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Kuma Matsuri

Bear Hunters as Intermediaries between Humans and Nature

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Abstract

The *matagi* are traditional hunters in the mountainous beech forests of northeastern Japan. They are distinguishable from recreational hunters in their veneration of the *yama no kami*, a female spirit or god who dwells in the mountains. This article will focus on their *kuma matsuri*, a set of rituals associated with bear hunting. It will argue that the rituals reinforce a sense of connectedness and interdependence with the forested mountains, as personified by the *yama no kami*, and that the bear epitomizes the gifts they bestow. From this perspective, the mountains are central to people's lives and livelihoods, a recognition that is somewhat at odds with the "mainstream" culture of the lowland plains and urban areas. For their part, the *matagi* routinely move back and forth across boundaries, both physical and conceptual. They therefore play a vital role as intermediaries between the cultivated human realm and that of untamed nature.

Keywords

matagi – bear hunting – ritual – Japan – *yama no kami*

In a religious sense, *matsuri* 祭り derives from a human desire to interact with the *kami* 神—the spirits that enliven or "animate" nature. This is reflected in the term *jinja* 神社, which is written with two Chinese ideographs meaning *kami* 神—ie., spirit(s) or god(s)—and "association" (*sha* 社). *Jinja* is generally rendered into English as "shrine," referring to a special building and its environs that are dedicated to the performance of Shintō rituals. The English gloss is misleading, however, in that the *kami* are not "enshrined" within a fixed perimeter but rather float freely through the atmosphere and landscape. A *jinja* is where

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one goes to beckon them momentarily to a convenient location where they can be honored, appeased, and petitioned.

The tutelary *jinja* of a town or village is typically situated in a transitional zone where buildings, roads, and cultivated land—the ordinary loci of human activity—give way to the forested mountains. The mountains are the realm of the *kami*, and are thereby synonymous with "wild" and "sacred." The *jinja* offers a halfway meeting point where humans can go to, as the term implies, "associate" with the *kami*.

On certain occasions, however, the line between sacred and profane is transgressed, with one side venturing into the other's domain. The *mikoshi* 神輿 (portable shrine) procession, as described elsewhere in this volume,[1] is one such occasion, whereby the "sacred" is invited into the society of humans to activate and renew their sense of community. This event constitutes the core of *matsuri* as the term applies to a Shintō shrine festival.

The word *matsuri*, however, may be recognized as the nominal form of the verb *matsuru* 祭る (alternatively 祀る), meaning "to worship" or "pray." Thus, at a more basic level, *matsuri* refers to a ritual act of devotion, however brief or improvised. And while this more basic expression of *matsuri* as ritual still implies the active involvement of humans with *kami*—a transaction of sorts—it is no longer confined to established locations like a shrine or neighborhood. It may also involve crossing the boundary between sacred and profane in the other direction: rather than the *kami* being escorted into the human community, it is humans who venture into the realm of the *kami*.

It is in this vein that I would like to consider *kuma matsuri* 熊祭り, referring to various rituals and events associated with bear hunting. These are conducted not by the priests and parishioners of a Shintō shrine, but by dispersed communities of traditional hunters known as *matagi* マタギ, who live and work in the forested mountains of northeastern Japan. Elsewhere I have addressed the role of hunters as intermediaries between villagers and the mountains personified (Schnell 2007). Here I will elaborate upon this role through a descriptive analysis of *matagi* rituals oriented toward the *yama no kami* 山の神, a spirit or god that dwells in the mountains. I will argue that such rituals both reflect and encourage reciprocal relationships with other species, and the recognition of one's own place within an interdependent network. Even so, the line between ritual and ordinary activity is often rather vague; to better understand *matagi* sentiments as they are regularly enacted in either form, I would first like to provide some background on their particular way of life.

1 See the articles by Tsukahara, Porcu, and Breen.

1 Mountains as Marginal: A Lowland Perspective

People who subsist by hunting animals in "the wild" are often viewed with some disdain by their more agriculturally invested neighbors and the distant urban masses. This inclination receives particular impetus in Japan, where the Buddhist proscription against eating meat has historically cast a negative light on anyone involved in taking the lives of animals, especially the four-legged variety (that is, as opposed to birds and fish; Blacker 1996: 179). And since hunters' lives are necessarily mobile, they are likely to be perceived as a threat by the central government, which prefers that its subjects remain in fixed locations where they are more "legible" (Scott 1998).

It is little wonder, then, that rice cultivation, which is highly sedentary and yields a harvest that is easily monitored and taxed, has long been favored by the Japanese nation-state and celebrated in its foundation myths (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). As recounted in both the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters, 712 CE) and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan, 720 CE), the technology for rice production, along with earthly government, were conferred upon Japan's ancient inhabitants by the sun goddess, Amaterasu 天照, through her grandson Ninigi 瓊瓊杵, and Shintō rituals still refer to Japan as the "land of abundant rice on the bountiful plain of reeds" (*toyo ashihara no mizuho no kuni* 豊葦原の瑞穂の国).[2] Such allusions betray a distinctly "lowland" bias that favors rice cultivation over other means of subsistence such as foraging or horticulture. The mountains may have been revered as sources of irrigation water (Hori 1968: 150–151), but not as proper places to make a living.

The distinction between lowland and mountain dwelling cultures in Japan has long been recognized, but the mountain-oriented—or "top-down"—perspective has been conspicuously under-represented in ethnographic and historical research (Tsuboi 1982; Schnell 2005, 2006; Knight 2008: 81; Ishikawa 2011). Such neglect is largely attributable to the lowland bias, and to the related assumption that Japan's cultural identity is firmly rooted in its ancestral rice-growing villages. The voluminous work of Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男, revered 'father' of Japanese folkloristics (or *minzokugaku* 民俗学), stands as an apt example.

In his earlier studies, Yanagita was intent on documenting regional peculiarities and spent much of his time in remote mountain regions. He was perhaps the first to describe for a popular audience the concept of the *yama no kami* 山の神, or mountain god (Naumann 1963: 136), which was recognized by

2 For an alternative interpretation of this mythical account, one which calls into question the primacy of rice in premodern Japanese agriculture, see Verschuer (2016: 269–280).

mountain dwelling people and lowland villagers alike. Yanagita noted that the villagers erected shrines for worshipping the *yama no kami* at the boundary separating land that they had cleared for cultivation from land that remained in forest. From this he reasoned that people prayed to the *yama no kami* as a way of gaining permission to enter its realm and use its resources. The concept must therefore have originated among the indigenous hunting and gathering population, who had retreated further into the mountains with the encroachment of agriculture. It was later incorporated into the beliefs of the agriculturalists themselves, whom Yanagita considered the forerunners of the present-day Japanese (Yanagita 1962b).

