited mountains are found everywhere in Japan. Nor are mountains the only object of worship; sometimes a huge rock or a tree can serve the same purpose. In addition, it is believed that all natural things co-exist with the gods, as channels of communication. People can sense messages from the gods through natural signs. If they purify themselves, they can approach closer to where the *kami* reside and receive the messages more easily.

This idea, never clearly written down in doctrinal form, nevertheless lives on in the public mind. There is no clear distinction between man and nature, or between deity and nature. *Kami* live in all forms of nature, from rivers to trees, rocks to

flowers, fish to animals. Thus Japanese believe all natural things are living, even rocks. Moreover, Japanese totally accept the fundamental idea that nothing is absolute, but rather protean – flexible and ever changing. People handle parallel sets of values in the same way as they accept that different laws of nature rule different plants in different seasons.

This paper attempts to characterize Japanese sacred mountains both by their appearance and the beliefs they embody. It looks at how to identify and differentiate Japanese sacred mountains, specific examples being the cities of Obama and Hiraizumi.

## 2. Historical Background: the Amalgamation of Buddhism and Shinto in Japan

To understand the architectural manifestations of mountain veneration in Japan, we must first touch on Japanese religion and its historical background. H. Byron Earhart, an American scholar specializing in *sangaku shinko*, describes Japanese religion as a “variegated tapestry created by the interweaving of at least five major strands: Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religion.” (Earhart, 2004:2) This excellent metaphor encapsulates the idea of the various religious strands interwoven together to make one intricate tapestry that gives the whole picture. No strand makes sense independently; nor can anyone make out the whole picture by peering at it too closely.

This tapestry of beliefs was formed mainly between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D. However, while Buddhism became the official national religion in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, the word *shinto*, to describe the amalgam of indigenous religious ideas pre-dating Buddhism, did not appear in classical literature until the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. Traditional somewhat vague shared moral values gradually developed through animism and ancestor veneration, until ultimately consolidated into the main body of Shinto belief. New waves of ideas - Buddhist culture, art, knowledge, and technology - followed one after another; however, the rituals and moral values of Shinto culture were never completely replaced. Instead, by the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, the syncretization of Shinto and Buddhism led to the emergence of a formal doctrine called *honji suijaku*: Buddhist deities, *honjibutsu*, manifest themselves as *suijaku* in order to save sentient beings. These manifested deities are what are referred to as *kami*. This philosophy is most clearly expressed on the Hie-sannno Mandala scroll.

Over time, Buddhist/Shinto syncretism developed and was assimilated throughout Japan. The word ‘temple’ is used to describe Buddhist places of worship, while ‘shrine’ is used for Shinto places. However, people began to build *jinguji*, official Buddhist temples, on Shinto shrine ground, for example, Kashima Jinguji in Ibaraki, Kamo Jinguji in Kyoto, and Kasugataisha Jinguji in Nara. The word *jinguji* is composed of the words of *jingu* and *ji*. *Jingu* means a shrine and *ji* means a temple. Therefore the word itself expresses the assimilation of Buddhism and Shinto. Conversely, shrines were often built for the guardian deity of a particular temple. Kofukuji and Kasuga Taisha, two of the eight significant World Heritage Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara, are of this nature. Such guardian deity shrines were often located in esoteric temples deep in the mountains.

However, in 1867, after 1200 years of religious assimilation, Japan decided for political reasons to reinstate Shinto over Buddhism. Government policy compelled Buddhism to be separated from Shinto. Many temple grounds were expropriated and some were forced to abolish temple activities. Unexpectedly, quantities of Buddhist art disappeared abroad at this time. Ironically, this unfortunate loss finally led to the establishment of legal protections to safeguard Japanese historic and

cultural property.

