The Hashira-matsu and Shugendo

WAKAMORI Taro
和歌森 太郎

The Problem

The rite known as hashira-matsu ("pillar-pine") has been discussed by YANAGITA Kunio (1915). This well-known folk observance most often took place on the 7th night of the 7th lunar month (the Tanabata 七夕 festival), or at Bon 盆. One or two pillars twice the height of a man, and up to two arm-spans around, made of bundled brushwood, were set up in an open space. To the top were attached gohei 御幣, sakaki branches and noshi-like strips: combustible materials which easily caught fire when the hashira-matsu were lit. Lighting the hashira-matsu involved a contest to see which pillar caught fire first.

In the past, this rite was widely performed from the Kanto to Kyushu. Yanagita pointed out that the local place-name “Hashira-matsu” often survived even where the rite had died out. He observed that, as in the case of other folk contests, the rite's basic meaning had to do with divining the success or failure of that year’s harvest.

Since Yanagita’s time, further materials relevant to the hashira-matsu rite have been collected. Many similar rites are now known, under such names as hi-age, hi-nage, nage-taimatsu, hashira-taimatsu, ho-age, hashiraimatsu, hotemu, hashira-matsuri, or hashira-maki. Many share one obvious feature which has been overlooked: they were performed by yamabushi. What follows is therefore intended as a reevaluation of

1 This article was originally published in Japanese (see WAKAMORI 1975a, pp. 362–376). Research for this article was done during the period 1963–1966, as part of a group survey of the Togakushi cult performed by the Togakushi Sōgō Chōsadan under Ishida Mosaku.
the rite's meaning and evolution, and as a contribution to the history of Shugendo.

**The hashira-matsu and Togakushi Shugendo**

The Tendai Shugendo of Togakushi-yama 戸隠山 in Nagano-ken was based at Kenkō-ji. On the subject of the *hashira-matsu* and Shugendo, *Kenkō-ji ruki*, preserved at the temple and dated Chōroku 2 (1458), contains the following entry:

> In late summer there is also the *hashira-matsu*, which burns up all karmic sufferings due to the passions and reveals the spiritual power accumulated thanks to the practices done during the summer.

This rite was a counterpart to the spring *hana-e* 花会 ("flower assembly"). Indeed, the *hana-e*, which started at the Hon-in 本院 or Oku-sha 奥社 (the "inner [upper] shrine"), signified the direction of movement "from fruit to seed" 從果向因; whereas the *hashira-matsu* rite began from the Chūin 中院 or Naka-sha 中社 (the "middle shrine"), thus signifying the direction of movement "from seed to fruit" 從因至果. It is in these terms, characteristic of Shugendo, that the text stresses the importance of the rite.2

The text does not clearly describe what the *hashira-matsu* rite consisted of. However, the chapter entitled "Bettō shokui no koto" 別当職位之事 ("On the office of the betto") has the following entry, dated Einin 5.7 (1297):

> There was an argument between the practitioners (gyōnin 行人) and the elder monks (rōsō 老僧), concerning the *gohei* for the *hashira-matsu*. In the end, no one was designated to light them.

One glimpses here the dual structure common to many Shugendo temples in Kamakura times. At Togakushi as elsewhere, the yama-bushi practitioners were distinguished from the scholar-monks. Normally, no doubt, both groups worked together in the *hashira-matsu* rite. In this instance, however, a quarrel arose, so that the *hashira-matsu* were in the end knocked down without ever having been lit at all.

