

wheat the farmer is harvesting but they will grow almost as tall as a man. The seedlings are transplanted in the coldest season and the reeds are harvested in the hottest. They used to be grown almost exclusively in Okayama Prefecture but they do not tolerate contamination: pollution on the other side of the Inland Sea has brought this crop to Shikoku.

Hanging inside the little chapel are large red banners, many of them, each bearing the name, age, and address of someone whose prayers to the Yakushi of this temple have been attended by recovery from illness. Outside are dozens—no, hundreds—of little flags, red and white, planted in the ground, signifying the same blessing. “There are innumerable stories of cures,” the priest murmurs, “from tuberculosis, blindness, paralysis—but the stories are no different, I suppose, from those of any other temple.”

He reflects. “To intellectuals, religion seems strange. But the point of the religious life is mental and spiritual training, and that cannot be achieved by oneself. We need help from some source like Buddha or Kobo Daishi or Yakushi.” He considers us. “The point of the pilgrimage is to improve oneself by enduring and overcoming difficulties.”

Now we leave Tosa. In the old days there was just one authorized exit, a mountain pass called Pine Tree Ascent right on the border between Tosa and Iyo. There is always something significant about crossing a pass. A scholar has noted that the Japanese word for “mountain pass” originates from a verb meaning “to offer,” “because travelers always had to offer something to the god of the pass as a prayer for safe journey (a custom also seen in Korea, Mongolia, and Tibet). . . . There are many instances where large mounds have accumulated from the offerings of small stones.”

At Pine Tree Ascent was a barrier gate. There was a flood of Tosa edicts, one every three or four years for more than two centuries, stipulating that it was the only point where travelers might cross the long border with Iyo. Of course henro who had entered Tosa by evading the barrier gate at the other side of the province had no choice but to try to evade Pine Tree Ascent—and, if caught,

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suffer being flogged or branded or both before being forcibly ejected.

Tosa guards also became unpleasant if outgoing henro had overstayed their authorized thirty days, while they doggedly examined incoming henro—those performing the pilgrimage in reverse order—to screen out spies, rogues, vagabonds, jugglers, minstrels, and monkey trainers.

Many henro of those times, on leaving this province where they felt so abused, would squat with their backs to it and augment the memorial to “the Devil’s Land,” a quite different offering from the usual one at a pass. Writing in 1927, Alfred Bohner reported that the Dung Monument no longer existed but that vegetation grew very rank where it had.

On a contrasting note, praise was lavished on the prospect from the summit: “The entire bay of Sukumo stretched before me: its countless islands, its bizarre tongues of land, its winding arms of the sea.” And, “Kyushu was within reach of my staff while the towering mountains of Iyo lay at my feet.” That 1819 henro from Tosa here surrendered his exit permit and received a new pass permitting him to reenter at the other side of the province. Then, overcome by the view and sentiment at leaving his home country, he composed a haiku before continuing.

For years I did not attempt Pine Tree Ascent, having been assured by presumably knowledgeable folk on both sides of the pass that the path no longer existed, that it had disintegrated and disappeared completely when a new road was built around the mountain instead of over it. But I have learned to distrust such advice and I was haunted by the feeling that I should try to find the old path. Last year, walking with friends in the heat of summer when the dirt and roar of traffic on the highway seemed almost intolerable, I suggested that I was willing to risk losing some hours in the search if they were. We struck off into the countryside toward the hills.

Trying from our maps to figure the best approach, we began to climb along a little wooded road. Around a curve we found an old man, comfortably stripped down to some baggy cotton trousers, with a cart that had started life as a baby buggy. In it were a