

Sutra as Speech Act: Shugendō Rivalries and the Heart Sutra in Northeastern Japan

Shayne A. P. Dahl

University of Lethbridge

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore some of the ways that the *Heart Sutra* is used by mountain ascetics in Dewa Sanzan, a sacred mountain range in Yamagata Prefecture, Japan, where I conducted twenty-four months of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork between 2012–2019. Dewa Sanzan is comprised of Mount Haguro, Mount Gassan, and Mount Yudono. There is a longstanding historical conflict between Buddhist-oriented and Shintō-oriented institutions of Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan that is especially concentrated in Mount Haguro. This rivalry stems from the *shinbutsu bunri* imperial edict in the early Meiji period (1868–1912) in which syncretic religions such as Shugendō were forced to purge Buddhist elements. In Dewa Sanzan, this process led to the reinvention of Shugendō as a Shintō-oriented religion. Buddhist Shugendō was, at the time, persecuted and greatly reduced from its former state. However, Buddhist Shugendō was revived in the postwar period when religious freedoms were expanded in Japan. The establishment of Shintō-oriented Shugendō in the Meiji period and the revival of Buddhist Shugendō in the postwar period has led to a situation in which the two institutions of Shugendō share the same contested mountainous space. This article considers the role of the *Heart Sutra* in negotiating social, religious, and political boundaries between ascetic rivals.

Keywords: Japan, Shugendō, Buddhist sutra, historicity, speech act theory

INTRODUCTION

One of my most vivid memories from ethnographic fieldwork among *yamabushi* 山伏 (mountain ascetics) in northeastern Japan is being awakened in the middle of the night, every night, by the piercing

melody of the conch trumpet. The high pitch of the *hora gai* 法螺貝 is unmistakable. Resounding in the temple like the tintinnabulation in a bell, the *hora gai* immediately sharpens the senses of sleeping ascetics. In Autumn's Peak, the ten-day ascetic rite in Mount Haguro in which I was participating, the *hora gai* enacts what it symbolizes: awakening.¹

Every time the *hora gai* shocked us out of sleep, I and the seventy male and female (but mostly male) ascetics sleeping around me in the basement of the temple would quickly spring up, put on our ascetic attire, and rush upstairs to the main hall of the temple where we sat in rows that corresponded to rank in the ascetic hierarchy.² It was silent but for the shuffling of feet over the *tatami* mats in the main hall. Dark but for the oil lanterns hanging from the ceiling and candles lit before an altar of golden statues representing the Buddhist pantheon. Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion and the principal deity of Mount Haguro, was positioned in the center of the other statues. The shadows of mythic figures were cast on the walls as candlelight, and lamplight filtered through elaborate paper cut-outs of dragons, *tengu* 天狗 (forest goblins), and other entities in Buddhist cosmology.

Once seated, we opened our sutra recitation booklets and began chanting sutras and mantras in the shifting shadows and dim, flickering light. The recitation service lasts two hours and runs through a range of esoteric sutras and mantras. The core sutra, the one chanted

1. Detailed in H. Byron Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō: An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion* (Tokyo: The Voyagers' Press, 1970). See also HITOSHI Miyake, *Haguro Shugen: Sono Rekishi to Mineiri* (The History and Mountain Entry Practices of Shugendō in Mount Haguro) (Tokyo: Iwata Shoin, 2000); HITOSHI Miyake, *The Mandala of the Mountain: Shugendō and Folk Religion* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2005); Carmen Blacker, "Initiation in the Shugendō: The Passage through the Ten States," in *Collected Writings of Carmen Blacker* (Tokyo: Japan Library and Edition Synapse, 2000), 186–200.

2. Hierarchical ranking has always been vital to ascetic social organization during Autumn's Peak. See Frank Clements, "Refining a *Shugenja* Elite: Household, Status, and Privilege in the Early Nineteenth-Century Reorganization of Haguro Shugendō," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 11, no. 3 (2022): 236–267; Frank Clements, "The Fall Peak, Professional Culture, and Document Production in Early Modern Haguro Shugendō," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 46, no. 2 (2019): 219–245.

with the most repetition and highest intensity by far, is always the *Heart Sutra*.

The *Heart Sutra* is a classic Mahāyāna text that emphasizes non-dualism through a series of paradoxical negations such as “form is emptiness and emptiness is form,” “there is no birth and there is no death,” “no purity or impurity,” “there are no senses,” and “there is no suffering.” By negating such fundamental attributes of reality, the *Heart Sutra* asserts the doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*), the notion that any identifiable aspect of reality and human experience is inter-related to every other. This reflects the doctrine of dependent arising (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*).³

The *Heart Sutra* has long been subject of scholarly interest.⁴ It concludes with the mantra of the perfection of wisdom: *Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā!*⁵ In “Inscribing the Bodhisattva’s Speech,” Lopez presents a novel analysis of the relation between the core text of the *Heart Sutra* and its mantra.⁶ Synthesizing Malinowski’s⁷ theory of magical language and speech act theory (as developed by J. L. Austin

3. While performance of the *Heart Sutra* has been elemental to Buddhist pilgrimage for centuries, especially upon one’s arrival at the temple gates, it has found traction in recent times (see Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* [Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005]). As Schultz recently argued, the *Heart Sutra* has undergone a “digital rebirth” that has generated “a viral enthusiasm for the text that is unmatched throughout more than twelve-hundred-year history in Japan” (John Shultz, “Heart Sutra Pop’: Religious Textual Democratization by a Sexy Vocal Android,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 33, no. 1 [2021]: 29).