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2 The pilgrimage from Kumano to Ōmine is known in Shugendo as going "from seed to fruit," whereas the pilgrimage from Yoshino through Ōmine was called "from fruit to seed." The former meant progressing, thanks to one's practice, from hell (the region furthest from enlightenment, "seed") to the buddha-realm of enlightenment ("fruit"). The latter signified movement from the buddha-realm toward hell, in order to save and enlighten sentient beings.
The procedure according to which the *gohei* were lighted and the *hashira-matsu* at last knocked down can be seen in the rite as practiced at Hiko-san 彫山 in Kyushu. Below, I shall discuss this topic as it appears in *Hiko-san sairei emaki*. For the moment, I shall only note that there occurred at Hiko-san, on the 15th day of the 2nd lunar month, a ceremony known as *hashira-matsu taoshi* ("the knocking down of the *hashira-matsu*") or *hei kiri* ("the cutting of the *gohei*"). A yamabushi would climb the *hashira-matsu*, set fire to the *gohei* at the point where they were attached to the pillar; then cut off the *gohei*, above the point which was now burning, with a vigorous sweep of his sword. This event marked the conclusion of the matsuri.

At Togakushi, the time when the rite was performed, and the meaning attributed to it, were quite different. Nevertheless, the information regarding Hiko-san helps to clarify the meaning of the sentence, "In the end, no one was designated to light them."

The medieval *hashira-matsu* rite is described as having been performed only "in late summer." No further detail is given. In Tenmei 4 (1784), however, Sugae Masumi (1754-1828) visited Togakushi and noted that it took place on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month. He wrote the following in his travel account, *Kumeji no hashi* (1971):

> The rite (*shinji*) performed on the 7th day of this, the 7th month is called *hashira-matsu*. They set up three immensely tall pillars, each of which is given the name of one of the Three Shrines [i.e., the Oku-sha, Naka-sha, and Hōkō-sha 宝光社 of Togakushi]. A bundle of brushwood is affixed to the top of each pillar. The brushwood is lit, whereupon everyone quickly draws back and watches. The quality of that year's harvest, good or poor, is then divined according to the deity upon whose pillar the brushwood most quickly bursts into a full blaze. This year it was Tajikarao-no-mikoto's pillar [i.e. that of the Oku-sha] which blazed up first, suggesting that the harvest will be good.

Although this is the same *hashira-matsu* rite as the one mentioned in *Kenkö-ji ruki*, the significance attributed to the rite in each case appears to be different.

At this point, we must consider the mountain cult which became Togakushi Shugendo in the light of traditional lore about the mountain (see WAKAMORI 1975b). The traditional, popular conception of Togakushi arose on the one hand from the cult rendered to the mountain by those who lived on it or around its base. In this conception, the mountain was a spirit-world inhabited by such super-
natural beings as oni 鬼 and yamauba 山姥. Togakushi is the setting for the legend of the fearsome giant Daidarabotchi 大座法師, and there is even a place by that name on the south side of the mountain. There were also legends about a demon-woman (kijo 鬼女), of the kind so well known from the noh play Momijigari 紅葉符. Tenpaku-san 天白さん, a tengu-like being, was greatly feared there. Thus, Togakushi was seen as a realm where such demonic creatures roamed freely.

Another element in the popular conception of Togakushi was the idea of it held by villagers who lived within view of the mountain, yet some distance away from it. Their cult had to do above all with prayers for rain. Such prayers were linked with Tane-ga-ike 種ガ池, a pond surrounded by lava rocks and situated beyond the Oku-sha, near the path to Kashiwabara 柏原. Even today, people come to Togakushi from quite far away to pray for rain. The people of the villages around Togakushi also watch the mountain for signs to guide their work in the fields.

The former kind of cult was no doubt stronger in the middle ages and the latter in the Edo period. Although we now tend to assume that agriculture-centered religion goes back to the very earliest times, it may well have been only in the Edo period that farmers began to be personally concerned about the success or failure of their crops. Perhaps this sort of concern became genuinely strong only after a large number of landowning peasants (honbyakushō 本百姓) had emerged and, through their annual taxes, developed a direct relationship with their domain lord or estate owner. Until then, it may well have been the ruling class more than anyone else who worried about the crop.

At Togakushi, belief in the demonic powers of the mountain surely appeared first. Yamabushi adepts (kenza 謀者) were then needed to quell them. Tane-ga-ike was feared as the dwelling place of Kuzuryū 九頭竜 (“Nine-Headed Dragon”), which can be fairly described as the local deity (jinushi-gami 地主神) of the mountain. Thus, the pond was more the home of a demonic power than a place for farmers to pray for rain. Perhaps it was this belief in Kuzuryū which led to the rise of Tendai-affiliated Shugendo at Kenkō-ji and of Shingon-affiliated Shugendo at Sai-in 西院. In general, the yamabushi appeared in answer to a need for sorcerers (jūjutsushi 呪術師).