Following World War II, Japan entered a new era of political and philosophical democracy, including freedom of religion as officially stipulated by the new post-war constitution. Thus Shinto and Buddhism were placed on equal grounds with other religions such as Christianity and Islam. However, how ordinary people practice religion now is perhaps not so different from centuries ago. People still have vague feelings of reverence and appreciation towards nature, regardless of their individual intellectual theological beliefs. This differs significantly from a monotheistic religion based on solid mutually held doctrine. According to Japanese statistics on religion in 2005<sup>2</sup>, the total number of people registered with some kind of religious organization was about 211 million, while the total population was just under 128 million. Although these figures hardly reflect reality, they do show that Japanese unwittingly register themselves with multiple religious organizations. Doing the right thing to maintain harmony in the community, and not upsetting the laws of nature, are basic expectations placed on all members of Japanese society, that take precedence over individual intellectual choices. However, social and economic change in recent years, together with globalization, is markedly affecting the Japanese and their feelings about religion.

### 3. Visual definition of sacred mountains in Japan

The theological definition of a sacred mountain is a widely discussed thesis topic in itself. This paper will concentrate on the visual conditions for nomination as sacred. Japanese sacred mountains vary considerably, which begs the question as to whether there are certain rules or a specific set of characteristics that define them as sacred. If so, it is interesting to discover what they might be.

Archaeological studies have often been instrumental in understanding the kind of ancient rituals, practiced on mountains. In Yamanashi prefecture, at the southern foot of Mount Yatsugatake, Kinsei ruins, dating back to 2500 B.C, underwent extensive archaeological study in the 1980s. The study confirmed that the community living there considered Mount Yatsugatake as their sacred mountain. According to legend, Mount Yatsugatake competing in height with Mount Fuji. Is height then an essential element for sacredness? It does not seem so. Some sacred mountains, such as Mount Fuji and Mount Aso, are volcanoes, while others are high snow crowned mountains, such as Mount Hakusan. There are also numbers of rather small sacred mountains protruding singly in the middle or at the edges of plains. In China, the ragged character of the rocks can be an essential element, but in Japan,



this does not seem to be a key factor.

*Figure 1. Kinsei Ruin with Yatsugatake in the background*

There appear to be three major visual characteristics of Japanese sacred mountains: volcanic, snow crowned and *kannabi*. The first two characteristics are fairly self-explanatory, universal concepts. The third, *kannabi*, the main focus of this paper, is more specifically Japanese, and will be defined at more length.

### 3.1 VOLCANIC MOUNTAINS

Active volcanoes are viewed as transcendental beings that possess awesome power to cause catastrophe by eruption. Japan, sitting right on top of the Pacific Ring of Fire, has many volcanoes that have been revered as objects of worship. Mount Fuji, the most prominent mountain in Japan, is also a volcano, which last erupted about 300 years ago. In particular, the stratovolcano's beautiful regular shape often leads to it being revered as sacred. Many archaeological finds have been unearthed from locations from which one can view such mountains. Mount Fuji is surrounded by *sengen jinja*<sup>3</sup>, shrines dedicated to it, and has its own religious followers, the Fuji-ko. Mount Aso in Kumamoto, while not a stratovolcano, is nevertheless venerated. An active volcano with a huge inhabited caldera, (from the edge of which the volcano vent can be viewed), it has many dedicated shrines in its vicinity. Other examples of this category are Mounts Asama in Nagano, Miharayama in Oshima, Tokyo.



*Figure 2. A stratovolcano, Mount Fuji*

### 3.2 SNOW CROWNED MOUNTAINS

Taller mountains, such as Mount Fuji, with snow-covered peaks, which stand out in stark contrast to their surroundings, are revered without exception. This is true worldwide: Chomolungma in Tibet/China and Tongariro in New Zealand are two examples among many. In Japan, Mounts Hakusan, Chokaisan, Gassan, Kurikomayama, Tateyama, Myoko, Mitake and Daisen all belong to this category. Throughout Japan, such mountains have attracted shrines and esoteric temples, since the mountainous setting suits ascetic training. It was natural for reverence for such mountains to emerge among people heavily dependent on agriculture. High snow-capped mountains made people aware of the source of abundant pure water. It

was also believed that the mountain deities could call clouds to collect rain when needed.