4. See, for instance, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (New York: SUNY Press, 1988).

5. Sarah A. Mattice, *Exploring the Heart Sutra* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); Kazuaki Tanahashi, *The Heart Sutra: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2014); Lopez, *The Heart Sutra Explained*. Lopez’s translation of the mantra is: “Śāriputra, Bodhisattva Mahāsattva should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in that way” (ibid., 121).

6. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Inscribing the Bodhisattva’s Speech: The Heart Sutra’s Mantra,” *History of Religions* 29, no. 4 (1990): 351–372.

7. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands, Volume II* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1935).

and John Searle⁸), Lopez argues that while the core text of the *Heart Sutra* proclaims emptiness through negation, its mantra is a speech act that fulfills the emptiness proclaimed.⁹ Lopez goes on to suggest that the core of the sutra is a “locutionary act” since it “can be uttered with certain [descriptive] sense and reference which can be judged true or false.”¹⁰ The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is, however, an “illocutionary act,” an utterance that has inferred meaning and carries affective force. Lopez writes that “the *Heart Sūtra*’s mantra inscribes temporality by implying movement toward a goal,” the soteriological goal of future enlightenment.¹¹ As an illocutionary act, the mantra is “a symbolic enactment of the path, where the literal and the metaphoric are conflated,” thus qualifying it as “Malinowskian magic.”¹²

Although Lopez draws on Malinowski, Austin, and Searle’s work on speech act theory in which the social context of an utterance is vital to the analysis of a speech act, Lopez’s own approach is restricted to a textual analysis of the sutra and mantra. He acknowledges the “absolute centrality” of social context in analyzing a speech act, yet does not go so far as to examine the performance of the *Heart Sutra* in any social or ritual milieu.¹³ As Austin outlined in his sixth lecture of *How to Do Things with Words*, the mood, tone of voice, cadence, emphasis, accompanying gestures, and the circumstances of the utterance as it is performed in a social context are vital to understanding its meaning(s).¹⁴ “Since meaning is always derived from intentionality,” according to Searle,¹⁵ “contextual dependency is ineliminable.” Malinowski also strongly underscored the significance of the “pragmatic setting,” the

8. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

9. Lopez, “Inscribing the Bodhisattva’s Speech,” 372.

10. *Ibid.*, 364.

11. *Ibid.*, 367.

12. *Ibid.*, 372.

13. *Ibid.*, 369.

14. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 73–82.

15. John Searle, *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980), 231.

situational, real-life circumstances of an utterance, to understand its meaning(s).¹⁶

In this article, I discuss the “pragmatic settings” of the *Heart Sutra* in the ethnohistorical and sociopolitical context of its contemporary performance among mountain ascetics in Dewa Sanzan, a sacred mountain range located in modern day Yamagata Prefecture, Japan, where I conducted a total of twenty-four months of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork between 2012–2019. Dewa Sanzan is the most prominent center of Shugendō (mountain asceticism) in northeastern Japan. It is comprised of three mountains: Mount Haguro (414m), Mount Gassan (1984m), and Mount Yudono (1504m). I argue that in contemporary Dewa Sanzan, the *Heart Sutra* is often performed as a speech act that re-asserts the historical continuity and historicity (versions of history)¹⁷ of Buddhist influence in Dewa Sanzan, which has been dominated by Shintō since the early Meiji period in the 1870s following the *shinbutsu bunri* imperial edict to ban Buddhist-Shintō syncretism.¹⁸ Reciting the *Heart Sutra* today is, I suggest, a performance of time, an intervention of the Buddhist past into the Shintō-dominated space of present-day Dewa Sanzan that negotiates sociopolitical boundaries between ascetic rivals.

One cannot begin to understand the social dynamics in contemporary Dewa Sanzan without a sense of historicity—how history is imagined by local stakeholders (Buddhist and Shintō).¹⁹ Over the course of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork, I participated in Buddhist-oriented Autumn’s Peak three times, joined several Shintō ascetic training programs, and sat down with Buddhist and Shintō ascetics for interviews. I travelled to different parts of Japan to visit Buddhist and Shintō ascetics in their homes and travelled abroad to study their

16. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, 45–51.

17. For more on the concept of historicity see Charles Stewart, “Historicity and Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (2016): 79–94.

18. Gaynor Sekimori, “Paper Fowl and Wooden Fish: The Separation of Kami and Buddha Worship in Haguro Shugendō, 1869–1875,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (2005): 197–234.

19. For an example of how historicity is applied to the analysis of ethnographic data see Michael Lambek, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

representations of Shugendō for a global audience.²⁰ The contemporary relationship between these two forms of Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan is best characterized as a rivalry based on historical *ressentiment*.²¹ This argument also applies to the contemporary role of the *Heart Sutra* in Dewa Sanzan, though there are reconciliatory nuances to the rivalry expressed through the utterance of the *Heart Sutra*.