3 Kenkō-ji ruki describes a confrontation between Kuzuryū and Gakumon Gyōja, the “opener” of Togakushi.
to quell such powers, and they developed a body of teachings well suited to this purpose. For the yamabushi, the lighting of the hashira-matsu had to do with burning up karmic impediments created by the passions. For the common people, however, the rite no doubt meant burning up the demon powers which underlie the passions themselves.

**Greeting Ancestral Spirits and Quelling Malevolent Spirits**

At the origin of this sort of interpretation is the Mantō-e 万灯会 ("assembly of ten thousand lights"). The purpose of this pre-medieval rite was zange 懺悔 ("confession"), and the rite involved the destruction of the passions. It included the erection of hashira-matsu.

The Mantō-e of Tōdai-ji, famous since the Nara period, is discussed in Tōdai-ji yoroku 東大寺要録 (ca. 1118), kan 5, under the heading *Nenjū sechie shitaku* 年中節会支度 ("Preparations for the seasonal festivals"). The entry is derived from a record of the Kanpyō era (889-898). Among the materials needed for the Mantō-e, which was performed on the 14th day of the 12th month, it lists "hashira-matsu, forty bundles, at a cost of two koku." Other kinds of fires appear to have been lit as well, and each is listed along with its cost. Thus Tōdai-ji yoroku gives us a glimpse of a great temple's hashira-matsu observance.

However, the hashira-matsu rite did not originate at Buddhist temples. Indeed, the tachiakashi 立ちあかし ("standing lamps") mentioned in Sagoromo 狛衣 monogatari were hashira-matsu in the broadest sense. One theory even has it that since the hashira character can also be read tsuku, the characters for hashira-matsu can also read tsui-matsu, which is then an archaic form of the word taimatsu 松明 ("torch").

This hashira-matsu in the form of a huge taimatsu appears in Konjaku monogatari shū (kan 25, no. 4), which tells how a gentleman traveled from Mutsu to visit his father in Kazusa. There, "hashira-matsu were lit here and there, since it was the last day of the ninth month and the garden was therefore dark." Such hashira-matsu were simply used for outdoor lighting. They consisted of pillars at the top of which a fire was lit. These thoroughly practical hashira-matsu were then turned to religious purposes and adopted into the regular round of annual observances at temples. Concerning their use by

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yamabushi at Togakushi for the quelling of demons, in the 7th month, it is noteworthy that there already existed the custom of lighting hashira-matsu at Bon, to welcome the ancestral spirits (shoryo 精霊). Almost all mentions of hashira-matsu in connection with folk practices have to do with Bon observances in the 7th month. The tall lanterns which later became associated with Bon no doubt descend from these same hashira-matsu. In time, folk observances turned into contests in which small taimatsu were tossed at the large hashira-matsu, but this development represents only a later transformation of the hashira-matsu as a sort of game.5 The original purpose of the folk hashira-matsu was surely to welcome and send off the ancestral spirits at Bon. Since the rite involved not only the lighting of a fire but the erection of a tall pillar, it was linked also with an ancient idea of the pillar as a vehicle (yorimashi) for divine beings or spirits. This made it particularly appropriate for the Bon observance.

By the time Sugae Masumi visited Togakushi, the Bon hashira-matsu observance had largely lost its original function and served instead to divine the quality of the harvest. Nevertheless, the date of the rite, the 7th day of the 7th month (the start of Bon) still recalls the rite’s earlier significance.

Why did the yamabushi, who came forward as wonder-workers to quell demonic powers, adopt this hashira-matsu rite celebrated in the season of Bon? No doubt because the demonic powers who roamed the mountains were felt to be continuous with malevolent ancestral spirits (goryo 御霊, onryo 怨霊). Thus, the hashira-matsu rite was probably adopted in order to pacify not so much ancestral spirits in general, as those among them which had turned malevolent.