Figure 3. Mount Kurikomayama

### 3.3 KANNABI MOUNTAINS

*Kannabi* mountains, the main focus of this paper, are the most significant manifestation of Japanese beliefs towards the highest being. The word '*kannabi*' is not a commonly used term, but is used here to refer to a revered natural phenomenon such as a sacred forest or mountain<sup>4</sup>. It appears to originate from a term meaning 'abode of divinity'. The height of a *kannabi* mountain can be relatively low: no more than a hill with a vertical drop of several hundred meters. To be recognized as a *kannabi*, a mountain must be: a) beautiful and of regular proportions (close to a circular cone); b) located within a reasonable distance of a settlement on a nearby plain; c) covered with dense green forest. It should also have: d) a river running nearby so that divine seclusion is possible; and e) have a big tree or gigantic stone in the vicinity. The last item is a desirable but not necessary condition. In China, the presence of an odd-shaped rock is evidence of the presence of a special spirit, but in Japan this is not the case.

In East Asia, where Chinese Feng Shui principles have been used to select desirable city locations, major settlements may be located south of one or more mountains. A desirable mountain located to the north of a settlement is a valued concept. The cities of Fujiwara-kyo (7<sup>th</sup> Century), Heijo-kyo (8<sup>th</sup> Century) and Heian-kyo (9<sup>th</sup> Century) were all based on this planning philosophy. *Kannabi*, however, must be looked at separately from this philosophy, even though cardinal directions are also very important.

The most classic example of *kannabi* is Miwayama (Miwa Mountain), in the Yamato basin in Nara. The design of the shrine in Miwayama shows the ancient Shinto style of worship: the mountain itself serves as the main sanctuary building of the shrine. With Shinto shrine architecture, the natural phenomenon is frequently the actual sanctuary; shrine buildings are often merely a substitute for the natural phenomenon. To apply this to a church setting, involves a paradigm shift. It would probably seem quite bizarre to most Christians to have a gateway and entrance hall leading only to a natural site, with no main building. In contrast, *kannabi* often complete the architectural complex, in the same way as the body of a church provides the focus and location for Christian worship.





Figure 4. *Kannabi* mountains: (left) Miwayama and its *Torii* gate, (right) Tambaizumosha (ca.1234), (Kageyama1971:frontispiece)

A typical example of *kannabi* embodying the assimilation of Shinto and Buddhism is Hie-sannosha (Hiyoshi Sannosha) and the related *kannabi*, Hie-Sanno, nearby. When the monk Saicho returned from China, he brought with him the idea of Chinese deities protecting Mount Tientai (Tendai in Japanese). In 788, Saicho opened an esoteric Buddhist Tendai school, at Enryakuji temple on Mount Hiei, northeast of Kyoto, then capital of Japan. The Chinese idea of a deity protecting a natural phenomenon developed along with Japanese ideas to become ultimately a Japanese tradition. A mandala depicts this relationship between Enryakuji temple and Mount Hiei; Hie-sannosha shrine is clearly depicted in the scroll to the east at the foot of Mount Hie-sanno, the *kannabi* for the shrine.

Other variations on *kannabi* mountains for fishermen can be found along the coast. The concept, however, also embraces other natural phenomena. Isolated islands in bays are also venerated: for example, the island shrines of Itsukushima in Hiroshima, Okinoshima in Fukuoka, Kamishima in Mie, and Chikubushima in Lake Biwa, Shiga.

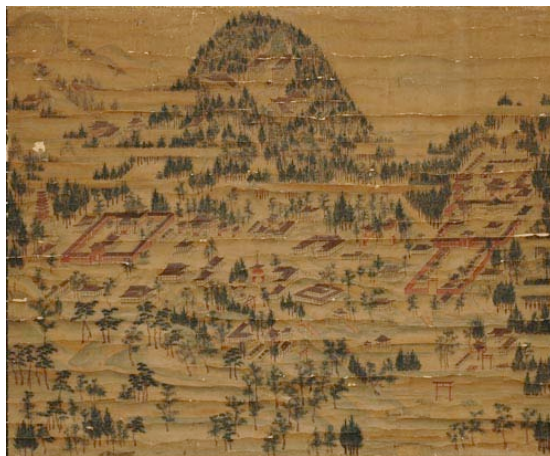


Figure 5. *Sannomiya Mandarazu*, depicting both temple and shrine complex and *kannabi*: *Sannomiya Mandarazu*, Hietaisha shrine