THE LEGEND OF AN ASCETIC PRINCE

When I first observed the significance of the *Heart Sutra* in contemporary Dewa Sanzan during fieldwork, I scheduled an interview with SHIMAZU Kokai, the lead ascetic of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō, and asked him about it.²² After pouring me a steaming cup of green tea (as he would every meeting), he said: “Dewa Sanzan has always been a place of the *Heart Sutra*. Mount Haguro, especially. It is a *Heart Sutra* mountain.” He then implored me to study the origins of Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan to see for myself.

To understand the role of the *Heart Sutra* among ascetics in Dewa Sanzan today, it is, as Shimazu-san insisted, necessary to have a basic understanding of its history. Although Dewa Sanzan is a historical palimpsest of 1400 years of religious transformation, the performance of the *Heart Sutra* has deep roots that stretch down to the bedrock of its Shugendō traditions. Situating the contemporary place-world of Dewa Sanzan in the context of its history (real or as imagined through legend) reveals that the *Heart Sutra* has been uttered as a speech act with widespread effect since the very beginning of the local Shugendō tradition.

Unlike many other mountain ascetic traditions in which En no Gyōja (634–700?)²³ is revered as a founding figure of Shugendō, local lore in Dewa Sanzan begins with the legend of Prince Hachiko (542–641),

20. Shayne A. P. Dahl, “Ancient Spirit, Modern Body: The Rise of Global Shugendō” (lecture, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, October 15, 2021).

21. Shayne A. P. Dahl, “Ascetic *Ressentiment*: Historical Consciousness and Mountain Politics in Northeastern Japan,” *History and Anthropology* 30, no. 4 (2023): 353–371.

22. Shimazu is the *daisendatsu* 大先達 (“great ascetic leader”) of Haguro Shugen Honshū 羽黒修験本宗.

23. Linda Klepinger Keenan, “En the Ascetic,” in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 343–353.

the eldest son of Emperor Sushun (530–592), who was the thirty-second emperor of Japan.²⁴ To this day, a shrine on the summit of Mount Haguro is dedicated to this legendary figure.

As the story has been told to me, Prince Hachiko renounced his position in Nara (in Central Japan) after the Soga clan assassinated his father, Emperor Sushun, in 592. Prince Hachiko then became a wandering ascetic and eventually fled to the northeastern region (modern day Tōhoku). When Prince Hachiko came to the province of Dewa (modern day Yamagata Prefecture), he followed a purple cloud into the forested area, where he lost his way. Miraculously, he then encountered a three-legged crow.²⁵ He followed the crow to the summit of a mountain that would eventually become Mount Haguro. Then, he descended to a valley behind.²⁶ Years passed as he trained alone, cultivating power in the mountains through the daily practice of ascetic ritual.

One day, a hunter found Prince Hachiko engaged in austerities and implored him to come to the aid of the father of a large household. Prince Hachiko instructed the hunter to tell the ailing man to recite sections of the *Heart Sutra*. When the ailing man did, he was healed. Over time, people would join Prince Hachiko, and this gradually led to the foundation of Haguro Shugendō. En no Gyōja, so the story goes, eventually came to Dewa Sanzan and learned the *saitō goma* 柴燈護摩 fire ceremony that Prince Hachiko had originated in Mount Haguro.

I recount this origin story because no matter its historical accuracy, it emphasizes several relevant points. First, Prince Hachiko is of imperial descent. In Japan, this means that he is of divine descent. He is, in other words, directly descended from Amaterasu, the Sun goddess. While it is true that many contemporary ascetics do not place much emphasis on this detail, the legend of Prince Hachiko has historically placed the Shugendō traditions of Dewa Sanzan in a mythic cosmology of solar descent, raising its position relative to all other

24. Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendo*, 43–48. He is also claimed to be a cousin to Prince Shōtoku (574–622), popularizer of Buddhism in Japan.

25. *Yataragasu* 八咫鳥 in Japanese. Earhart connects the *yataragasu* in Shugendō traditions to the three-legged crow that guided Japan's legendary first emperor, Jimmu (660–585 BCE), during his eastward expedition and the “sun-crow” of Chinese mythology.

26. Hence Mount Haguro 羽黒山 literally translates as “Black Wing Mountain.”

Shugendō traditions in Japan who generally position En no Gyōja (not of divine descent) as the founder.

Second, the chronology of this story undermines the prevalent notion that the founding figure of Shugendō in Japan is En no Gyōja. Prince Hachiko is alleged to have been born ninety-two years prior to En no Gyōja.²⁷ In addition, En no Gyōja is said to have indirectly learned *saitō goma* from Prince Hachiko. This aspect of the story plays right into “the polemics of Shugendō rivalries” described by Earhart since it establishes Prince Hachiko as the true progenitor of Shugendō.²⁸ By extension, Mount Haguro and Dewa Sanzan become the hallowed birthplace of Shugendō. This element of the story establishes the inferiority of Kumano Shugendō in Central Japan relative to the superiority of Mount Haguro Shugendō and Dewa Sanzan. As we will see, the concern for historical legitimacy highlighted in the foundational legend of an ascetic prince remains paramount in contemporary Dewa Sanzan, though the parameters have shifted with historical circumstance.