The Nagato-bon version of Heike monogatari clearly shows hashira-matsu being used to pacify such spirits. In the Hashira-matsu innen no koto 柱松因縁事 (On the origins of hashira-matsu) and Hanahagi Dainagon no koto 花萩大納言事 chapters in kan 3, Fujiwara no Narihira 藤原成親 is exiled for a crime, then dies an untimely death before he can be pardoned. The account of the memorial rites performed for him includes a description of the hashira-matsu observance. The observance is explained as having originated in the komyo-age 光明揚げ (“raising the light”) ceremony performed by a disciple of the Indian Yuien Shonin 唯円上人 to mourn his master’s death. The hashira-matsu rite therefore honors and pacifies the spirit of someone

5 See the references to hashiramatsu, nage-daimatsu, and so forth in the Sogo Nihon minzoku goi, MINZOKUGAKU KENKYUJO 1955–1956.
who ought not to have died. The so-called yamauba, too, was believed to be ultimately the spirit of someone who had died an untimely death in the mountains. Thus it is natural that the hashira-matsu should have been used to quell such entities.

Gen-kurabe 騒くらべ ("Contests of Power")

Now that the hashira-matsu rite of Togakushi has died out, nothing further can be learned about it. Surely it had not always involved the three pillars as described by Sugae Masumi. Judging from the observation in Kenkō-ji ruki that the rite started from the Naka-sha, a hashira-matsu was probably erected at each of the three halls. In the Edo period, then, the custom would have changed to lighting three hashira-matsu in a single spot, which allowed the rite to stress crop divination in response to the demands of the peasants of the time.

Myōkō-zan 妙高山 in Echigo, not far from Togakushi, is likewise a Shugendo mountain. According to Echigo shiryaku 越後志略, two hashira-matsu were erected at Sekiyama Sansha Daigongen 開山三社大權現 ("The Triple Shrine of Sekiyama"), on the 17th day of the 6th month. Two "temporary yamabushi" (lay believers dressed up as yamabushi) were led forward by the arm, carrying tinder-boxes, by a sendatsu 先達 (a senior yamabushi). When the sendatsu released their arms, each dashed to one of the hashira-matsu, scrambled up and went about striking fire. Victory depended on which hashira-matsu blazed up first. This Myōkō-zan version of the rite is characteristic of the Edo period. Since the purely popular hashira-matsu almost always consisted of nage-taimatsu ("taimatsu-tossing") or hi-age ("fire-raising") practices, the hashira-matsu of Hiko-san, Myōkō-zan, and Togakushi, in which a man climbed the pillar to light the fire at its top, deserve special notice.

A hashira-matsu rite exactly like the one at Myōkō-zan was performed in Nagano-ken at Daishō-in 大聖院, a temple associated with Shingon-affiliated Shugendo and located within the present city limits

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6 No mention of hashira-matsu occurs in Okunoin nenjū gyōji or Hōkōin nenjū gyōji, two manuscripts roughly of the Genroku period (ca. 1700) which are owned by Togakushi Jinja. However, a "divine rite in the ancient manner" (kōhō shinji) is listed for the seventh day of the seventh month. This probably means that the hashira-matsu rite, having ceased to be the property of the yamabushi and become instead a rite for the peasants, was no longer considered a "public" (ōyake) observance, so that only an abbreviated mention of it was given.
of Iiyama 飯山．The rite is still performed on July 15 at Kosuge 小菅 Jinja. Two hashira-matsu are erected on July 12. Gōdo-buraku 神戸部落, on land which formerly belonged to Daishō-in, contributes firewood; Maesaka 前坂-buraku contributes grape vines; while the two buraku of Harida 針田 and Sasada 笹田 raise the hashira-matsu. One of the two hashira-matsu is said to stand for Kosuge, and the other for all the other buraku. The Kosuge hashira-matsu is bound with nine strands of grape vine, while the other is bound with seven; the Kosuge hashira-matsu is also a little taller and thicker. Sakaki branches with gohei in them are set in the top of each.