During the mid-1920s, Yanagita's focus began to shift away from distinctive regional identities toward the definition of a unified mainstream, or *jōmin* 常民 (common folk), culture derived from rural villagers engaged in rice cultivation. He subsequently espoused a new understanding of the *yama no kami* more in line with this unifying project. In so doing he drew on a widespread belief among rice growing communities that roughly proceeds as follows. In spring, when the rice seedlings are transplanted, the *yama no kami* descends from its mountain abode to become the *ta no kami* 田の神, or rice paddy god, taking up residence in the flooded rice fields to vitalize the crop and ensure a successful growing season. In autumn, when the crop is harvested, this *ta no kami* retreats back into the mountains and becomes the *yama no kami* once more. The cycle is repeated year after year, notably coinciding with the flow of irrigation water (see Grapard 1982: 200; Hardacre 1983: 156; Gilday 1990: 273; Schnell 2007: 865).

In *About Our Ancestors* (*Senzo no hanashi* 先祖の話), one of his best known works, Yanagita notes an interesting parallel between the seasonal movement of the *yama no kami* and another widespread folk belief—that ancestral spirits, who also reside in the mountains, return every year, either at New Year or at Obon お盆 in mid-summer, to visit their former households. He then proceeds with an interesting yet highly speculative attempt to integrate the two beliefs. He begins with the assumption that land tenure serves as the primary basis for establishing and maintaining a family. From this he reasons that since the ancestors, while alive, had invested so much of their time and energy in the land—specifically the rice fields—it is understandable that they would maintain an ongoing interest in the success of the harvest even after crossing into the spirit realm. Over time, as the land is passed from one generation to the next, the ancestral spirits come to be associated with the rice fields themselves. He therefore concludes that the *ta no kami* and ancestral spirits are but different manifestations of a single metaphysical presence, and that the *yama no kami* is simply its off-season identity (Yanagita 1970: 74–75; see also the original in Japanese, Yanagita 1962c: 54).

Yanagita's stature was such that his ideas tended to be accepted uncritically and soon became the standard explanations. They have been adopted and conveyed by subsequent scholars, thereby becoming further entrenched in the relevant literature (see, for example, Grapard 1982: 201; Ivy 1995: 108; Miyake 2001: 186). Yanagita himself (1970: 75) insisted that belief in the alternating *yama no kami/ta no kami* was found all over Japan, "from the farthest north to the farthest south." Strictly in terms of latitude, this statement may be accurate, but it fails to recognize another source of cultural diversity—namely *elevation*, as in vertical distance above sea level.

2 Mountains as Central: An Alternative Image of the *Yama no Kami*

Let us now consider the perspective of people who live and work higher up in the mountains. Communities in these areas generally exist as clusters of houses in narrow river basins enveloped by steep slopes. Arable land is limited and the growing season is often too short for rice cultivation to be feasible. Subsistence traditionally depended upon a diversified strategy that combined gardening near the houses and swidden cultivation on the adjacent slopes, with hunting, gathering, and fishing deeper in the mountains. Timber cutting and charcoal production offered supplemental income, as did migrant labor opportunities such as mining and construction.

The "deep mountain," or *okuyama* 奥山, area was extensive, affording a wealth of vital resources for people (like the *matagi*) who possessed the knowledge and skills to exploit them. The forested mountains not only fed water to the streams but also provided food, fuel, medicinal substances, and raw materials for clothing and shelter. Human life and welfare were inextricably linked to the mountain environment and all the other species it contained. The mountains, in other words, were central to people's lives and livelihoods.

Such material dependencies were symbolically acknowledged through localized religious beliefs, specifically relating to the *yama no kami*. While invoking the same deity, however, these beliefs were somewhat different from those held by people who lived at lower elevations in flatter terrain. From a mountain-oriented perspective, the *yama no kami* watched over the forest and all its varied inhabitants, be they animal or plant, thus remaining in the *okuyama* the whole year round—there was no seasonal coming and going (Chiba 1975a: 285; 1977: 395–399). And while the lowland *ta no kami* was typically identified as male, the *yama no kami* of hunters and timber cutters was recognized as female (Ishikawa 2000: 746–747; Sasaki 2006: 42–50). In fact, she was often depicted as a nurturing mother, and in many areas served double-

duty as the patron deity of childbirth (Naumann 1963: 219–221). Some sculpted images of the *yama no kami* show an infant clinging to her breast and are highly reminiscent of the Kosodate Kannon 子育て観音, or child-nurturing Bodhisattva of compassion.

These sentiments have persisted in varying degrees to the present day but are rapidly fading. The intrusion of market capitalism and industrial technologies has enhanced the divide between humans and "nature." People increasingly draw their necessities from outside the local area, so their ties to the land are obscured or diluted. Rural Japan, especially in the more mountainous regions, is becoming depopulated: young people move away to the cities in search of more attractive social and economic opportunities, while old people (the traditional custodians of local knowledge) die off with no one to succeed them. This combination of factors has led to a general desacralization of the rural landscape, which is understandable if we accept that, in the words of Leonardo Boff (1997: 118), "Only a personal relationship with Earth makes us love it."

But among those who have maintained such a "personal relationship" through their lifestyles and activities, and who still recognize the extent to which their own wellbeing depends upon the presence and viability of other species, the natural landscape continues to be valued as a sacred trust. This intimate association with nature and active involvement in local ecosystems is what epitomizes the *matagi*—traditional hunters, most famously of bears, in the mountainous beech forests of Northeastern Japan.[3]

3 Matagi

The origin of the term *matagi* is the subject of considerable speculation with no definitive answers. One theory suggests it was borrowed from the Ainu language,[4] combining the words *mata* (winter) and *iki* or *ki* (to do) to mean work

3 Here I am referring to the Tōhoku 東北 region in northern Honshū, the largest island in the Japanese archipelago. Tōhoku officially consists of Aomori, Akita, Iwate, Yamagata, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures, though *matagi* communities are located in parts of Niigata and Nagano prefectures as well. "Beech forest" is a general term that represents a diverse community of plants and animals, including various other types of trees such as oak, maple, birch, cherry, ash, and chestnut; the beech tree is simply the most representative or defining member. In the mountains of Tōhoku, *bunarin* ブナ林 (beech forest) resonates with all the cultural associations that *mizuho no kuni* (land of abundant rice) holds for people in the lower basins and coastal plains.