The third point to glean from this tale relates directly to the role of the *Heart Sutra* in the narrative. Excerpts from the *Heart Sutra* are offered to the hunter by Prince Hachiko not as a text to read or chant for the sake of attaining Buddhist enlightenment, but for the sake of acting on the health of an ill man, to eliminate his suffering. This aspect of the legend signals that even in the earliest lore of Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan, the *Heart Sutra* exerts a strong influence not in terms of soteriology or doctrinal exegesis, but as a miraculous speech act. Like medicine, it acts on the body, eliminating suffering through performative utterance.²⁹ The fact that the *Heart Sutra* features so prominently in the original legend is reflected in a comment made by SHIMAZU Dendō (Kokai’s grandfather and former lead ascetic of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō in Mount Haguro) made to Earhart in the seventies: namely,

27. As Carter writes, it is common in Shugendō for ascetics to use “discursive narrative strategies...to buttress, or contest...and outwardly project their mountain’s power, be it salvific, efficacious, economic, or political.” See Caleb Carter, *A Path into the Mountains: Shugendō and Mount Togakushi* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2022), 43.

28. Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō*, 47.

29. Buddhists have a long history of using sutra recitation for non-soteriological purposes, such as gaining magical powers, healing, and merit-making. For contemporary examples, see Helen Hardacre, *Lay Buddhism in Contemporary Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 28, 81, 129, 165, 177, 180.

that Prince Hachiko was the *Hannya-bosatsu*, the bodhisattva of the *Heart Sutra*.³⁰

HISTORICAL FRACTURES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

As the centuries passed since its legendary formation in the late Kofun period (300–700),³¹ Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan would develop a shifting network of alliances with different forms of Shugendō and different forms of Buddhism. Affiliations would even shift between the three constitutive mountains of Dewa Sanzan. Shingon Buddhism, the esoteric tradition imported to Japan by Kūkai in the early Heian period (784–1185),³² was a dominant influence in Dewa Sanzan throughout the Muromachi period (1336–1573), but a significant split occurred in 1630, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867). At this time, an influential Tendai priest named Tenyū succeeded in converting several of Mount Haguro’s temples from Shingon to Tendai Buddhism. Not only did this effort fail in Mount Yudono, but it led to a long-term rift and legal battle between monks of Mount Haguro and those of Mount Yudono.³³ To this day, Buddhist-oriented Shugendō in Mount Haguro remains affiliated with Tendai and Mount Yudono with Shingon.

As we can see in my discussion of the foundational legends of Prince Hachiko and their use to legitimate Dewa Sanzan over competing Shugendō traditions, as well as in the history of internal political fractures in the Buddhist world of Dewa Sanzan during the early Tokugawa period, what Earhart described as “the polemics of Shugendō rivalries” is a persistent feature in Dewa Sanzan’s premodern history.³⁴

30. Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō*, 45.

31. Historians confirm Dewa Sanzan was known as a prominent center of Shugendō since at least the mid-Nara period (710–784). See Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō*, 40.

32. Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

33. For a more complex analysis of Mount Haguro–Mount Yudono relations in the early Tokugawa period see Andrea Castiglioni, “Ascesis and Devotion: The Mount Yudono Cult in Early Modern Japan” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015), 62–77. For more information on the internal politics of Shugendō in Mount Haguro see Clements, “The Fall Peak, Professional Culture, and Document Production in Early Modern Haguro Shugendō”; Clements, “Refining a *Shugenja* Elite.”

34. Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō*, 47.

Then, on top of this already many-layered historical palimpsest, came the Meiji period (1868–1912). The legacy of Meiji period policies echoes powerfully into present-day Dewa Sanzan. The Buddha-Kami Separation Orders, an imperial decree that led to widespread persecution of Buddhism throughout Japan, cued the near complete erasure of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan.³⁵ The majority of Buddhist temples and statues there were destroyed. Buddhist-oriented ascetics were forced to laicize or convert to a new, “Shintōized” form of Shugendō. Key sites of worship that remained, such as the mountaintop shrine-temple complex Jakkōji 寂光時, were retrofitted into Shintō shrines. Annual mountain entry rites were reimagined through Shintō theology, and all Buddhist place names and meanings were re-fashioned through a Shintō mythology.³⁶ Pilgrims lodges (*shukubō* 宿坊) that sought to remain were Shintōized as well. Buddhist-oriented Shugendō in Mount Haguro and its embryological mountain-entry rites would not return to the mountain until the postwar period in late 1940s.³⁷ Even still, it has never returned to its former glory. To this day, Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan yields to the cultural and bureaucratic hegemony of Shintō.