Two children known as matsu miko 松神子 light the fires, having first been suitably purified. Actually, each matsu miko has an entourage of six young men who lift the matsu miko up and thus assist in the fire-lighting. The contest is, as usual, to see which side can first strike a fire and set its hashira-matsu ablaze, and the result is interpreted as predicting which side (Kosuge or the other group of buraku) will have the better harvest. At present, Kosuge and the group of other buraku no longer necessarily supply one matsu miko each, for both matsu miko may come from Kosuge alone. In the past, however, the distinction must have been carefully made. The two groups of six young men, each leading a matsu miko by the hand, rush toward the hashira-matsu, the starting signal having been given by the so-called matsu taiko 松太鼓 (“matsu drummer”): a man wearing an extraordinary, bird-beaked tengu mask. The matsu taiko actually represents a yamabushi. (At other hashira-matsu rites elsewhere, the starting signal may be given by blowing on a conch shell, which yamabushi normally carry.) Moreover, when the matsu miko appear, wearing special costumes, they form a procession not only with the matsu taiko, but with the figure known as nakadori 中どり, who wears an extraordinary, red-colored, yamauba-like mask. The nakadori stops before the Kōdō 講堂 of Daishōin and, facing the hashira-matsu, performs a hanpei 反闘 rite. The matsu taiko then gives the starting signal. Both matsu taiko and nakadori are derived from yamabushi figures.

Yamabushi undoubtedly once played a commanding role in the Kosuge hashira-matsu observance. Even today, when the whole responsibility for the rite has devolved upon the ujiko 氏子 (traditional supporters) of the shrine, it is interesting to see that the form of

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A hanpei is a secret rite of the Abe family performed in order to drive off evil spirits and invite good fortune. See MOROHASHI 1984, vol. 2, p. 1777a.
climbing the pillars to light them is still preserved. This aspect of Shugendo-related hashira-matsu rites may well have to do with the gen-kurabe (“contest of spiritual power”) practices characteristic of Shugendo.

A hashira-matsu rite which takes the form of a gen-kurabe contest appears in the documents at Kokawa-dera (Wakayama-ken). Here, in the Muromachi period, the rite was performed on the 13th or 14th days of the 1st month. Great significance was attached to the quick and successful lighting of the fire. A relevant passage notes one such observance performed on Ōci 30.1.13 (1423). It then goes on to state:

On Bunmei 9.1.14 (1476) the saki-yamabushi 前山伏, Kakugen-bō, spent a whole hour [in the pre-modern sense] trying to light the hashira-matsu, but without success. He therefore leaped back to the ground. Genkaku-bō, Kyōzō-bō and all the others of their group then came forward again, and Kyōzō-bō, the ato-yamabushi 跡（後）山伏, scrambled up. Having successfully started a fire, he waved gohei, blew his conch shell, and came down. However, the hashira-matsu still failed to blaze up properly. Thereupon an anonymous message (rakusho 落書), as follows, appeared on the walls of Muryōju-in: The name Kakugen 觉眼 means “enlightened eye,” but the fellow it belongs to never managed to light a fire at all. The name Kyōzō 敎蔵 means “keeping the Teaching locked away,” and that’s quite right. The fellow it belongs to will never set anything on fire with the Teaching he keeps locked up.

Thus, the hashira-matsu rite of Kokawadera was performed by yamabushi and included such roles as saki-yamabushi (“fore-yamabushi”) and ato-yamabushi (“hind-yamabushi”). These two figures became a laughing-stock when, despite all the spiritual power they were supposed to possess, neither was able successfully to light the hashira-matsu. The Kokawadera documents show that the hashira-matsu rite of the temple had lapsed for nine years because the temple had burned down, and was revived only in the first month of Bunmei 8 (1475), after peace had been restored the previous fall. Therefore, these yamabushi had not performed the rite for many years, and their skills had presumably become rusty.