#### 4. Key examples of *kannabi*: Obama and Hiraizumi

#### 4.1 OBAMA CITY: A DENSE CONCENTRATION OF SHRINES AND SACRED MOUNTAINS

Obama City in the Wakasa region has an incredible concentration of temples, shrines and *kannabi*. Obama is directly north of the ancient cities of Nara and Kyoto, facing the Sea of Japan, and was once active in trade with Korea and China. The deeply indented coastline of Obama yields spectacular views, with a series of capes jutting into the ocean. Situated behind the port and plain is the handsome Mount Tadagatake, formerly used as a navigation landmark, since its peak can be instantly recognized from the sea.

While some town houses in the port town of Obama date back as far as the early modern era, the old city blocks date back even further to the medieval era. Obama has a rich, diverse concentration of cultural assets, including Buddhist sculpture and paintings, historic buildings and districts, traditional landscapes and historic landmarks such as castle ruins. A large number of shrines and esoteric temples dating from the Nara and Heian periods (7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries) are spread widely across an area centering on Mount Tadagatake. This clear manifestation of religious assimilation in Japan includes several classic examples of Buddhist halls of the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The entire landscape created around a concentration of temples and shrines of this magnitude is quite unusual, even in Japan. Small *kannabi*, called *shirayama*, are coupled with each temple in Obama to complete temple complexes. One theory states that the word 'shirayama' originates from the word 'Silla', (the Silla Dynasty in Korea), and reflects the connection between the Obama region and the external world.

Mount Tadagatake is also the *kannabi* of Tada shrine; Jinguji's *kannabi* is Mount Nagao. In these cases, buildings and mountains are located directly opposite one another, the main gate facing the mountain. In the cases of Wakasa Jinguji, Myoutsuji, Myourakuji, and Hagadera, one prays to the mountains from distant main pavilions. The step canopy of Jinguji main pavilion has a Shinto ceremonial rope and in the sanctuary, a Buddhist statue and a *kami* stand side by side. When these temples were at their height, each complex was much larger in scale, the many subordinate buildings creating an area of much more grandeur than now. People today, however, hardly recognize these *kannabi* and their significance. (See Fig.6 on the following page.)

#### 4.2 HIRAIZUMI: SAIHOJODO (WESTERLY PURE LAND) AND *KANNABI* MOUNTAINS

The 'Pure Land' is the concept of ultimate bliss in Buddhism. It is imagined as a calm conflict-free utopia, with abundant greenery, surrounded by pure air and water, with water lilies in full bloom. Grass, trees, birds, animals, fish, insects, and all kinds of sentient beings live in harmony in the Pure Land.

In 12<sup>th</sup> Century northern Japan, the warrior leader, Kiyohira Fujiwara, attempted to actualize this concept, with the bold decision to build a city based on Buddhist Pure Land philosophy. Numerous cities along the Silk Road (the path of Buddhism from India, through China and various other countries, ultimately to Japan) were built with Buddhist concepts in mind. However, Hiraizumi is the most eastern of these ancient cities. Although there are no giant golden Buddha statues as in Bamiyan, there is a breath-taking Golden Pavilion.