4 The Ainu are an indigenous people who traditionally subsisted by hunting and gathering and once occupied all of Hokkaidō and northern Honshū, as well as Sakhalin, Khabarovsk Krai,

that one does in the winter—namely hunting.[5] Mutō (1997: 215) speculates that it derives from the Sanskrit word *matangi* (an occupational category involving the slaughter of animals for meat), perhaps introduced into Japan through esoteric Buddhism. Yanagita (1962a) thought it was a reference to a kind of improvised walking stick made from a forked tree branch (*mata* 股, meaning "crotch" or "fork" combined with *ki* or *gi* 木, meaning "wood" or "tree"). *Matagi* is usually written in *katakana*, a native syllabary reserved for foreign words and phrases. When written in *kanji*, or Chinese-derived characters, it is most often rendered as 又鬼, combining the characters *mata* 又, meaning "once more" (but in this case "more than"), and *ki* or *gi* 鬼 (also read *oni*), referring to a supernatural demon commonly appearing in Japanese folklore. The allusion here is that in order to kill a wild animal—especially a large and dangerous animal such as a bear—the hunter has to be even more fierce than a mythical demon. This is most likely a "folk etymology" that was coined well after the term's origin, but that nevertheless served its purpose in training young *matagi* to be stoic.

Each attempted explanation appeals to certain people for certain reasons, and each reveals a different aspect of *matagi* tradition. For the purposes of this article I would like to highlight yet another popular theory—that *matagi* is a nominalization of the verb *matagu* 跨ぐ, meaning "to step over or across;" "to bridge, span, or straddle."[6] This derivation accurately captures the essence of *matagi* activity—they cross freely over mountain ridges (and political boundaries) in pursuit of game animals, they straddle the divide between domesticated space and wild nature, and they serve as a spiritual link between humans and the *yama no kami*.

The more general word for "hunter" in Japanese is *ryōshi* 猟師, but it fails to convey the same cultural associations. The English loanword *hantā* ハンター (hunter), is also widely used, and evokes the image of a modern outdoor sportsman. Significantly, the *matagi* use the word *hantā*, but never in reference to themselves; rather, it is reserved for people—usually from urban areas—who simply stalk and kill wild animals for recreation with little knowledge of, or affinity for, the local landscape.

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and the Kuril Islands. Their language is completely different from Japanese. Many of the place names in northern Honshū are of Ainu origin. The Ainu and *matagi* are culturally distinct but no doubt interacted historically.

5 Some older *matagi* recall customary use of the phrase *matagi e iku* マタギへ行く (going *matagi*-ing) when setting out to hunt in the mountains.

6 As Mutō (1997: 215) notes, this is similar to the way that *kasegu* 稼ぐ (to earn) is nominalized as *kasegi* 稼ぎ (earnings).

In any case, to describe the *matagi* merely as "hunters" is somewhat misleading. Until around the mid-1950s, some of them were able to support themselves almost exclusively through hunting. Most, however, were involved in a wide range of subsistence activities that included gathering edible vegetation (ferns, roots, berries, nuts, and mushrooms), freshwater fishing, swidden cultivation of various root vegetables, intensive cultivation of hardy grains (millet, barley, and buckwheat), and perhaps even growing a little rice where conditions allowed. These activities were often supplemented by the production and sale of charcoal as well as migrant labor in the timber cutting, mining, and construction industries. Hunting was largely confined to the winter and early spring when other activities demanded less of their time.

Even so, the *matagi* were renowned for their hunting abilities, supported by an intimate understanding of the mountain terrain and of the habitats and behaviors of wild animals. Of course, wild animals are highly mobile, and their numbers fluctuate. Whether in search of food or evading predation, they roam freely across the landscape with little regard for political boundaries. The *matagi* adopted a similar pattern, not only in pursuit of game animals, but also to expand their hunting operations into other areas and engage in the commercial exchange of meat, furs, and medicinal substances. Their lives were necessarily more mobile than those of lowland villagers, and therefore less subject to surveillance and regulation by government authorities.

A wide variety of game animals made their home in the beech forests, or *bunarin* ブナ林, that once covered much of central and northeastern Japan. The *matagi* hunted hare (*nousagi* 野兎), marten (*ten* 貂), badger (*anaguma* 穴熊), flying squirrel (*musasabi* ムササビ or *bandori* バンどり), copper pheasant (*yamadori* 山鳥), and other small game, but in terms of subsistence the larger animals were more highly prized. Large game animals were collectively referred to as *shishi* シシ, which was an allusion to their having four legs (*shi ashi* 四足) but generally conveyed the notion of "meat." For the *matagi*, the two most important species were the *kamoshika* カモシカ, or Japanese serow (often described as resembling a cross between a goat and an antelope), and the *tsukinowaguma* ツキノワグマ, or Asian black bear (Ursus thibetanus), distinguishable by a crescent-shaped patch of white fur on its chest.[7]

7 Deer (*nihonjika* 二ホンジカ) and wild boar (*inoshishi* イノシシ) generally stayed out of the deep mountain areas since heavy snow accumulations presented impediments to their movement. This is recently starting to change, and is taken by the *matagi* as another indication that nature is "out of balance." The encroachment of wild boar is particularly alarming to the *matagi* because the boar competes directly with the bear for food.

Due to declining populations of *kamoshika* in Western Japan, restrictions on hunting the animal began in the 1930s, and in 1955 it was designated a protected species nationwide. Thereafter the *matagi* focused mainly on bears. Their hunting activities and traditions had been rather extensively studied by Japanese ethnologists, most notably Takahashi Buntarō (1937), Mutō Tetsujō (1997), Gotō Kōzen (1989), Miyamoto Tsune'ichi (1964, 1992), and Chiba Tokuji (1975a, 1975b, 1977), prior to, during, and just after the Second World War. But a popular-audience book by Togawa Yukio (1962) introduced them to a wider readership, and they came to be romanticized in the popular imagination as courageous bear hunters.

Matagi still exist, but their numbers are steadily dwindling through attrition. Documentaries typically portray them as nostalgic remnants from a bygone era, or instructive examples for "coexisting with nature" (*shizen to kyōsei suru* 自然と共生する). Even so, today's *matagi* are as much a part of contemporary Japan as the salaried employees of major business corporations. Most of them hold regular jobs (if not yet retired), particularly in forest management and the timber industry. They live in contemporary homes with all the modern conveniences, communicate via cell phone, obtain much of their food from supermarkets, and transport themselves in the most recently manufactured vehicles. Hunting continues to define their identity, but its importance is more symbolic than material. When they hunt they use high-powered rifles with telescopic sights, binoculars for locating their prey, and radio transceivers for coordinating their movements (see Figure 1).

What then distinguishes them from the ordinary *hantā*, and what qualifies them as being 'traditional?' The answers may be found in some recent scholarship on "traditional ecological knowledge," or TEK, which Berkes (2018: 7) defines as "*a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings* (*including humans*) *with one another and with their environment*" (italics in the original). In contrasting TEK with Western science, Berkes notes that "many systems of indigenous knowledge include spiritual or religious dimensions (beliefs) that do not make sense to science or fall outside the realm of science." He adds that "Traditional knowledge systems tend to have a large moral and ethical context; there is no separation between nature and culture" (Berkes 2018: 11). In a similar vein, Pierotti (2010) distinguishes TEK in terms of the following characteristics: it is specific to a particular location; it has endured over time but is nevertheless capable of incorporating new information; and it conveys a sense of honor and responsibility on the part of human beings, primarily through the use of stories and metaphors. Of particular interest is the following observation: "Indigenous peo-

FIGURE 1 Contemporary *matagi*
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

ple invariably contend that the attitude and philosophy involved, rather than the technology, are what make a practice traditional" (Pierotti 2010: 13–14). In short, adopting new technologies does not necessarily require abandoning tradition.