At Haguro-san, the center of the Shugendo of Dewa Sanzan, one

8 The fact that this form has survived in a region where Shugendo itself has vanished has to do with the rite’s significance for divining the future health of cattle and horses. Kosuge has long been an active horse-trading center, and Daishōin houses a Heian-style Batō (“Horse-Headed”) Kannon.
finds an analogous rite performed on the last day of the year. Named not hashira-matsu but matsu no reisai, it involves a contest from which is divined the quality of the following year’s crop. The key roles are played by two yamabushi, or matsu hijiri. The rite involves setting fire to and tugging on a great heap of straw called tsutsuga. The outcome of the contest shows which will be greater for that year, the harvest from the sea or the harvest from the land. The observance also includes a contest over striking fire from stone and from metal. No doubt this uchikae shinji was originally a contest over lighting the tsutsuga itself, but it is now independent. The contestant who first succeeds in lighting the tinder wins. In all likelihood, the origin of the matsu no reisai was the need to quell, at the start of the year, the tsutsuga-mushi (a disease-causing mite) which threatened both people and crops. At any rate, the uchikae shinji clearly recalls the older gen-kurabe pattern of the yamabushi.

Hashira-matsu as a Fire Rite (Saitō Goma 柴火護摩)

Just as the matsu no reisai of Haguro ushers in the new year, the hashira-matsu rite was not necessarily held only in late summer or in the season of Bon. The hashira-matsu observance of Kokawa-dera, in which the gen-kurabe element was much more important than divination, was held in the first month. In this case, the rite was obviously connected with the folk custom of sending off the deity of the old year and with greeting the deity of the new year (toshigami 年神).

The yamabushi of Hiko-san responded to peasant concerns in the Edo period by introducing into their own rites, which were centered on deciding the hierarchical order of the yamabushi group itself, traditional peasant prayer rituals for a good harvest (toshigoi 祈年). Thus, they sought to attract the peasants’ religious devotion. The resulting observance was the Toshigoi o-taue matsuri ("Rice-planting festival with prayers for a good harvest") which was performed on the 13th day of the 2nd month and which died out in the late Edo period. It began with raising hashira-matsu. As one learns from Hiko-san sairei emaki 彦山祭絵巻, the yamabushi settlement at Hiko-san had an observance called shōe 松会 ("pine assembly") which included an o-taue matsuri. This rice-planting rite was performed on the 13th and 14th days of the 2nd month. On the
13th, the whole **nagatoko-shu** (the yamabushi of the main temple hall) turned out, forty strong. Four leaders (**bugyō** 奉行) gave orders from the four corners of the ritual space as the **saki-yamabushi** raised a **hashira-matsu**. Once it was raised, white **gohei** were attached to its top. Thick ropes were also tied to it, stretching east and west, and secured to stakes set in the ground. This whole procedure, known as **hashira-matsu okoshi** (“the raising of the **hashira-matsu**”) constituted a prayer for a good harvest. There followed a sequence of other rites which evoked tilling and sowing the fields; the last one, known as **ii kagume shiru kagume** 飯戴汁戴, involved pregnant women bearing rice and soup on their heads. When the whole rice-planting festival was over, the deity's sacred vehicle left the sacred space, and there followed a rite in which the sendatsu of the yamabushi community were appointed. Next came various other contests, including sumō, performed by the **saki-yamabushi**. When all this was over, the **nagatoko-shu** withdrew. At this point, a call was blown on a conch shell, and the **hashira-matsu** was knocked down. **Hiko-san sairei emaki** gives the following description:

The four **saki-yamabushi** (for so those who lead the **hashira-matsu** rite are called), each bearing his own **fuda** 礼, circle the **hashira-matsu** three times. Having done so, they cut off the **gohei**. An official then climbs to the top of the pillar. When he has finished [lighting the **gohei** with his flint], he draws his sword and cuts the **gohei** down. The senior [yamabushi] officials present then intone the **Hokke senbō** 法華懐普 and knock the **hashira-matsu** down. With this, the rite is over.

