Chapter 8
Terrains of Myths and Devotion:
Ritual Interactions With the Land at the Kôyasan Monastery in Traditional Japan

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ABSTRACT
How do religious imaginings and practices reconstitute the environment and situate communities in the surrounding space? What can religious institutions tell us about the historical interplays among myths, societal formations, and terrains of the earth? This chapter inquires these questions with a case study from preindustrial Japan. The Buddhist monastery of Kôyasan in the mountains of Kii province in western Japan enjoyed historical prominence both on political and spiritual terms. In the late medieval era (14th to 16th centuries), it presided as a landholding overlord and ruled large estates in the plains below. As a site of popular devotion, it developed in the early modern era (or Tokugawa, ca. 1600-1867) a transregional network of worshippers who sought its ritual services that promised salvation in the afterlife. What, then, propelled Kôyasan to its historical prominence? By contextualizing clerical practices with the mythical landscape of the monastery, the chapter uncovers how Kôyasan’s success was undergirded by the ritual reconstitution of the land and soil.

INTRODUCTION
This essay explores the nexus of religion and the environment in medieval and early modern Japan. While religion in premodern Japan is a topic of rich scholarship, the role played by religious imaginaries and practices in situating historical communities in the physical terrains of the earth is a theme that warrants fuller explorations. That human communities reproduce themselves by exploiting nature and the surrounding environment seems irrefutable. Such exploitations or appropriations might be driven by material imperatives—to obtain food and various resources to survive and accumulate or generate wealth. But societal interactions with the environment are not strictly material or objective, for they are conditioned by cultural conceptions and perceptions of the world. We may say that in modernity, the...
rationalization of economy along with developments in ideas and technology have deflated or undermined religious nuances imparted into earthly terrains. Emile Durkheim had articulated that “the idea of the supernatural, as we understand it, is of recent vintage.” That is, before the “triumph of the empirical sciences,” there was no dualistic sense of the world in which the environment was understood to operate strictly in accordance with natural law, set apart from the divine (Durkheim, 28). The religious, in other words, had richly textured the space in which people situated themselves.

Preconceived notions about religion, however, may dissuade us from reckoning with its dynamic roles in situating communities in the corporeality of the surrounding world. After all, isn’t religion about gods and deities, creed and teachings, or beliefs and practices associated with divine entities? Normative subcategories of religion include the varieties of the so-called “world religions,” such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc., as well as their denominations. We tend to define religions in terms of doctrines, political orientations or dynamics, and gods or figures of worship. These are crucial aspects of religions, but these frames of reference may lead us to grasp religion as a thing existing in the subjective world, in so doing, disaggregating it from the physical terrains in which it is embedded. The idea that religion is a system of beliefs, too, may obscures its broader effects, unless we contextualize it with the ways in which those beliefs transform or reconstitute the physical terrains in which humans as embodied actors go about their business of organizing social lives.

To glean the religious from social interactions with the environment, it is important to recognize that communities situate themselves not in pristine environment, but one comprising artifices and constructs as well as elements of the natural world. Communities colonize the environment with various social interventions, transforming it through cultural, economic, political, and architectural projects. The texture of the world is dynamic and transformative, being shaped and reshaped by storytelling, rituals, and ideas, as much as physical constructions such as buildings, markets, and ports that are installed upon the face of the earth. But surely, these do not eliminate social interactions with such features of the natural world as the land or the sea. Rather, we may say that they reorient or redirect them.

In recent years, scholars have been discussing the importance of geography in religious traditions of Japan (Reader, Ambros, Thal, Moerman, Blair, Grapard, Hur). In his study of the Shikoku pilgrimage, Ian Reader joins conversation with studies of pilgrimages in other contexts to suggest that we take the landscape of pilgrimage as a “moving text,” which is enlivened with various elements such as narratives and myths that “provide the pilgrimage with an atmospheric or emotional power that permeates and enhances the meanings of the physical terrains.” As such, Reader argues that “one cannot differentiate the performance of the pilgrimage from the landscape (physical and emotional) in which it occurs” (Reader, 39).

I draw on this insight and examine socioreligious practices that developed in connection with the landscape of a Buddhist monastery called Kôyasan (or Mt. Kôya). Located in the mountains of Kii province (now known as Wakayama prefecture) in western Japan, Kôyasan is a renowned religious establishment with rich history. In the late medieval era (14th to 16th centuries), Kôyasan wielded considerable political power. It held vast estates in the vicinity and acted as the overlord of the region. The monastery also developed historically as a site of popular piety and devotion. In the early modern era (Tokugawa era, 1600-1867), it was supported by worshippers in different areas of the country extending from the southern island of Kyushu to the eastern provinces of Kanto and beyond. The question, then, is what enabled the monastery to enjoy its historical prominence? How did it create and sustain the ruling power and garner piety from far and wide?
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