

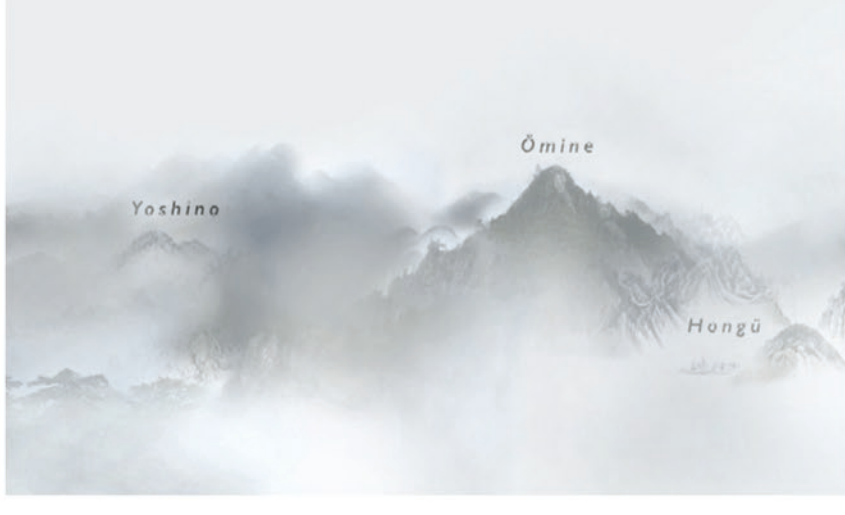
## Where Mountains Fly: A Shugendo Documentary, Part 2

By Alena Eckelmann | July 15, 2022



The *Shozan engi*, literally “Mountain Stories of Origin” is a Shugendo document dating to the 12th century. This document constitutes the basis for a documentary film created by two sisters, Carina and Sandra Roth—one of only a few English-language documentaries on the topic of Shugendo.

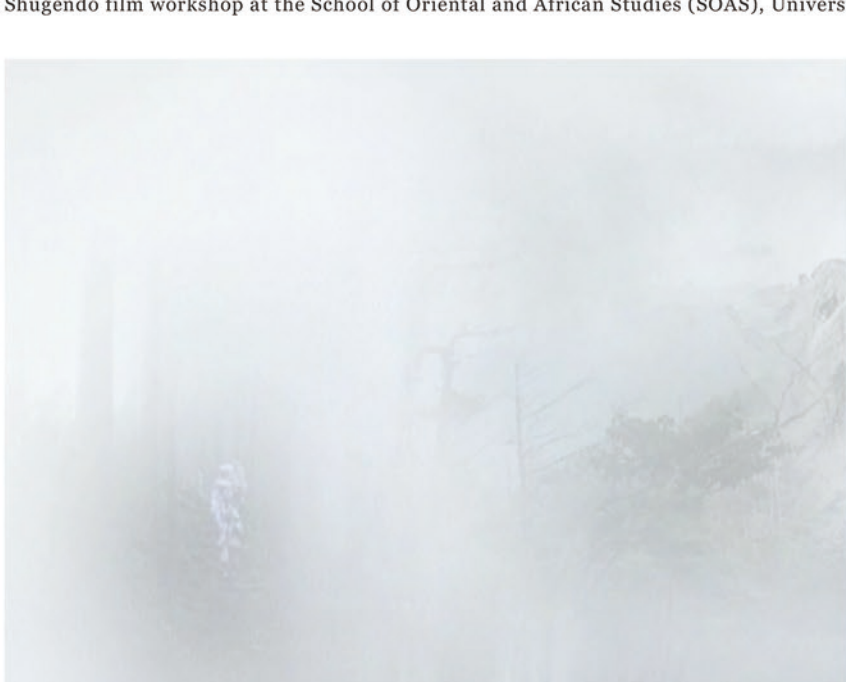
Buddhistdoor Global had an opportunity to speak with Carina and Sandra about the making of this documentary and their fieldwork in Japan. This is part two of a two-part interview.



**BDG: How long did it take to make the film? How much time did you spend in Japan?**

**Sandra:** The images were shot over six weeks during the summer of 2004. The making of the movie then spanned over the next few years, and was completed in 2010. A few months before it was completed, [researcher and academic] Mark McGuire got in touch with Carina, as he was finishing up *Shugendo Now*, the film he made with Jean-Marc Abela.\*

**Carina:** We then realized that both movies shared not only direct quotes from the *Shozan engi*, but also one of their main protagonists, Tateishi Kosho. This exchange led not only to an ongoing friendship with Mark over the years, but also to participation in a Shugendo film workshop at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, in spring 2011.



**BDG: Do you have any strong memories from your time in Japan during filming?**

**Sandra:** For me, it was the eventful “47 waterfalls” circuit that [Shugendo monk] Tateishi Kosho took us on, which turned into an overnight stay on the mountain the very night that a grade six earthquake shook the Kii Peninsula. This meant that when we came out of the forest the next day, the fire brigade and NHK [television news] were waiting for us.

What struck me most was the constant unpredictability from the start of our trip: every day, something new and unforeseen happened. The cause-and-effect chain was as eccentric and far-fetched as the *Shozan engi* storyline. That was really the basic concept of the movie: all that happened to us, we found an echo in the *Shozan engi*.