SEMIOTIC INCOMPREHENSION AND ALTERED STATES

The first point I’d like to make about the pragmatics of the *Heart Sutra* in contemporary Dewa Sanzan offers an ethnographic counterpoint to Lopez’s textualist analysis by way of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō. Where Lopez treats the mantra of the *Heart Sutra* as an “illocutionary act” that is distinguished from the “locutionary act” (the descriptive and intelligible aspect) of the central text of the sutra, I observed, during Autumn’s Peak and in other ascetic rituals, the sutra and mantra of the *Heart Sutra* blur together into a single repeated illocutionary act when uttered in a ritual context. What causes this is the lack of understanding that contemporary Buddhist ascetics have of the precise

35. Sekimori, “Paper Fowl and Wooden Fish.”

36. *Ibid.*

37. Gaynor Sekimori, “Foetal Buddhism: From Theory to Practice—Embryological Symbolism in the Autumn Peak Ritual of Haguro Shugendō,” in *Transforming the Void: Embryological Discourse and Reproductive Imagery in East Asian Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 552–558.

meaning of the sutra as they utter it. Most contemporary ascetics are only vaguely familiar with the meaning of each syllable of the sutra as they chant it. As Lopez himself acknowledges, “It is important to realize that throughout much of the history of Buddhism, few Buddhists could read Buddhist texts.”³⁸ This certainly applies in contemporary Shugendō, at least as I have observed in Dewa Sanzan. Contemporary *yamabushi* chant the syllables of the sutra, but the sutra is mostly incomprehensible to the unordained.

Autumn’s Peak, which I briefly described in the opening of this article, is a good example. This is a ten-day annual mountain entry rite held at the end of August in Mount Haguro that symbolizes the ascetic, embryological transformation through the ten realms of Buddhist cosmology.³⁹ In this ritual context, the recitation of Buddhist texts is called *gongyō* 勤行, and each session lasts hours at a time. Numerous texts (sutras, repentances, and mantra) are chanted throughout *gongyō*. The *Amida Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and many other mantras, hymns, and verses are recited; however, the *Heart Sutra* is always performed near the beginning of *gongyō*. Later *gongyō* sessions focus exclusively on the recitation of the *Heart Sutra* as temple parishioners had paid a fee prior to Autumn’s Peak, requesting that the sutra be performed on their family’s behalf, often with the intent to memorialize their ancestors.⁴⁰

The ordained ascetics that lead ceremonies during Autumn’s Peak are referred to as *sendatsu* 先達. They are far outnumbered by lay ascetics who are sometimes playfully referred to as *shūmatsu yamabushi* or “weekend ascetics” because of the irregularity of their unordained practice. With exception to senior ascetics who are retired, most ascetics have demanding careers to manage and cannot commit ample time to ascetic training. This has led to a situation where the performative utterance of the *Heart Sutra* (as with other texts during *gongyō*) is experienced by all but the most studious ascetics as an unintelligible series of syllables that become memorized in melodic flow. One senior Shintō *yamabushi* teaches contemporary ascetics not to concern themselves

38. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 2.

39. See Blacker, “Initiation in the Shugendō.” Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō*; Sekimori, “Foetal Buddhism, 552–558.

40. Robert J. Smith, *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

with understanding the meaning of the *Heart Sutra* (or any sutra for that matter). They should instead focus on the feeling or affect (*kanjiru* 感じる) it has on consciousness when chanted.⁴¹

As Fumi Ōuchi, who has also conducted fieldwork related to Autumn's Peak, writes: "An ethnographic and performative analysis of Esoteric practices demonstrates that...ritual recitation...performs a critical function by generating a physical or sensorial experience in the practitioner...."⁴² *Gongyō*, the repeated recitation of the sutras and mantras, does indeed generate a transformational experience as Autumn's Peak progresses. The specific meaning as it pertains to soteriological doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism is far less salient to the ritual than the transformative effect the utterance of the syllables has on consciousness. Many *gongyō* sessions are held by candlelight in the middle of the night throughout Autumn's Peak; ascetics are increasingly sleep-deprived. *Gongyō* induces a trance-like state in which ascetics may fall asleep mid-chant only to awaken, find their place in the sutra book, and follow along once more, blending multiple states of consciousness into one sutra recitation ritual. Many ascetics I've interviewed after the completion of Autumn's Peak have described the experience, especially the nocturnal sutra recitation, as feeling like a dream. Ironically, they have also said that their worldly life feels like a dream during Autumn's Peak.⁴³

In his essay "On Not Understanding Symbols: Toward an Anthropology of Incomprehension," Roger Keesing presents a five-part thesis

41. See HOSHINO Fumihiko, *Kanjiru Mama Ni Ikinasai: Yamabushi No Ryugi* (Live by Feeling: A Yamabushi Method) (Tokyo: Sakurasha, 2017).

42. Fumi Ōuchi, "Sound," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 212.

43. Although there were no direct parallels made by ascetics, this reference to one's worldly life feeling like a dream during Autumn's Peak and Autumn's Peak feeling like a dream after one has returned home is reminiscent of Daoist Master Zhuang and his dream of being a butterfly in which, upon awakening, he wonders if he is a man dreaming that he was a butterfly or if he is now a butterfly dreaming that he is a man. See Richard John Lynn, "Birds and Beasts in the Zhuangzi: Fables Interpreted by Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying," *Religions* 10, no. 7, 445 (2019): 11.

that is pertinent to my argument about ascetic incomprehension of sutra meaning.⁴⁴ He writes:

1. The symbolic systems of a community are structured, as it were, in layers—from outer, transparent meanings down to inner ones, access to which requires increasing degrees of esoteric knowledge / poetic imagination / philosophical insight / and global perspective.
2. Distribution of the knowledge required for deep interpretations is a matter of the political structure of the community. Who knows what depends on age, sex, sacredness, etcetera, and on the intellectual abilities and personal predilections of individuals.
3. Because meanings depend so heavily on what individuals know, the same ritual sequence or myth may evoke highly diverse meanings for members of the community—from literal, superficial, mundane constructions to “deep” and global ones....
4. The “function” of ritual, and ritual symbols, in the community thus cannot be to evoke shared understandings of the latter sort—even if a highly coherent structured system of symbolism is part of the cultural heritage of a community.
5. The existence of such a coherent symbolic structure requires only that enough members of the community have access to the deeper symbolic layers of the culture to perpetuate these structures, progressively add to and modify them, and maintain their coherence—and these need be only a small minority in each generation.

