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Ian Reader/Making Pilgrimages

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NB: Illustrations have been deleted to decrease file size.
There is a Japanese saying that in spring Shikoku comes alive with the sound of pilgrims’ bells; that saying seemed particularly appropriate in April 2000 when I returned, after three years’ absence, to Shikoku, the fourth largest island in the Japanese archipelago. I was there to continue my research into the Shikoku *henro*, the fourteen-hundred-kilometer-long pilgrimage route that circles the island and in which pilgrims visit eighty-eight temples in a journey that takes at least ten days by bus or car, and several weeks on foot. Spring—the period between mid-March and early May—has traditionally been the peak time for pilgrims to travel in Shikoku, and whereas people may nowadays visit the pilgrimage temples throughout the year, it remains the most conducive and pleasant time for travel there.¹ It is a time when the island’s temples are thronged with pilgrims clad in the traditional pilgrim’s garb of white shirts, hats (traditionally made of bamboo, although often, nowadays, replaced by white sun hats), and a wooden staff, usually with a small bell attached either to the clothing or to the staff.

I had been conducting research on the pilgrimage for over a decade and a half, had visited Shikoku many times in this period, and had become accustomed to the sound of bells as groups of pilgrims walked up the steps leading to the temples. Their sounds, too, always seemed especially resonant in spring, as if I had always associated Shikoku and spring—the time, indeed, when I have visited it most often. And yet the sounds of bells seemed louder and more vibrant in April 2000 than I remembered from before and the crowds of pilgrims more numerous. On my first full day back in Shikoku, as I alighted from a one-car local train at the tiny station of Iyo Miyanoshita, a couple of stops beyond the town of Uwajima in southwest Shikoku, and headed toward Ryūkōji, one of the pilgrimage temples situated not far away, I was struck by the sheer numbers of pilgrims on the road, and this impression remained with me throughout the rest of my visit.
Ryukōji—the name means “temple of the shining dragon”—is known to pilgrims as Dai yonjūichiban, Temple 41; all eighty-eight temples have both a name and a number, though generally pilgrims refer to them by number rather than name. Temple 41 is situated in one of the most pleasant rural parts of Shikoku, of which I had fond memories from my first visit to the island in 1984, when my wife Dorothy and I walked the pilgrimage at the start of an academic and personal journey that just may have come to completion with this book. Because of those memories I had decided to make the area around Ryūkōji the focus of my first day back in Shikoku and planned to walk from Ryūkōji to Temple 42 (Butsumokuji) and Temple 43 (Meisekiji)—a distance of around fifteen kilometers mostly on quiet paths through forests and hills. My intentions were twofold: to unwind from the long journey from England to Shikoku by walking in the warm April weather, and to get back into my pilgrimage studies by spending time on the route and at these temples observing what the pilgrims were doing and to prepare myself for a short period of intensive fieldwork.
As I walked up the narrow road to Ryūkōji I was passed by numerous buses and microbuses full of pilgrims, and on entering its courtyard I was engulfed by crowds of pilgrims, often in large groups led by a pilgrimage guide or leader (sendatsu). The pilgrims—mostly in groups—chanted prayers, mantras, and pilgrimage songs, lit sticks of incense and candles, threw coins into offertory boxes, and generally milled about, talking to each other, discussing their schedules, the attributes of the temple being visited, and much else besides. The cacophony and chaos of the temple were overwhelming, and so, rather than lingering, I made a quick escape along the quiet path heading to the next temple, along with a female Japanese pilgrim (who will appear again in chapter 3) who felt equally ready to leave behind the noise of the temple.

My immediate impression about pilgrim numbers was confirmed by visits to other temples and by discussions with temple priests, people running pilgrims’ lodges, and the officials of transport companies on the island, all of whom considered that pilgrim numbers had risen sharply since around 1998.
An official of the Iyo Tetsu Company based in Matsuyama, Shikoku, the biggest single carrier of pilgrims in Shikoku, told me that people using its organized pilgrimage tour services had risen by around 30 percent over the last three or so years and that well in excess of one hundred thousand people were now doing the pilgrimage each year. The reasons for this current rise in numbers will be explored later in this book. Such changes are nothing new in Shikoku, where pilgrim numbers have fluctuated depending on circumstances such as economic conditions and the political attitudes of regional authorities over the ages and from decade to decade. They illustrate that pilgrimage is rarely something that remains static or stable from age to age and that change and development are common characteristics within it. Such issues will be central to this book, which examines the Shikoku pilgrimage in the context of, and as a process of, change. As pilgrimages are made, so too are meanings in the eyes of pilgrims and other