The *matagi* are distinctive in their attachment to place, their intimate understanding of the local ecosystem, and their sense of responsibility for its maintenance and preservation. But what sets them apart most clearly from "ordinary" hunters is their abiding veneration of the *yama no kami*. They are careful to seek her blessing before venturing into her realm, and to thank her for any benefits they obtain therein. Anything gained from the mountains is thus considered a gift from the *yama no kami*, and they routinely use the word *sazukaru* 授かる—a humble verb form meaning "to be bestowed/blessed [with]"—in referring to the taking of game animals. They are also mindful that abusing the privilege—by taking too much or failing to offer anything in return—would invite the deity's wrath, resulting in declining fortunes. Living things must consume other living things in order to survive—that is the nature of ecosystems and food chains—but killing merely for sport or recreation is anathema. Veneration of the *yama no kami* thus enforces an ethic of conservation by placing limits on

the amount of resources that are taken and encouraging efforts to promote the health of the entire ecosystem—of which the *matagi* themselves are a vital component.

The fact that the *yama no kami* of hunters is female, however, should not be taken as evidence of progressive attitudes toward gender equality. Folk belief holds that the *yama no kami* is sensitive about her own appearance and inherently jealous of other females (Togawa 1962: 80; Chiba 1975b; Blacker 1996: 181; Fujita 2011: 40). For this reason women have traditionally been prohibited from hunting for fear that the deity might take offense and withhold her favors—refuse to grant the hunters success, in other words. With the number of hunters declining and fears that the hunting tradition may disappear altogether, the restriction on females is slowly starting to lift. At present I know of at least three women who have become *matagi*, each in a different hunting group. This would have been inconceivable as recently as ten years ago.[8] Even so, the transition is piecemeal, and most groups continue to be exclusively male. The justification for excluding women, typically, is reluctance to offend the *yama no kami*.

There are various factions among the *matagi*, just as there are various denominations within the same religion. One of the major factions, the Nikkō-ha 日光派, claims a vague association with Tendai 天台 Buddhism and identifies itself by invoking a legendary ancestor named Banji Banzaburō 磐次磐三郎.[9] According to one narrative, Banji Banzaburō is highly renowned for his skill with the bow and arrow. He fights on the side of the mountain deity Nikkō Gongen 日光権現 in her battle with a rival god Akagi Myōjin 赤城明神, who has taken the form of a giant serpent.[10] With deadly accuracy, Banji Banzaburō shoots an arrow into the serpent's eye, thereby ensuring Nikkō Gongen the final victory. As a reward, he and his descendants are granted the right to hunt freely in the forested mountains all over Japan. This legend is contained in a scroll entitled *Yamadachi konpon no maki* 山立根本之巻 (Hunter's Foundational Scroll),[11] which is held by the *matagi* as a kind of license that justifies their lifestyle and freedom of movement. The leader of every hunting group in this faction owns a copy of the scroll.

8 This trend is reflected nationwide, with increasing numbers of women taking up hunting (Tanaka 2011).

9 Alternatively written as either 盤司盤三郎 or 万事万三郎.

10 According to some versions a giant centipede, or *mukade* 百足.

11 *Yamadachi* 山立 (sometimes written 山達), is an older, more general term for traditional hunters of Northeastern Japan. It refers to "people who enter the mountains," and is virtually synonymous with *matagi*.

Another story describes Banji Banzaburō not as one man but as two brothers, Banji and Banzaburō, who happen upon the *yama no kami* in the forest while she is in the midst of giving birth. The elder brother Banji flees in fear of becoming polluted, but the younger brother Banzaburō remains to assist the deity through a successful delivery and is therefore rewarded with the right to hunt in her mountains. This version is particularly interesting in that it acknowledges an active role for human beings in helping to nurture the environment, as personified by the *yama no kami*.

The other major faction, the Kōya-ha 高野派, traces its origins to Kūkai 空海 (posthumously known as Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師, 774–835), founder of Shingon 真言 Buddhism in the ninth century. This story is contained in another scroll entitled *Yamadachi yurai no koto* 山達由来之事 (On the Hunters' Origins). Three hunters are pursuing game on Mt. Kōya 高野 where they encounter Kūkai, who has come there hoping to establish a monastery. Despite the fact that taking the lives of animals is considered deeply sinful in Buddhism, Kūkai allows the hunters a dispensation provided that they comply with certain conditions: they must refrain from killing indiscriminately and take only what they need for their subsistence; they must relinquish the use of bow and arrow since arrows can be shot to great distances (presumably meaning that they are less accurate than a spear and thus more likely to cause suffering to the targeted animals); and of the three hunters, one of them must give up hunting altogether and spend the rest of his life as a Buddhist monk. The hunters agree to these conditions, whereupon Kūkai endows them with a salvific prayer (*indō* 引導) to recite for the spirits of the animals they kill.

Taken as a whole, these narratives establish three important precedents relating to the *matagi* lifestyle. First, the *matagi* have the right to move freely through the mountains as they hunt for wild game, unrestricted by political boundaries. Second, they play an active role in local ecosystems by assisting the *yama no kami* in her productive activities. Third, by maintaining the proper attitudes of reverence and respect, they absolve themselves of sin from killing animals. In other words, by evoking these narratives, the *matagi* have managed to legitimize their activities through a clever manipulation of religious concepts that would otherwise discredit and exclude them.

4 Bears and Bear Hunting

It has long been recognized that among indigenous peoples throughout the northern hemisphere the bear is the object of special respect and veneration, and that bear hunting is accompanied by rituals and ceremonies that are not similarly afforded to other animals (Hallowell 1926; Nelson 1983: 172–189; Shepard and Sanders 1985: 77–91; Scott 2006). The *matagi*, of course, are no exception. What explains this special treatment of bears in particular?

Bears exhibit a number of affinities with human beings. First and foremost they are omnivores, positioned at the top of the food chain. They tend to like the same kinds of food that humans like. Their eyes are positioned forward on their heads to afford binocular vision. Due to their hip structure, they can stand upright on their hind legs to gain a better perspective, and can even walk bipedally. A track from the rear paw of a bear looks remarkably like a human footprint. The front paws, meanwhile, exhibit impressive hand-like dexterity. Bears are good at climbing trees and navigating rugged terrain. Mother bears are notoriously protective of their young, and cubs remain with their mothers for extended periods of time until they learn to survive on their own. If one is looking for a human counterpart in the realm of nature, the bear is an obvious candidate. According to the eminent *matagi* scholar Taguchi Hiromi 田口洋美, when *matagi* are asked "what animal is closest to the *yama no kami*?" they invariably answer "the bear" (Taguchi Hiromi 田口洋美, personal communication, 3 May 2013).