This description clearly aligns with my observations of Shugendō as practiced by Buddhist-oriented ascetics during Autumn’s Peak. Semiotic comprehension of the *Heart Sutra*—clear awareness of the difference between the core text and the mantra, for instance—is unnecessary for lay ascetics. The same is not true of the ordained, senior members, however. In Keesing’s framework, the elite knowledge of ritual practice and the semiotics of sutras that senior ascetics possess

44. Roger M. Keesing, “On Not Understanding Symbols: Toward an Anthropology of Incomprehension,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (2012): 407.

is vital to the preservation of the “coherent symbolic structure” of the religion.

CHANTING BUDDHIST CONTINUITY

Apart from the trance-like state of consciousness that *gongyō* can produce, especially to a sleep-deprived mind that is immersed in Buddhist rituals for days, what is the effect of the illocutionary act of the *Heart Sutra* in the “pragmatic setting” of its performance in contemporary Dewa Sanzan?

Gummer draws on speech act theory in her recent book chapter “Sutra Time” to argue that sutras are an “active linguistic intervention...a performative utterance that aims to (re)make (the) real—in no small part by transforming time.”⁴⁵ She demonstrates that Mahāyāna sutras enact a “narrative manipulation of time” that “intervene[s] in the time-space of the audience,”⁴⁶ effectively resituating “the present within an unfolding narrative of liberation.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere Gummer draws on speech act theory to interpret the chanting of sutras as vicarious speech acts of the Buddha.⁴⁸ She writes, “When others speak those words with sufficient eloquence, they make [the Buddha’s] sovereign speech body present and efficacious such that its words consecrate those who utter them.”⁴⁹

Whether performed within the confines of the temple among a cohort of lay ascetics in the middle of the night during Autumn’s Peak or along the publicly accessible 2,446 stone-step stairway that ascends Mount Haguro during the day, the chanting of the *Heart Sutra* by Buddhist ascetics “intervenes in the time-space of the audience.”⁵⁰ For lay ascetics, *gongyō* and Autumn’s Peak overall intervene in the space-time of capitalist modernity in which they live and work, a space-time that is increasingly precarious.⁵¹ The experience of Autumn’s Peak,

45. Natalie Gummer, “Sūtra Time,” in *The Language of the Sūtras: Essays in Honor of Luis Gómez*, ed. Natalie Gummer (Berkeley: Mangalam Press, 2021), 301.

46. *Ibid.*, 295.

47. *Ibid.*, 314.

48. Natalie Gummer, “Speech Acts of the Buddha: Sovereign Ritual and the Poetics of Power in Mahāyāna Sūtras,” *History of Religions* 61, no. 2 (2021): 173–211.

49. *Ibid.*, 174.

50. Gummer, “Sūtra Time,” 295.

51. Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

especially during *gongyō* and especially during the *Heart Sutra*, which is repeated more than any other text, generates a medieval Buddhist space-time for contemporary ascetics, a “time out of time” in which the contemporary subject can cultivate an annual sense of rebirth⁵² within the “homogenous, empty time” of capitalist modernity.⁵³ As one ascetic leader teaches, “Ascetic training is a way to cultivate an ancient spirit in a modern body.” The contemporary practice of Shugendō has a strong time-travelling dimension to it, a symbolic return to a medieval period through ascetic ritualism and social isolation.

While the *Heart Sutra* is performed as an illocutionary speech act that intervenes in a precarious but nostalgic present in Japan to generate Buddhist space-time, it is also vital to understand that Dewa Sanzan is not just sacred space. It is, turning back to history, deeply contested space. Recall that Buddhist-oriented Shugendō was dominant in the area for over a thousand years. The Buddha-Kami Separation Orders in 1872, an imperial edict from the newly minted Meiji government, changed everything.⁵⁴ All but select temples were destroyed, and what Buddhist statues that could be salvaged were stored in those that remained. Buddhist-oriented ascetics were forced to either laicize or convert to a newly invented Shintō-oriented form of Shugendō, which retained the basic ritual structure of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō but has omitted Buddhist content. Jakkōji, the former shrine-temple complex at the summit of Mount Haguro, was at that time retrofitted into Dewa Sanzan Shrine. The *shukubō* (pilgrim’s inns) of Mount Haguro were all forced to shift to a Shintō orientation. Buddhist place names throughout the mountains were all reimagined and renamed with reference to Shintō mythology. I reiterate this history to clarify that the illocutionary act of the *Heart Sutra* when performed by contemporary Buddhist ascetics today is not simply “proclaiming and fulfilling emptiness,” to return to Lopez, but is in fact reasserting the historical continuity of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan.

