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Personal and Social Dimensions of the *Akinomine* Practice on Haguro Mountain

The *akinomine* 秋峰 (autumn peak) is a form of ascetic training that *shugenja* 修験者 (also known as *yamabushi* 山伏) undergo in order to obtain spiritual powers and attain Enlightenment by experiencing the various states of existence (from hell spirits up to Buddhas) through bodily practices and rituals. The practice is held every year from the 24th of August until the 1st of September on Mount Haguro 羽黒山 (Yamagata prefecture) and gathers a considerable number of practitioners from all over Japan and often also from abroad.

This paper represent an account of my personal experience as a participant in the *akinomine* practice held in 2005 and also an attempt to analyse, and possibly understand, the personal and social dimensions that such a practice has in regard to its participants. Personal motivation, social and institutional pressure and the mere desire for evasion are just some of the possible reasons that may lead "ordinary" and less ordinary Japanese and non-Japanese people to pursue a path of spiritual election by following the mountain paths of the Dewa Sanzan 出羽三山 on the trail of more seasoned *yamabushi*.

In the wider context of present-day Japanese *shugyō* 修行 (physical exertion practices), this may represent a small step in to understand by which terms many of the practices roughly labelled as "ascetic" are still alive in Japan today, and why, in some cases, they are gaining increasing popularity.