Back in the days when mountain villages had to be largely self-sufficient, bears were highly valued for their meat, especially in regions where other sources of animal protein were lacking. Bear furs are warm and water resistant, so they were often incorporated into cold weather clothing. Of particular importance was the gall bladder (*tannō* 胆のう but colloquially referenced as *kuma no i* 熊の胆), which in traditional East Asian medicine is attributed with the power to heal a multitude of ills, especially stomach ailments. In short, bears were essential for human life in *matagi* villages, and the success of the bear hunt was of paramount importance. It is little wonder, then, that bear hunting was surrounded by rituals and taboos.

The villages of Ani 阿仁 in Akita prefecture, located in the vicinity of Mt. Moriyoshi (Moriyoshi yama 森吉山),[12] are considered the birthplace of the *matagi*, and that is where the term was first applied to people who made their

12 Ani no longer exists as a political unit. In 2005 it was amalgamated with three other towns to form the city of Kita-Akita.

living, at least in part, by hunting. The Akita *matagi* belonged to the Nikkō faction, and freely exercised the boundary crossing privileges they had been granted through their ancestor Banji Banzaburō in the *Yamadachi konpon no maki*. During the latter part of the Edo period, in the early 1800s, they began to expand their hunting activities into neighboring regions and capitalize on emerging markets for meat, fur, gall, and other animal products. When the new Meiji government mounted a program of "reclaiming" land for agriculture in the late 1800s, the *matagi* began to market their technical skills for the purpose of protecting crops and villagers from wildlife depredations. Hunting thus became a form of migrant labor for the Akita *matagi*, some of them proceeding to organize bands of hunters in other prefectures and even marrying into local households (Taguchi 2000a: 90–94; 2000b: 101–105). While these so-called *tabi-matagi* 旅またぎ (*tabi* referring to "travel" or "journey") were no longer engaged exclusively in subsistence oriented hunting, they nevertheless extended their conservation ethics into the new commercial ventures, recognizing that over-exploiting wild animal populations would have eliminated their own *raison d'être*. As Taguchi (2000a: 78) explains, "It is impossible to sustain hunting as a way of life without maintaining a balance between capture and propagation. In other words, 'sustainable hunting' cannot be achieved unless there is coexistence with wildlife."

Again, the concept of TEK as a combination of knowledge, practice, *and* belief is highly relevant to this discussion. Indeed, throughout the Taishō 大正 (1912–1926) and early Shōwa 昭和 (1926–1989) periods, the *tabi-matagi* introduced not only their hunting techniques but also the corresponding beliefs and rituals into other areas, such as the villages of Oguni 小国 in Yamagata Prefecture and adjacent parts of northern Niigata Prefecture (Taguchi 2000b: 105–106; 2002: 143–144). The result was a loosely structured network, not a rigidly controlled system. Tradition, of course, is malleable, and adapts itself to specific local conditions. Turning now to the present day, this malleability helps to explain why dispersed *matagi* villages share the same basic patterns but vary widely in details.

The favored time of year for bear hunting is mid- to late April through early May, just after the bears emerge from hibernation and begin to roam around in search of food. Several factors combine to make this brief period ideal for hunting. Animals are much easier to spot while the trees are still bare. The packed melting snow offers solid footing on the steep slopes, allowing humans easier access to the higher elevations. And since the bears have not been digesting food for several months while hibernating, the gall bladder is much larger, swollen with its accumulated bile. In Japan, however, the official hunting season for all species of game animals is 15 November to 15 February. Bears are in

hibernation and therefore inaccessible during most of that time. Consequently, the *matagi* must obtain special permission from their local governments each year to hunt bears during the ideal conditions of early spring.[13]

The *matagi* sometimes hunt singly or in twos and threes, but they are better known for hunting cooperatively in larger groups of fifteen to twenty or more members. Generations ago they perfected a technique called *makigari* 巻き狩り, or "enveloping hunt,"[14] which makes clever use of the rugged mountain terrain and has proven highly effective. As the term implies, the participants encircle a steeply sloping watershed wherein a bear has been sighted or is thought to be hiding. Some of them—usually the younger, less experienced members—take positions well down on the slope, forming the bottom of the encirclement. These are the *seko* 勢子, or drivers.[15] Other, more senior members locate themselves along the ridges on either side of the watershed leading up to the summit. They are called *uke* 受け or *ukeseko* 受け勢子 (interceptors), and their role is to contain the bear if it tries to cross over into an adjacent valley. Waiting at the top are three *buppa* 射場 (shooters)—ranked "first," "second," and "third"—positioned at intervals along the summit. Their job, of course, is to shoot the bear as it nears their positions, and not surprisingly they are the best marksmen. On a convenient vantage point, usually the high ground directly opposite the encircled watershed, is the *mukaimatte* 向い待手, who observes and directs the entire operation. This role is usually assumed by the *shikari*, the leader of the group (see Figure 2).[16]

At a signal from the *mukaimatte*, the drivers begin to shout: "Hooo-o! Hooo-o!" The sounds of their voices echo eerily through the valley. This flushes the bear and gets it moving. The drivers then close in behind to tighten the circle. When a bear senses danger, it instinctively moves toward higher ground. If it heads for the ridge on either side of the watershed, the *uke* there will turn it

13 This special permission is granted ostensibly for the purpose of culling bear populations to reduce the number of human-bear encounters and to limit damage to crops (Taguchi 2000b: 92).

14 Also known as *shishimaki* シシ巻き.

15 It is worth noting that the *seko*, typically, do not carry firearms. Through years of apprenticeship they gain knowledge and experience—of bear behavior, of the intricacies of the hunt, and most importantly how to navigate their way through the mountains without getting lost. If they prove themselves worthy they will move up through the ranks, perhaps one day joining the *buppa* (shooters) at the summit.

16 These are the terms used by the Akita *matagi*. The terms used for the various roles differ from region to region. In Oguni of Yamagata Prefecture, for example, the leader is called either *yamasaki* ヤマサキ (lead in the mountains) or *oyakata* 親方 (foreman). The term *oyakata* is used in Niigata as well. Such leadership is confined to the hunting operations—it does not necessarily carry over into other aspects of community life.

FIGURE 2 View from the position of the *mukaimatte*
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

back the other way. The bear thus moves in a zigzag pattern as it works its way upslope. Ideally (from the hunters' perspective), as it nears the summit, it will pass laterally by one or more of the *buppa*, offering a clean broadside shot.