The Buddhist defiance to Shintō historicity in Dewa Sanzan through the performative utterance of the *Heart Sutra* hits its climax on the

52. Roy Rappaport, “Ritual, Time, and Eternity,” *Zygon* 27, no. 1 (1992): 5–30.

53. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–264; Gummer, “Sūtra Time,” 297.

54. Sekimori, “Paper Fowl and Wooden Fish.”

final day of Autumn's Peak when seventy plus Buddhist ascetics, fully adorned in the attire of Haguro Shugen Honshū, walk from Kōtakuji Temple 荒澤寺 (the ritual center during Autumn's Peak) to the summit of Mount Haguro in a flag bearing, conch trumpet-sounding procession. As a participant-observer among them, I clearly recall Buddhist ascetics bellowing out declarations of repentance (from desire and the illusions produced by the senses) on our way to the Dewa Sanzan Shrine (formerly, Jakkōji). Tourists paused in their tracks to observe and take photos. Before long, we approached the Dewa Sanzan Shrine on the summit of Mount Haguro. We ascended the ten stairs of the staircase (which correspond with the ten realms of Buddhist cosmology) and squeezed together on the veranda before the main hall. There was a Shintō service underway with pilgrims dressed in white kneeling before the inner sanctum, but the priests abruptly halted their service when we arrived, a Buddhist irruption from the past.

Buddhist ascetics took out their *shakujo* 錫杖, a metal sistrum that clangs in rhythm with the recitation of sutras, and then entered a series of chants with the *Heart Sutra* at its center. Every time I participated, there was an intensity to the chanting that was noticeably different from what I observed in the confines of the temple. It was forceful. Hostile. This climactic moment in the annual ritual cycle in Dewa Sanzan is where Buddhist *ressentiment* toward the shrine is revealed before the public.⁵⁵ I recall several senior Buddhist ascetics cupping their hands over their mouths to amplify their voices as they faced the inner sanctum of the Dewa Sanzan Shrine. This was the singular moment in the year when Buddhist ascetics ascended the stairs of the shrine and announced their continued existence on the mountain through the illocutionary force of *gongyo*, with the *Heart Sutra* as its core.

During structured interviews that I conducted during fieldwork, ascetics on either side of the rivalry were generally diplomatic when discussing the relationship between Buddhist and Shintō forms of Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan. This is understandable because the situation today, which is still tense, is ultimately a matter of mutual inheritance. Outward expressions of *ressentiment* (historical rancor), though difficult to get on record during a structured interview, are more apparent in off-the-cuff comments and private conversations, as I have

55. Dahl, "Ascetic *Ressentiment*."

detailed in my article, “Ascetic *Ressentiment*: Historical Consciousness and Mountain Politics in Northeastern Japan.” Nevertheless, through participant-observation, I have heard Buddhist ascetics admonish Shintō-oriented Shugendō for failing to pay their respects to historically significant Buddhist sites prior to entering the sanctuary of the mountain, criticize the Shrine for minimizing Buddhist history in the local Ideha Museum exhibits (which represent Shintō-oriented Shugendō as the original form), dismiss the historical legitimacy of Shintō-oriented Shugendō because “it is only 150 years old,” and, in a very roundabout manner, allege that senior Shintō ascetics who have designed ascetic training programs for lay people are no longer practicing authentic Shugendō.

In a separate account of the contemporary rivalry between these institutions of mountain asceticism in Dewa Sanzan, Riessland describes Shintō-oriented Shugendō as a “thriving religious enterprise” with a “well-functioning publicity machine” that strives to make Mount Haguro a more attractive destination for tourists and pilgrims.⁵⁶ Riessland argues that this active public relations campaign has been designed to legitimize the authenticity of Shintō Shugendō as the destined successors of Shugendō in Dewa Sanzan. At the time of Riessland’s research, Buddhist ascetics leaders described this PR campaign as “profanity” to the esoteric secrecy of Shugendō practices. They were also strongly opposed to a road construction project endorsed by the Shrine that would eventually cut right across the path leading from Kōtakuji Temple to the summit.

The performative utterance of the *Heart Sutra* by Buddhist ascetics before the Dewa Sanzan Shrine and before an audience of Shintō priests strikes me, in my capacity as a participant-observer, as an unspoken but clearly performed expression of the historical *ressentiment* that is ever-present among Buddhist ascetics in Dewa Sanzan. In this instance and even in the confines of the temple late at night during Autumn’s Peak, the performative utterance of the *Heart Sutra* by Buddhist ascetics goes well beyond the soteriological intent of its text. It is a speech act with myriad meanings. The *Heart Sutra* is a prism refracting a history of

56. Andreas Riessland, “A Mountain of Problems: Ethnography among Mount Haguro’s Feuding Yamabushi,” in *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Harumi Befu, Tom Gill, and J.S. Eades (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2000), 194.