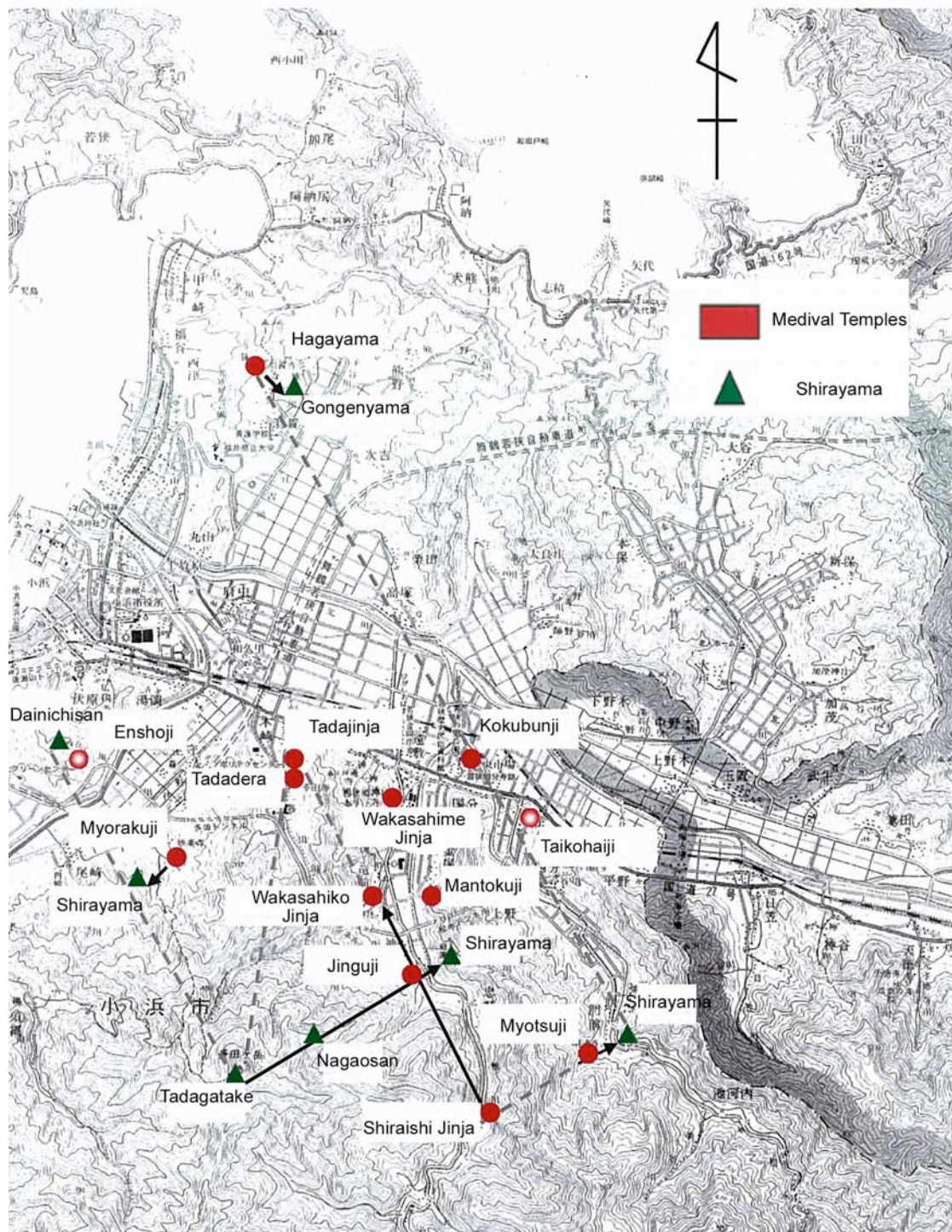


Figure 6. Distribution of temples, shrines and kannabi in Wakasa section of Obama

The third generation Hidehira Fujiwara built Muryoko-in temple, following the same philosophy. *Muryoko* is Japanese for the Sanskrit *Amithaba* (Buddha of Infinite Light). Hidehira chose the location carefully so that the sacred mountain or *kannabi*, Mount Kinkei, can be viewed directly to the west, while a large pond lies east of the Golden Pavilion. The Pure Land is thought to be located in an imaginary realm, somewhere further west of where the Sun sets. At the summer solstice, viewed from Muryoko-in, the sun sets directly behind Mount Kinkei.



Inside Muryoko-in, there is a statue of *Amida-nyorai* (the Buddha who leads dead souls to the Pure Land). For Hidehira, it was important to reconcile both Shinto and Buddhist ideas of the after life harmoniously: according to Shinto, the souls of the dead should return to the mountains, signifying nature, while, according to Buddhist ideas, the enlightened among them would be taken to the Pure Land. Thus from Muryoko-in, souls would first pass through Mount Kinkei, where the *kami* would bless them; and then be led on to the westerly Pure Land. Further proof of the integration of Buddhism and Shinto beliefs exists in the Buddhist scrolls found buried at the peaks of surrounding mountains to delineate the boundaries of existing Pure Land. Hiraizumi is therefore quite a sophisticated example of the syncretistic role played by *kannabi*.