Accepting a gift bestowed by the mountains is not simply a matter of shooting an animal, however. It is effected symbolically through the medium of ritual, which brings us at last to the topic at hand. The following descriptions are drawn from Mikame (1976), Chiba (1969, 1975a, 1977), Sakuma (1985), and Taguchi (2004), as well as my own multi-sited fieldwork among the *matagi* of Akita, Yamagata, and Niigata prefectures during successive years from 2013 to 2019.

5 Kuma Matsuri

Any mention of *kuma matsuri* (or of bear ceremony in a Japanese context) will likely bring to mind the Ainu *iyomante* イヨマンテ, or spirit-sending ritual for bears (Kitagawa 1961; Irimoto 2010). *Matagi* bear ritual is similar to the *iyomante* in that it entails an expression of gratitude for the bear's sacri-

fice (or gift) and a sending of the bear's spirit back to its place of origin. But there are also major differences (Ikeya 2005: 166–169). The Ainu of Japan are mostly located in Hokkaidō and hunt the Hokkaidō brown bear, or *higuma* ヒグマ.[17] The *matagi*, on the other hand, live mostly in northern Honshū and hunt the Asian black bear (*tsukinowaguma*), *higuma* being entirely absent from that region and indeed all of Japan outside Hokkaidō. To the *matagi*, the bear is a gift from the mountain god, while to the Ainu the bear itself is a god (or *kamui* in the Ainu language). The *iyomante* involves capturing a bear cub from its den and raising it to maturity, at which point it is ceremonially killed—or rather (considering that the bear is essentially a spirit) sent back to the spirit realm. Bear ritual for the *matagi*, on the other hand, is directly related to the hunting effort and begins in the mountains where the bear is encountered and killed in its natural habitat.

Kuma matsuri, often referred to in the vernacular as *shishi matsuri*, manifests itself at three different levels. In the mountains, it is a set of rituals performed over the body of a bear immediately after it has been killed. In the local community, it is a celebratory feast marking the conclusion of a successful bear hunt. At the regional level, it refers to a large tourist event created in the mid-1970s for the purpose of attracting visitors and stimulating the economy.[18] Here I will focus on the mountain and community levels, which are in actuality different phases of a single commemorative and conciliatory process. In fact, since the hunt itself is carried out within the realm of the *yama no kami* and conducted according to a strict set of rules and prohibitions, it too could be considered a sacred (i.e., ritualized) activity.

It should be noted here what perhaps is already obvious to the reader—that *matagi* belief is a kind of "animism" in which nature is recognized as a conscious presence. When the *matagi* enter into the deep mountains, they carry with them a strong sense or awareness that they are being watched—by both the mountain deity *and* the animals that reside there (Taguchi Hiromi 田口洋美, personal communication, 3 May 2013). Their behavior is being evaluated, in other words, as to whether they are demonstrating the proper respect and comportment.

17 *Ursus arctos yesoensis*, the same species as (but a different sub-species from) the Grizzly and Kodiak.

18 This large tourist-oriented version of the *kuma matsuri* is held every year on 4 May in the village of Kotamagawa 小玉川, Oguni city, Yamagata Prefecture. It retains some of the ritual elements of the traditional version but with an emphasis on spectacle and entertaining the public. As for tourist-oriented versions of festivals, see also Foster's analysis of Namahage in this volume.

FIGURE 3 Shrine to the *yama no kami* in Oguni, Yamagata Prefecture
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

5.1 *Hunting Rituals*

As the importance of hunting for subsistence continues to fade, so do its attendant rituals. Often they are abbreviated or abandoned altogether, and with them the sentiments they once conveyed. Depopulation of rural areas, busy work schedules, and new technologies have all had an impact on the way bear hunting is conducted. Here and there throughout northeastern Japan, however, *matagi* traditions have persisted in varying degrees to the present day.

Veneration of the *yama no kami* remains a defining element in *matagi* identity. When embarking on a hunt, typically at the point of entry into the *okuyama*, the participants assemble in front of a small shrine or large rock dedicated to the deity (see Figure 3) to seek her endorsement, pray for their safety and success, and make an offering of *sake*, or rice wine (a small portion of which they themselves imbibe).

In former times, that is until around the early 1970s, the *matagi* were famous for their adherence to a special argot called *yama kotoba* 山言葉 (mountain language), which was used only in the mountains and not shared with outsiders.[19]

19 In fact, Taguchi (2000a: 81–83; 2002: 128; personal communication 5 February 2013) claims

It also served to conceal the hunters' intentions from the targeted game animals—in this case bears—who were believed to be capable of understanding human speech. While in the mountains, certain behaviors—such as talking too loudly, laughing, singing, whistling, yawning, or mentioning one's wife or girlfriend—were strictly prohibited. The use of alcohol and tobacco were forbidden as well. Infringement of the rules, typically by a young novice, was considered disrespectful to the *yama no kami*. Offenders were required to immerse themselves naked in the icy waters of a mountain stream, which served as both an admonishment and a ritual of purification. Any misfortune, or simply lack of success in finding a bear, would invariably arouse suspicions that someone had broken the rules and offended the *yama no kami*.

Many of the older *matagi* still remember being subjected to such ordeals. At present, however, young recruits are so few and so urgently needed that they are not likely to be treated so harshly. Likewise, *yama kotoba*, with the exception of a few key words, is no longer spoken. The air of silence and solemnity upon entering the mountains, however, most certainly prevails. This has obvious practical benefits in focusing the hunters' attention and not alerting the game animals, but is routinely explained as a show of respect.

The most iconic expression of *matagi* sentiments is a solemn ritual called *kebokai* けボカイ,[20] which is usually performed immediately after a bear has been killed. First the bear's body is laid out on its back—preferably atop a clean patch of snow—with the head oriented toward a particular direction. Typically that direction is north, but some groups choose the east, and others the west. Still other groups arrange the body so that the head is upstream, regardless of the cardinal directions.

This lack of uniformity in practice from one group to another should not be surprising. If ritualization involves the framing of an activity to distinguish it from the mundane or purely instrumental (Bell 1992), then what really matters is that *some particular direction* is specified, no matter which one. Furthermore, the secretive nature of this particular ritual lends itself to variation among groups, as the exact procedures are not shared with outsiders.

At this point the group's leader, the *shikari*, squats or kneels beside the bear and sprinkles a little salt over its body. Then, while quietly uttering a prayer—

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that the term *matagi* is part of this special argot and simply means "a person." Thus, while hunting in the mountains, it was naturally used in reference to oneself and to one's fellow hunters.

20 The derivation of *kebokai* is unclear, though the *ke* (毛) is obviously a reference to the fur or hide. Gotō (1989: 93) states that *kebokai* means "praying to honor the fur" (*ke o iwai inoru koto* 毛を祝い祈ること).

kept secret from all but his eventual successor—he gently brushes the bear with either a branch from a fir tree or a leafy stalk of bamboo grass.[21] This is meant as a ritual of purification, much in the manner of a Shintō priest purifying offerings with a *haraegushi* 祓串 (purification wand).