Buddhist persecution and a medium for generating a Buddhist frame of historical consciousness in a Shintō-dominated space. As an illocutionary speech act on the steps of the Dewa Sanzan Shrine, the *Heart Sutra* enables Buddhist ascetics to express historical *ressentiment* toward the post-Meiji dominance of Shintō in Dewa Sanzan.

AT THE HEART OF RECONCILIATION

On the side of Shintō-oriented Shugendō, there are *yamabushi* who, seeking reconciliation with Buddhist-oriented Shugendō, regularly integrate the *Heart Sutra* into their *gongyō* practices. This use of the *Heart Sutra* is not officially sanctioned by the shrine but is used by Shintō-oriented ascetics in the community as a way of honoring the syncretic, Buddhist heritage of their now (post-Meiji) Shintō-oriented religion. In an interview with a local historian in the region, it was mentioned that despite coerced conversion to Shintō-oriented Shugendō in the Meiji period, the *sendatsu* of pilgrim lodges secretly hid Buddhist images and effigies (for instance, of Fūdo-Myōō 不動明王, wrathful slayer of desire) in their altars. The transition to Shintō hegemony was a destructive process.

While much Buddhist terminology and ritual was jettisoned since the separation orders, several Shintō *yamabushi* continue today to incorporate the *Heart Sutra* into their practice when guiding pilgrims through the mountains. Uttered from the mouth of a Shintō-oriented *yamabushi*, the *Heart Sutra* can be interpreted as not only a reconciliatory speech act, an expression that acknowledges and honors the pre-Meiji combinatory tradition, but also a reconciliatory gesture in a mountain otherwise divided by “the polemics of Shugendō rivalries” described by Earhart.

I have observed the *Heart Sutra* uttered as a reconciliatory speech act every year of my participation during Autumn’s Peak. I described earlier the scenario of Buddhist ascetics ascending the ten steps of the Dewa Sanzan Shrine and chanting the *Heart Sutra* aggressively, expressing *ressentiment*. On the inside of the shrine, most priests halt their services and give space to the Buddhist ascetics during their climactic *gongyō*. There is also a small group of Shintō ascetics who chant the *Heart Sutra* in unison with the Buddhists in this climactic moment.

A clear example of the *Heart Sutra* as a reconciliatory speech act occurred on the summit of Gassan in October 2011 in an event that continues to reverberate to this day through a new post-disaster memorial

ritual. Following the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters of March 11, 2011, Shintō-oriented ascetics and Buddhist-oriented ascetics collaborated for months. They ended up compiling thirteen thousand *shakyō* 写経, handwritten transcriptions of the *Heart Sutra*, with the intent to memorialize the disaster dead.⁵⁷ The *shakyō* were collected by way of a strong grassroots campaign that was promoted widely through social media. Initially, the goal was to receive ten thousand. There was also a fundraiser to pay for a large stone memorial set to be erected on the summit, beneath which all the *shakyō* would be interred as a timeless memorialization for the disaster dead. On the last day prior to the closing of Gassan for the season, an elaborate ceremony was held in tandem between a *shukubō* in affiliation with the Dewa Sanzan Shrine and Shozen-in, the headquarters of Buddhist-oriented Shugendō. Between all participating ascetics, the *Heart Sutra* was recited ten thousand times. The disaster memorial and its thirteen thousand *shakyō* remain on the summit of Gassan to this day as a place for pilgrims to memorialize the disaster dead through recitations of the *Heart Sutra*. Every year on August 13, the first day of the Festival of the Dead, *yamabushi* (Shintō and Buddhist) and pilgrims gather on the summit at eventide. A core aspect of their practice is to chant the *Heart Sutra* together to memorialize the disaster dead.

CONCLUSION

When we examine Buddhist sutras not just as texts, but as performative, illocutionary speech acts that mean more (and, often, something completely different) than the doctrine implied in the text, we see how the utterance of the sutras tether to unique sociopolitical and historical dynamics. By viewing sutras as speech acts, we learn more about Buddhism not only as a lived religion (that, like all religions, changes and adapts), but also about the diachronic power of liturgy in shaping sociopolitical dynamics.

By taking an ethnohistorical and ethnographic perspective of the *Heart Sutra* as it is performed by contemporary Buddhist-oriented and

57. Shayne A. P. Dahl, “Summits Where Souls Gather: Mountain Pilgrimage in Post-Disaster Japan,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 6, no. 1 (2017): 27–53. For more historical context on ritual sutra transcription, see Bryan D. Lowe, *Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017).

Shintō-oriented ascetics in Dewa Sanzan, we see that a closer look at the “pragmatic setting” of its utterance greatly exceeds the meaning of the sutra beyond the soteriological intent of its text. The *Heart Sutra* is clearly more than just a text containing religious doctrine. It is, rather, a living performance that actively negotiates social, religious, and political boundaries between ascetic rivals. It also opens spaces for reconciliation between historical rivals in times of national crisis. Just as in the foundational legend of Prince Hachiko when its utterance leads to the miraculous healing of an ill man, its utterance in the wake of disaster heals those in mourning and ensures the disaster dead safe passage into the afterlife. In the Shugendō community of Dewa Sanzan, the *Heart Sutra* divides, and it unites. It draws lines of religious difference, and it blurs barriers in times of crisis. Perhaps, in so doing, it enacts what it proclaims—that “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”