Spring in Shikoku: crowds of pilgrims going up and down the steps of one of the pilgrimage temples.
participants in the pilgrimage process. As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, pilgrimages are not just “made” by pilgrims who set out to travel along a pilgrimage route but by many other actors as well—from priests and others who look after the sites, to local people who support and interact with pilgrims, to those who provide services for pilgrims. The things these participants do—their acts, the stories they tell, the things they leave at sites—add to the landscape of pilgrimage, which in turn influences those who are involved with the pilgrimage process, who thereby create and make meanings for themselves. As such, the landscape of pilgrimage—a term that, as will be discussed in chapter 2, refers not just to the physical but to the emotional terrain that frames pilgrimage—is, through such meanings, itself constantly (re)made anew.

The purpose and structure of this book

In examining the Shikoku pilgrimage as something that is made and remade through continuing performance and practice, I am primarily concerned with the activities of a variety of actors and forces that have influenced its development and nature, with the landscape and framework that shapes it, and with the meanings that are thereby constructed in the eyes of participants. My focus is primarily on the present day—a term I use to mean, by and large, the latter part of the twentieth and the turn of the twenty-first centuries, the period in which I have conducted fieldwork in the region. My approach is predominantly synchronic, and one of its aims is to show how all manner of themes and participants are linked and operate together within the contemporary structure and process of pilgrimage. However, one cannot understand or properly analyze a phenomenon as rich and diverse as pilgrimage just through observing it, and its participants, synchronically. The traces and influences of the past (including the imagined and legendary past) are, as will be seen in later chapters, vital parts of the emotional landscape that infuses and influences the consciousness of its participants. Thus in order to understand the pilgrimage in the present one needs to understand its past and how this impacts on and colors that present.

This book broadly divides into three sections. The first (chapters 1–3) presents a general overview of the pilgrimage in terms of how it is structured, what it involves, the landscape that frames it, and the motives and general orientations of its pilgrims. In chapter 1 I describe the pilgrimage and its main focus of worship before discussing some theoretical issues relating to pilgrimage in general and outlining the parameters of my study and expanding on the themes outlined above. From there I move on, in chapter 2, to examine the background that frames and shapes the activities of its participants. This background is what I call the emotional landscape of pilgrimage—a term that incorporates not just the geographical features and structures that pro-
vide a setting for the pilgrimage, but also nonphysical matters that shape the emotional terrain in which pilgrims voyage, such as the pilgrimage’s various legends, symbolic meanings, and miraculous tales, all of which help create the mental landscape framing the pilgrimage and influencing its participants. As I show in chapter 2, this emotional landscape has been shaped and framed by the pilgrims and others in numerous ways and is being constantly reshaped as successive generations of pilgrims pass along the way and as new interpretations of the landscape are formed. In chapter 3 I then turn to a general account of the pilgrims themselves, based mainly on cameo accounts of a number of pilgrims I have met, interviewed, and traveled with. I use their stories to draw out representative aspects of pilgrim practice and experience and to illustrate the variety of motivations and attitudes pilgrims may have, their levels of engagement with the pilgrimage, and the ways in which such pilgrimage practices may be embedded in their daily lives.

I then turn, in the second section, comprising chapters 4 and 5, to the ways in which the pilgrimage has developed and been shaped historically. Some of the issues central to this process will have been touched on in chapter 2, which recounts some of the legends that have become part of the “historical” record of pilgrimage, but in chapters 4 and 5 I turn more specifically to the history of the pilgrimage. In chapter 4 I outline the origins of the pilgrimage, the development of certain important legends and stories, the beginnings of an organized route and the first guidebooks, as well as wayside markers and pilgrims’ lodges, all of which indicate the gradual development of a formalized pilgrimage structure. As the pilgrimage developed, too, a number of influential pilgrims began to appear, including people who performed the route numerous times, thereby establishing a custom and practice that remains prevalent in the present—that of making multiple circuits of the island. In chapter 4, also, I discuss the attitude of the local feudal authorities to the pilgrimage and highlight the extent to which the pilgrims themselves in the premodern era, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and well into the twentieth century), were widely seen as outsiders and disruptive elements who needed to be kept in check—and yet how they were also surrounded by beliefs associating them with the sacred and hence were seen as specially holy figures worthy of support and help. These dualistic views of the pilgrimage have not entirely disappeared in the present either—and indeed, questions of ambivalence, for example in terms of the nature of the pilgrims and of attitudes to them, recur throughout the book as a continuing theme within the pilgrimage.