The *shikari* takes his knife and makes a lengthwise cut down the centerline of the bear's body. He then makes follow-up cuts from the centerline out to each of the four legs, and proceeds to systematically skin the bear.

When the pelt (*kegawa* 毛皮) has been removed, the hunters gather together and stand around the carcass in respectful silence.[22] This is the point at which the *kebokai* actually begins. Here again, the details of the ritual vary from group to group, but the underlying pattern is the same—the pelt is momentarily held out over the naked carcass while a prayer is offered to the *yama no kami*. In most versions of this ritual, the head and tail of the pelt are reversed relative to the carcass. In some groups the pelt is held by four hunters, one at each corner. In other groups two hunters do the holding, one at the head and forelegs and the other at the hind legs. In still other groups the *shikari* alone holds the pelt. Furthermore, the pelt may be held steadily, or it may be waved over the carcass three times. Some groups lay the pelt back over the carcass momentarily, as if covering it up again.

The accompanying prayer is more like an incantation and is partly derived from Sanskrit.[23] Its meaning is obscure and the wording varies widely among different villages, but it generally incorporates the phrase *senbiki mo manbiki mo* 千匹も万匹も ("a thousand [more], ten thousand [more]),"[24] followed by the phrase *abira unken sowaka* アビラウン ケン ソワカ.[25] The *kebokai* is a combination of several things at once: an expression of gratitude, an apology to the bear for having taken its life, a gesture of sending the bear's spirit back to the *yama no kami* so that it can be reborn in a new body, and a prayer for the proliferation of the bears, upon whom the *matagi* are so dependent.

21 The particular type of fir tree is called *Aomoritodomatsu* アオモリトドマツ (*Abies mariesii*, or Maries' fir). Fittingly, the specific type of bamboo grass being used is the *kumazasa* クマザサ (*Sasa veitchii*), or "bear" bamboo grass.

22 The Japanese term *kegawa* combines both "fur" and "hide." Thus "pelt" seems the closest English equivalent.

23 Presumably through the influence of esoteric (Tendai or Shingon) Buddhism.

24 Using the counter *hiki* 匹, which is reserved for animals.

25 This is a rendering of the Sanskrit incantation *a vi ra hum kham svaha*, drawn from Shingon Buddhism. Sasamori (1997: 95) attributes its use in folk religious contexts to the influence of the *yamabushi* 山伏, or mountain ascetics.

FIGURE 4 Returning home in the evening after a successful hunt. The bear's body has been cut up and distributed among the participants
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

This description is based on the ritual as it is practiced in Akita Prefecture. The *matagi* villages of Oguni in Yamagata Prefecture perform basically the same ritual but do not refer to it as *kebokai*. Rather, they use the term *kawakise* カワキセ, which derives from the phrase *kawa o kiseru* 皮を着せる, meaning "to drape the hide." Afterwards, they perform another ritual in which the leader takes his knife and makes two deep crosswise cuts into the bear's heart to form a quartering shape. This is called *honawari* ホナわり (dividing the heart) or *honabiraki* ほなびらき (opening the heart), *hona* being the word for "heart" in *yama kotoba*. It is said to mark the act of accepting the bear's body from the *yama no kami* (Taguchi Hiromi 田口洋美, personal communication, 4 February 2013). By extension, "opening the heart" may also represent releasing the bear's spirit back to the mountains.

Whether in Akita or Yamagata, removal of the pelt is followed by yet another ritual in which small pieces of meat are taken from the bear and placed on wooden skewers, then warmed or roasted over a hastily kindled fire. This is called *mochigushi* 持ち串 (holding the skewers). Generally the pieces of meat are taken from the heart and liver, and sometimes also from the back (i.e., loin). Here again the details vary. Some groups place three pieces of meat on each

of three skewers for a total of nine, while others place seven pieces of meat on each of seven skewers for a total of forty-nine. In any case, the meat is presented as an offering to the *yama no kami*, then eaten by the hunters right there in the field.

The rest of the body is cut up into portions, placed in plastic bags, and distributed among the hunters to be carried back home. The gall bladder, in particular, is handled with great care, as it is still highly valued for its medicinal properties. The combined weight of a firearm, equipment, and apportioned bear body can amount to a significant burden, especially when navigating rugged, snow covered slopes, so it is important that the burden be equally shared (see Figure 4).[26]

5.2 *Communal Feast*

When the *matagi* return from a successful hunt, they immediately begin to process the bear (or bears) that the mountains have bestowed upon them. The hunting was a cooperative effort, so the meat too is shared, and everyone who participated, regardless of role or contribution, receives an equal portion.

The *matagi* show their respect to the animal by using every part of it. Whatever is left after distributing the meat—even the bones and entrails—will eventually be placed in a bubbling cauldron along with water, *miso*, and various other ingredients to produce a thick and richly flavorful stew called *kumajiru* 熊汁 (bear soup—see Figure 5).

Bear hunting season does not last long. As the days grow warmer the snow melts rapidly even on the upper slopes. Trees break out in a leafy canopy that conceals the bears' whereabouts and movements. Prime time for hunting lasts only about two weeks. But in the present day that brief interval is further limited by people's ordinary work schedules. Hunting is largely confined to two or three weekends. The "Golden Week" holidays (29 April–5 May) at one time offered a prime opportunity for several consecutive days of concentrated hunting, but recently due to the effects of climate change that opportunity often comes too late.

A few days after the season has ended, provided that they have been blessed with a bear, the *matagi* gather together within their respective villages for a

26 If the bear has been shot fairly close to the village, the *matagi* will sometimes attach ropes to its legs and drag it intact all the way back home, using the snow where possible to slide the carcass. In that case the *kebokai* and associated rituals will be performed at a central location within the village itself—typically a parking space or other open area adjacent to the leader's home. This is fairly common practice among the Akita *matagi*.

FIGURE 5
Kumajiru, or bear soup
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

celebratory feast. This is what is usually meant by *kuma matsuri*.[27] The event is hosted by and for everyone associated with the hunt, but often includes representatives from the timber industry, local politicians, police officials, and members of hunting groups from neighboring communities. Central to this feast is the consumption of *kumajiru*, as well as copious amounts of beer and *sake*.