**Carina:** Another densely packed moment was the evening we spent in a restaurant in Shingu City with a group of *koshinto* [ancient Shinto] specialists. It turned out that the husband of the restaurant owner had filmed the last days of Ibuki Tomyo, a Shugendo practitioner who had intentionally starved himself to death a few years earlier. It was absolutely surrealistic to view these images and discuss them over an abundant and delicious meal.

Like Sandra, I thoroughly enjoyed being carried from moment to moment, never knowing what would happen next, and almost without pause. It was quite magical and also very tiring at times.

It was interesting on a different level, too, because we had to adjust to a shift in our relationship as sisters. Sandra was filming and I was assisting and translating for her, which meant that I did not have the same role as when I do research on my own. It was not always easy to think of being out of the frame, or even just not making any noise during a conversation, especially in Japan, where any conversation is constantly punctuated by little vocal acknowledgments.



**BDG: What reactions have you received from people who watched the film?**

**Sandra:** The film is dense and requires a certain amount of attention, so it cannot really be considered entertainment. As far as orders are concerned, they essentially come from people directly interested in Shugendo, so the movie lives through the research side.

**Carina:** Neither Sandra nor I have a background in film distribution. When the film came out, we both had very young children and were juggling between them and work, and for me, my dissertation, so we had no time to even figure out how to get the film out to a wider audience. Distribution has therefore remained very limited.

We were very happy to be able to show it before it was even completely finished, at the international Shugendo conference in 2008 organized by Bernard Faure, an author and scholar of Asian religions, at Columbia University.

Paul Swanson, an author and scholar of Japanese religions (Shugendo) and Buddhist studies, also included a kind appreciation of *Where Mountains Fly* in the review he made of three Shugendo films in one of the 2010 issues of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (37/2).



**BDG: Two women made this documentary about a male-dominated society, what reactions did you receive and how did you feel about this gender issue?**

**Sandra:** Not only were we two *gaijin*, two foreigners, but we were also two sisters. In a sense, this allowed us to bypass a lot of hierarchical hurdles. We were in a kind of free zone that gave us space to move more or less freely. Our status also meant that we remained outsiders. In addition, because Shugendo is Carina’s research topic, some things did not need to be explained, which also gave us more latitude, and perhaps a more horizontal access.

**Carina:** The gender issue was not on our minds, and we had no intention of tackling the contested discussion [of the exclusion of women] on Sanjogatake Peak, for example. The various beings En no Gyoja encounters on his way to Kumano in the passages of *Shozan engi* that are illustrated in the film are indeed all demonic female beings, but the film does not dwell on the fact that they are women. The theme of the film is not the Okugake trail, or even Shugendo *per se*, but rather the life and lives, religious and other, that abound in the Omine Mountains.



**BDG: Do you think that this documentary has somehow contributed to the revival of Shugendo?**

**Carina and Sandra:** The film was never intended to promote or even introduce Shugendo to an international audience. It is a movie on lived experiences in the Japanese mountains, past and present.

Because of our increasingly urban way of life, for a great number of people, religious or spiritual practice in a natural environment, what is sometimes termed eco-spirituality, has gained stronger appeal—along with a part of dreamed exoticism too.

Some shots in *Where Mountains Fly* also show how our contemporary way of life and the imprints of man-built environments infringe on nature too: the concrete pouring that drapes over mountain flanks, or when *yamabushi* talk on their smartphones, or smoke while taking a break, or eat plastic-wrapped candies.

One of the main objectives of the film was to question our relationship with nature and with the invisible, and Shugendo is a great medium to do that. Shugendo as a practice inherently awakens the imagination and the interest to look at nature differently, intently—which includes an almost fantastic dimension.



**Carina Roth** is a senior lecturer and research fellow in the Department of East Asian Studies and *La Maison de l'histoire* at the University of Geneva and Switzerland. She specializes in the history and anthropology of Japanese religions, and is one of the editors of the recently published volume *Defining Shugendo: Critical Studies on Japanese Mountain Religion*. She is working on the figure of En no Gyoja as founder of Shugendo, as well as on the international expansion and development of Japanese rituals surrounding abortion and perinatal death (mizuko kuyo).

**Sandra Roth** is a visual artist and a Geneva Fine Arts School graduate. She specializes in animation as a tool for documentary storytelling. Where Mountains Fly, the film discussed here, relies, for example, on animation for the narrative parts. As a graphic animator, she has also realized numerous animations and audiovisual projects for museums and the Swiss television network. Her ongoing projects include a film on international finance mechanisms.

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Images courtesy of Carina and Sandra Roth.

\* Connecting the Past and Present of Shugendo – The Revival of Japan’s Ancient Mountain Ascetic Tradition, Part Seven (BDG)

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Alena Eckelmann

Alena Eckelmann is from east of the Wall and south of Berlin, in Germany. She holds an MA in Asian Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and an MA from Passau University in Germany. In 2005, Alena traveled to Tokyo under the EU-sponsored Executive Training Program and worked as assistant director for the Japan Market Expansion Competition. She has been writing about Japan since her days in Tokyo. In 2011, she moved to Kumano in the south of the Kii Peninsula to begin training with a Shugendo monk. In 2016, she received tokudo from Sakuramotobou Temple in Yoshino, where she continues her Shugendo training. She qualified as a licensed guide for the Kumano Kodo and Koyasan, and is a licensed forest therapy guide.

Alena has a deep interest in the spirituality and nature of Japan, which she would like to share with the world. The Shugendo Diaries is published bimonthly.