

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 16, 2021

The Buddha Mummies of North Japan

Reviewed by Filippo Pedretti

University of Padua/Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: filippo.pedretti@studenti.unipd.it.

The Buddha Mummies of North Japan. DVD. Directed by SHAYNE A.P. DAHL and SATOSHI WATANABE. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2017. 20 minutes. USD \$295.00.

The Buddha Mummies of North Japan is a twenty-minute Japanese documentary directed by Satoshi Watanabe with English subtitles and translated by Shayne Allan Peter Dahl, a postdoctoral researcher at McMaster University. The film captures the images of the “Living Buddhas,” known in Japanese as *sokushinbutsu* 即身仏, a term translated as “the actual body of a buddha,” in reference to self-mummified monks who were thought to have entered a state of *nyūjō* 入定 (deep meditation and suspended animation). The *sokushinbutsu* are considered to still be living and able to provide protection to devotees in various ways, especially in regard to healing illnesses. The documentary was awarded both as Best Documentary at the University of Toronto Film Festival in 2017 and as Best Cinematography at the Documentary Short Film Festival in Toronto in 2018.

The film is particularly suitable for undergraduate and graduate classes in Japanese studies and Cultural Anthropology, since it deals with topics such as asceticism, Esoteric Buddhism, and folk religion in Japan, as well as anthropological themes such as materiality and devotional practices. Also, Religious Studies courses covering subjects such as death and the afterlife could widely benefit from the content.

The documentary features the following: Interviews with Buddhist monks who oversee the robed bodies of *sokushinbutsu*, commen-

taries by discipline-specific scholars, and footage of ceremonies performed for the mummies. First, Endō Yūkaku, the chief priest of Dainichibō, introduces us to the figure of Shinnyokai, an *issei gyōnin* 一世行人 (permanent ascetic) who underwent the process of becoming a *sokushinbutsu* in 1783, for the sake of people who were struggling from a great famine and subsequent related illnesses. As Endō Yūkaku describes, the process of self-mummification involved a strict diet that the ascetic observed to preserve his body from the biological post-mortem deterioration. Significantly, the documentary is the first and only footage to show the Shinnyokai's *kaigen kuyō* 開眼供養 (reclothing ceremony) at Dainichibō temple, located near Mount Yudono, not far from Tsuruoka in the Yamagata prefecture. Suzuki Masataka, professor emeritus at Keio University, describes the role of the *sokushinbutsu* as a "reliever" of other people's suffering, before sketching the complex and diversified religious milieu behind this figure. Suzuki recalls both the heritage of the Esoteric Buddhist philosophy of Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon sect, and the role of the folk religion of Yudono mountain in shaping the cult of the "Living Buddhas." Dr. Andrea Castiglioni, explains how the mummification process of the *issei gyōnin* was an authentic self-mummification process only in rare cases; most of the mummies were actually treated in an ad hoc manner so that the community could maintain its object of worship (who they still consider to be alive). The link between the *sokushinbutsu* and healing illnesses is again stressed with the story of a couple of devotees, who recall how they became dedicated to the *sokushinbutsu* after one of them had been successfully healed from cancer. Finally, Miura Shinkō of the Zōkōin temple in Shirataka (Yamagata prefecture) led us to the tomb of the *issei gyōnin* Kōmyōkai, who was exhumed in 1978. He is believed to have buried himself alive in 1854 (though evidence suggests that he was probably buried after death). Aside from this issue, Miura Shinkō clarifies the important role that the community surrounding Kōmyōkai played in burying him, by supporting his cause and contributing hard work, even in the asperity of winter, to

build his tomb. The last minutes of the documentary are reserved for Miura Shinkō's own view about the *sokushinbutsu*, as an iconic reminder of the importance of a continuous spiritual practice.

Capturing all the actors involved in the ethnographic scene of Mount Yudono, the documentary manages to present the voices of the monks, scholars and devotees equally, providing viewers with a full spectrum of the different groups that gravitate around the *sokushinbutsu* mummies, showing that the collective cult is thriving. The scholars interviewed provide the essential information about the context and the meaning of *sokushinbutsu* worship, based on their own research, while the monks give insights into the nature and the significance of their beliefs according to their tradition and personal sensibility; moreover, the devotees tell their life stories and the reasons behind their faith in the *sokushinbutsu*.

Inevitably, due to the short length of the film, the documentary does not offer an exhaustive discourse on the *sokushinbutsu*. There is important information that is missing from the film, which would be useful for a deeper comprehension of the *sokushinbutsu*; namely, the status that the *issei gyōnin* holds in relation to the official clergy and the various institutions operating on Mount Yudono. In his 2015 dissertation at Columbia University "Ascesis and Devotion: The Mount Yudono Cult in Early Modern Japan," Andrea Castiglioni extensively describes the relationships between the Shingon clergy, the Shugendō institutions and the *issei gyōnin*. The latter held a liminal position within this web of relations, having been excluded from both the Shingon and the Shugendō hierarchies. However, Castiglioni explains how the *issei gyōnin* were heavily sustained by the lay community of devotees due to the benefits produced by the ascetics' peculiar practices, thus creating what Castiglioni calls a "*do ut des*" relationship (Latin for "I give that you may give") that made the *issei gyōnin* an irreplaceable religious and social actor alongside

the Shingon and Shugendō sects. This distinctive feature of the *issei gyōnin* is, of course, a fundamental factor in understanding the cult around their mummies.

In conclusion, the film successfully achieves its aim by capturing the whole atmosphere of the “Living Buddhas” phenomenon through clear and concise explanations. The cinematography elements of the movie are particularly helpful, since they intersperse the interviews with detailed footage of the rituals and the ceremonies, giving the viewer the perspective of the devotees. Another important feature is the presence of various images taken from the natural world, a component that was central in the *issei gyōnin*’s universe, that shaped the spiritual environment of North Japan’s mountains. The effectiveness of the documentary and the high-level presentation of its content is further confirmed by its critical praise and the film awards received.

Notes on the Contributor

Filippo Pedretti is an M.A. student of Religious Studies at University of Padua and Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. He received a bachelor’s degree with honours in Anthropology, Religions, and Oriental Civilizations at Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna. His main field of inquiry is Rinzai Zen Buddhism in Japan during the 20th century.

Correspondence to: Filippo Pedretti.

Email: filippo.pedretti@studenti.unipd.it