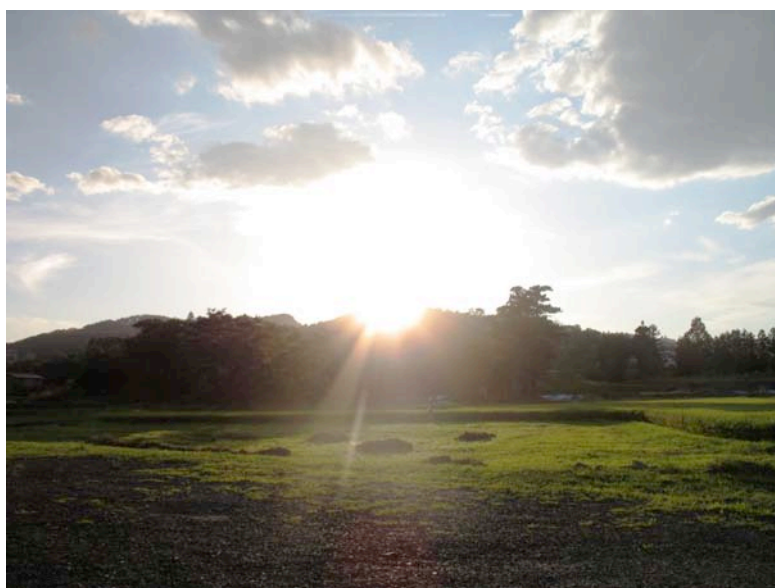


Figure 7. The Sun sets behind Mount Kinkei

## 5. Conclusion

Regardless of formal education, the average Japanese person is brought up to sense the *kami* in all their various forms while, at the same time, seeing the light of Buddhism. The Japanese traditional belief in multitudinous gods (expressed literally as 'eight million gods') results in a feeling that numerous gods and spirits surround us in every aspect of life. Many folklore traditions, based on the idea that both animate and inanimate things are sentient, still continue today, practiced even by Japanese who follow non-Shinto religions. Each season, people offer sake to the gods for permission to cut down trees; and before commencing new buildings, ground-calming ceremonies are held, even for high-tech buildings, to placate the earth spirits and ask their blessing. People take used needles and scissors to a shrine, before discarding them, to thank them for their hard work in the service of humans. People may also bring children's stuffed animals to shrines to be thanked and blessed before being discarded or burned at the shrine.



Figure 8. Harikuyo: People are placing their used needles into Tofu to rest.

In the world of Japanese philosophy, there is no dichotomy between men and nature, gods and men, or gods and nature. Even right and wrong can exist simultaneously and somehow be reconciled. This multitudinous existential philosophy, embracing spirituality, is strongly expressed in the works of both Hayao Miyazaki, the Academy Award winning animator of the film, *Princess Mononoke*, and the late Osamu Tezuka, the renowned Japanese forerunner of modern *manga* artists. As this paper has shown, the principles are also reflected in Japan's architecture and cultural heritage. In a sense, this is the Japanese traditional way to bring about peace and harmony. I believe that disseminating and explaining this idea to the world, as it is expressed through our cultural heritage, is a valuable Japanese contribution to world thought.

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<sup>1</sup> The Tokugawa regime banned Christianity from 1612 until 1868, however, this was a political decision to limit external influence on Japan, rather than a reflection of internal conflict between religious groups.

<sup>2</sup> 2005 Survey: [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/001/index39.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/index39.htm) A legally registered religious organization is asked,

<sup>3</sup> *Sengen jinja* is a common name for shrines revering Mount Fuji. More than 1300 *sengen jinjas* are in Japan.

<sup>4</sup> '*Kannabi*' can be used in the name of a specific location or mountain (e.g. *Kannabiyama* or *Kannabi Mountain*). However, these are by no means the only *kannabi*.

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