

# Mountains, Religion, and Spirituality: Modern Constructs and Ongoing Reconstructions

Caleb Carter, Faculty of Humanities, Associate Professor



The aim of this project was to identify and investigate major trends in mountain worship in Japan over the last century through a cross-disciplinary and multi-sited approach. Our project integrated five fields in the humanities—religious studies, tourism studies, history, gender studies, and anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach helped us to evaluate various forms of mountain worship as dynamic systems and examine the complex transformations they have undergone since the Meiji era. This collaboration allowed us to reposition the study of mountain religion in Japan alongside adjacent fields of research. It also helped us to resituate this research within a context of social and economic issues relevant to regional tourism, heritage development, mountaineering, and gender imbalances that span Japan’s modern past and its contemporary present.

Project members comprised a diverse group of scholars in terms of specialization and institution: Caleb Carter (Kyushu U, religious studies), Ellen Van Goethem (Kyushu U, history), Amada Akinori (Hokkaido U, tourism), and Kobayashi Naoko (Aichi Gakuin, gender and anthropology). Over the course of the project, we conducted joint research at several significant mountains of worship: Togakushi (Nagano), Ontake (Nagano), and Tateyama (Toyama). At each site, we utilized our respective areas of expertise to tackle broad questions that demand multi-faceted approaches. How have communities at sacred mountains navigated the continuation of traditional practices versus new challenges related to rural economies, depopulation, and so forth? In what ways have pilgrimage associations attempted to balance elements of continuity with pressing issues like declining membership and gender inclusivity? By combining our respective research backgrounds, we were able to discuss the social and cultural complexities of these issues where individual research and single disciplines would have been deficient.

The project concluded with an invigorating workshop at Kyūdai titled, “Approaching Modernity in Japan’s Mountains / 日本の山で近代に近づく.” The bilingual workshop featured research in progress by project members and graduate students, and was followed by an exciting excursion to the nearby shrine and mountain of Miyajidake where participants continued the conversation.

## Fields

- Religious Studies
- Tourism Studies
- History
- Gender Studies
- Anthropology



## Keywords

- Japanese religions
- Mountain worship
- Mountain tourism
- Shugendō

This project succeeded in forging new relationships across fields of study and among our sites of research. Project members will continue to benefit from this expanded network as we move forward in our research. The project leader is now exploring opportunities to expand this network into several new disciplines (regional anthropology and environmental history) and to scholars working in Europe and the United States.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is the way to go for future research. Headwinds continue to challenge this type of work: the composition of traditional faculty departments, scholarly associations bound to narrow fields, a job market overly determined by conventional disciplines, and so forth. As scholars in the Humanities (and beyond), we can forge our own cross-disciplinary connections in ways that enrich our work. We also encourage administrators to continue seeking ways to advance interdisciplinary environments. The present grant was a promising step in that direction.