Consuming the bear is a form of communion, not only among the human participants, but also with the bear itself. The conceptual basis for the entire event is memorializing (*kuyō suru* 供養する) the bear, without whom there is no *matsuri*. One might object that this is *merely* a party, and that the defining elements appear to be drinking and boisterousness. But the same could be

27 A *kuma matsuri* used to be held immediately following each successful hunt. Now however, in order to accommodate people's busy work schedules, it is usually held only once at the conclusion of the season.

said of many other *matsuri*—that they offer a religious rationale for a raucous celebration. The revelry may eclipse, but does not eliminate, the underlying purpose.[28]

The *kuma matsuri* is highly reminiscent of what Ray (1991) describes for the Koyukon people of Alaska's northwestern interior, drawing primarily on the ethnographic work of Richard K. Nelson. The Koyukon, too, are bear hunters, and like the *matagi* they celebrate a successful hunt with a ritual feast, referred to in English as a bear party.

> On the surface, the bear party does not seem to be a ritualistic occasion. The men speak about it pragmatically as a way of insuring successful hunting and of renewing traditional culture. But, Nelson was told, the bear party is implicitly a funerary potlatch for the bear spirit. A Koyukon potlatch is a ceremony that honors the deceased with food and gifts for relatives and friends. The soul of the deceased sees that many people have come to the potlatch in his or her name and that the food and gifts have made people happy. Satisfied and content, the soul will then depart and not bother his or her kinsmen.
>
> RAY 1991: 169

And so it is among the *matagi*. Their *kuma matsuri* is fundamentally a potlatch held to honor the bear (Taguchi Hiromi, personal communication, 20 April 2019). If we accept the premise that the bear is a gift, either from the *yama no kami* or from the spirit of the bear itself, then it stands to reason that accepting the gift with gratitude and sharing it with others would be pleasing to the giver.

Since at least the time of Marcel Mauss (1990 [1925]) it has been widely recognized that gift exchange is fundamental to the creation and maintenance of social relationships. Unless the gift of the mountains is gratefully accepted and consumed, how can "a personal relationship with Earth" be enacted? In the *matagi* way of thinking, the bear wants its meat to be shared widely, so the more guests who partake of the *kumajiru*, the greater the honor for the bear, and the

28 The *matagi* villages of Oguni in Yamagata Prefecture used to invite a local *hōin* 法印—a high ranking *yamabushi*, or mountain ascetic in the Shugendō 修験道 tradition—to the *kuma matsuri* to perform *yutate* 湯立て, the dramatic "boiling water" ritual as described by Reader (1991: 67–68) and Blacker (1999: 249–250). This was intended to both purify the hunters and appease the bear's spirit. *Yutate* is no longer performed in the local village festivals but has been incorporated into the large tourist event; in fact, along with the opportunity to eat *kumajiru*, it is considered one of the main attractions (Sakuma 1985: 62–67; Fujita 2011: 74–75).

more meaningful its sacrifice. In the words of one of my informants, "To eat what you have caught, without wasting it, that is how you pay respect to the animal." This may help to explain the ethic of sharing so commonly attributed to hunting and gathering cultures all over the world; vegetative food sources may be gathered and kept for oneself, but meat, representing the sacrifice of a sentient being, must be shared with others.

6 Hunters as Intermediaries

As communities carve out places to settle and cultivate, they simultaneously create a divide between themselves and the natural environment. Indeed, the concept of "nature" as an entity separate and distinct from human beings may be considered an unavoidable by-product of cultivating land (Dwyer 1996). Once such a divide has been established, humans and "nature" are placed in opposition. Nature comes to be seen as an enemy, constantly threatening to break in and reclaim its territory through incursions of weeds and insects, crop depredations by wild animals, the mechanical effects of wind and precipitation, etc. In defense of their livelihoods, human communities are obliged to struggle against these continuing threats to their lives and property.

The *matagi*, through their varied means of subsistence, transcend this divide. As hunters who grow crops (or crop growers who hunt) their sympathies lie on both sides. The forest and its denizens are not enemies that threaten their livelihood, but rather a wealth of vital resources necessary for their survival. Life in the mountains is dependent upon reciprocal exchange relationships with other species, so one's own needs must be balanced against the needs of the others. Taking too much (by killing too many animals, for example) would be detrimental to one's own existence. Crop damages are accepted (to some extent at least) as part of the exchange.

The rituals contained in the *kuma matsuri* not only express, but also maintain, this sense of mutual dependence and reciprocity. As physical enactments of basic ideals they communicate in two directions—outward toward a watchful presence, and inward toward the self. In this sense ritual becomes what Jordan (2003: 4–5) has described as "a technology of value creation"; that is, a way of instilling favored attitudes and dispositions in the minds of the participants.

I shall conclude with an example from a *matagi* village called Yamakumada 山熊田, which is located deep in the mountains of northern Niigata Prefecture. The name of the village is significant, as it is written with the characters for mountain (*yama*), bear (*kuma*), and cultivated field (*ta*). Local residents

have often told me that this name represents what is most important to their survival—in ranked order.

Their *kuma matsuri* is held a few days after the bear hunting has ended—provided, again, that they have been granted a bear. The participants start to gather at around 10:00 a.m. on the second floor of the old *kōminkan* 公民館, or public hall, which is located in the heart of the village. They sit on the *tatami*-matted floor around a long table, chatting amiably. When everyone has arrived, the *oyakata*—leader of the hunt and on this occasion also master of ceremonies—calls for their attention. He offers a few formal words of welcome, then an official toast. After that everyone relaxes and the beer begins to flow, as the participants pour for one another. Bowls of *kumajiru* are brought up from the kitchen and handed around until everyone has been served.

At around noon, before the serious drinking begins, the hunters rise from the table, go back downstairs, and gather outside on the pavement. The *oyakata* appears with a bottle of *omiki* お神酒 (sanctified rice wine), a tray, and some cups. Then he and part of the group—around eight to ten members including a couple of local dignitaries—take their leave and walk up the street, while the other members remain standing outside the *kōminkan* and watch them go.

About halfway through the village, the *oyakata* and his retinue turn from the street and onto a narrow foot trail leading up into the mountains. The trail becomes steeper as they climb through the forest to an old *tochi no ki* 栃の木, or horse chestnut tree. For many years this tree has served as the *yorishiro* 依り代, or temporary dwelling for the *yama no kami*. The hunters line up before the tree and beckon her into their presence by clapping their hands twice in unison. With the second clap they keep their hands together and bow their heads in silent prayer. After this they pour a cup of the *sake* and offer it to the *yama no kami*, then pour a cup for each other so that all may share in the offering.

With the offering completed, the *oyakata* and his group face back toward the village. They cup their hands to their mouths and together emit a loud, elongated call: "Hooo-o!"—the shout used by the *seko* when they are driving the bear. Meanwhile, the other participants waiting back at the *kōminkan* face up toward the mountains in the direction of the sanctified tree. When they hear the call ringing down from above they respond in kind with a call of their own: "Hooo-o!" The back-and-forth calling is repeated for a total of three exchanges, the hunters' voices echoing back and forth between mountain and village. This deceptively simple-looking ritual epitomizes the role of the *matagi*, who bridge the divide between the two realms.

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