The presiding officials then leave.

This took place on the 15th day of the month. Each of the four **saki-yamabushi** wore around his neck a large **fuda** (“tablet”) with his name on it. The “official” who climbed the pillar wore the red **suzukake** 鈴懐 (stole), **tokin** 兜巾 (cap), **habaki** 裆巾 (leggings), etc. of a Shugendo practitioner. If he cut off the **gohei** with a single stroke of his sword, this meant peace for the realm.

Since in this case only one **hashira-matsu** was erected, its purpose was to greet the divine spirits and to invite them to enter the pillar. Therefore, knocking down the **hashira-matsu** signified sending off the deity. It is noteworthy that cutting off the **gohei** still required a yamabushi to display a special skill.

This **hashira-matsu** rite of Hiko-san is derived from one of the most ancient forms of matsuri: that in which a divinity is called down into a pillar erected within the ritual space. However, the yamabushi
involved were seeking the religious devotion of the peasants of all of northern Kyushu, so as to acquire in them a base of economic support. They therefore ended up officiating at a rice-planting festival. Originally, however, at Hiko-san as at Togakushi, the hashira-matsu must have had for the yamabushi a meaning peculiar to their own tradition. Analogous yamabushi rites, from an earlier period, were known as shōe (discussed above) or matsu-mori 松盛. These were tests which gained a yamabushi recognition for his prowess, and they involved the erection of a single hashira-matsu.

Yanagita Kunio (1915) argued that the single hashira-matsu rite was derived from the pattern of the double or triple hashira-matsu, and that the harvest-divination meaning of the rite was primary. However, quite apart from the number of hashira-matsu involved, the simple act of setting such an object ablaze was bound to be interpreted differently by different spectators. Whatever interpretation one may give it, the hashira-matsu's function in welcoming ancestral and malevolent spirits is surely fundamental, while its divination function arose, as already noted, when the peasants became more self-conscious and more concerned about their own crops. This is particularly true for the hashira-matsu events involving yamabushi. In such cases, the rite seems to have evolved from one which established a yamabushi's prowess, to one in which the yamabushi presided over crop-divination, and then to one in which the yamabushi functioned simply as officiants for a rite in which they otherwise participated little.

The hashira-matsu rite of Kashiwano 栗野 at Ayuhara-mura 鮎原付 (Tsuna-gun 津名郡) on Awaji is explained as being a saiō goma practice. This rite, which still survives, appears also in Awaji no kuni fūzoku mondō jō 淡路国風俗問答状 (Bunka 10 [1813]), Awaji-gusa 淡路草 (Bunsei 8 [1825]), Miji-gusa 味地草 (Tenpō 10 [1839]) and Awaji no kuni meisho zue 淡路国名所図会 (Kaei 4 [1851]). Also called hashira-maki 柱巻 or hashira-taimatsu 柱松杖, it occurs during Bon, on the 16th of the 7th month, and involves a single hashira-matsu which is interpreted as gathering into one all the fires lit by the families of the region to welcome the ancestral spirits. A bundle of straw is tied to a long bamboo pole, then the straw is lit and applied to the top of the hashira-matsu, which catches fire in turn. This observance has nothing to do with divination. Instead, the object of the rite is the fire itself. In the Edo period, the rite was performed by the priests from Jizō-ji 地蔵寺, Saikō-ji 西光寺, and Ryūun-ji 竜雲寺, which
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became Shingon temples in Edo times. Before then, however, it must have been performed by yamabushi. This would explain why it is called saito goma, a term peculiar to the yamabushi tradition. And the fact that it bears this name shows that the Shugendo hashira-matsu had about the same meaning as the burning of goma sticks by the yamabushi on the saeto (the spot for honoring the sae-no-kami, the gods of the road), in order to gain or to refine spiritual power. At the origin of this observance, too, there lies the custom of greeting and sending off divine spirits at a crossroads ritual site. The hashira-matsu in its hi-age ("fire-raising") form, at least as observed on Awaji, originally was surely run by yamabushi and by Shingon monks.

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