The modern era—by which I mean the postwar period, and particularly since the 1950s, when mass transportation effectively altered the way in which most pilgrims travel—has brought numerous developments that have altered the face of the pilgrimage. These include the rapid growth of commercial pilgrimage companies and organized pilgrimage tours, the development
of the Shikoku Reijökai (Shikoku Pilgrimage Temples’ Association), which
represents the eighty-eight temples, an organized system of ranks bestowed
by this association to give status to pilgrims who do the pilgrimage many
times, and successful publicity campaigns that have portrayed the pilgrimage
as a symbol and image of Japanese cultural tradition. All these are con-
ected, and in chapter 5, in examining how the pilgrimage infrastructure has
developed in the age of mass transport, I will look at these connections, as
well as the agents (including the bus companies whose activities have
changed the ways in which pilgrims travel) that have affected the ways pil-
grims make their pilgrimages in the present day.

In the last section of the book I look primarily at experience and practice
in the pilgrim community, focusing on the largest and most visible part of the
pilgrimage community: the pilgrims themselves. In chapters 6 and 7 I focus,
in turn, on the two widely used means of doing the pilgrimage historically and
in the present—foot and bus package tours. In chapter 6 my focus is on those
who walk the pilgrimage. While nowadays numerically fewer than those who
go by bus, pilgrims who travel on foot remain perhaps the most vocal—in
terms of written journals and published accounts of their pilgrimages and
experiences—and historically enduring section of the pilgrimage community.
Since, too, I have retained an interest in foot pilgrimage since my first visit to
Shikoku in 1984, and since much of my research has been carried out on the
pilgrimage paths of Shikoku, the experiences and attitudes of foot pilgrims
remain a central part of my interest. While space (as well as personal expe-
rience) does not permit extended discussion of every form or means of doing
the pilgrimage, I do, in chapter 7, examine in some detail the most common
form of modern pilgrimage by looking at organized pilgrimage tours by bus.
The chapter is largely framed around a pilgrimage tour I undertook during my
research, through which I attempt to show what goes on in organized group
pilgrimage tours, how such pilgrims view and experience the Shikoku pil-
grimage, and how they may interact with other pilgrims.

My account of pilgrim activities on the road, as set out in chapters 6 and
7, shows the extent to which pilgrims, whilst in the process of traveling, are
largely focused on goals such as getting to the next temple or completing the
route, and this perception of pilgrimage as a goal-centered activity is cer-
tainly one that has been prevalent in standard academic (and especially
anthropological) discussions of the subject. Yet, as I discuss in chapter 8,
there are problems with such goal-centered approaches, which generally do
not consider what occurs after pilgrims have reached their apparent goals at
the end of their journeys. Pilgrimages are not, as chapter 8 shows, just tran-
sitory performances carried out at specific locations and directed at particu-
lar spatial and temporal goals, but may be points of departure for their par-
ticipants, impacting on and influencing their lives thereafter and even, as the
cases outlined in the chapter indicate, becoming recurrent features in them.
Thus while chapters 6 and 7 primarily follow normative patterns within the anthropological study of pilgrimage by concentrating on pilgrims as they travel and at pilgrimage sites, chapter 8 seeks to show how such apparently transitory performances may be life-transforming events and central features in the identities and lives of participants. It looks at one of the most distinctive features of the Shikoku pilgrimage: the tendency of many of its pilgrims to do it over and over again. A high proportion of pilgrims do the *henro* not just once but several times or more, and examples will be given throughout the book of people who have made dozens and even hundreds of circuits of the island. Chapter 8 focuses on such pilgrims and shows how, for such people, the pilgrimage is a life-transforming event, one that causes them to devote much if not all of their time to making pilgrimages, effectively turning pilgrimage into a way of life so that they sometimes even become “permanent pilgrims” on the road in Shikoku. As such, chapter 8 asserts that pilgrimage is by no means a one-off or marginal phenomenon located somewhere on the fringes of religious life, nor something associated specifically with goals, ends, and going to and from specific sacred places. Rather, it can be a central pillar in the lives of participants, a “way of life” central to their social and religious being. After this section on practice and experience, I briefly, in my conclusion, comment on some of the prevailing themes and issues that have surfaced in my account of the pilgrimage and consider what can be gleaned from this excursus into the world of a specific and prominent Japanese pilgrimage about concepts and theories of pilgrimage in general.