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Devotion in Flesh and Bone

The Mummified Corpses of Mount Yudono Ascetics in Edo-Period Japan

In contemporary Japan the fame of Mount Yudono (Yamagata prefecture) derives from the high concentration of mummified bodies of ascetics, which are enshrined in various temples of this mountainous area. These taxidermic statues are often interpreted as the final result of a voluntary abandonment of the body in which the ascetic self-interred within a sepulchral underground cell before dying. However, the present article seeks to reconsider these mummies as *ad hoc* manipulations of the ascetics' corpses, which were executed by disciples and lay devotees after the natural death of the ascetics. Such a rethinking of the mummified bodies of Yudono does not diminish their religious value as cultic objects; rather, it adds complexity by highlighting a creative tension between the historical and meta-historical dimension of these full-body relics. The semantic variety of such mummified bodies results from a continual oscillation between narrative sources, which, on the one hand, depict Yudono ascetics within the ordinariness of their human existence (historical dimension) and, on the other, make them transcend space and time (meta-historical dimension). The article demonstrates that the ascetics of Yudono could extend their charisma beyond the normal lifespan thanks to their mummified corpses, which worked as sensorial supports of the ascetics' power upon which lay devotees could continuously rely.

KEYWORDS: Mount Yudono—asceticism—vow—devotional practices—mummification—materiality

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"Flesh is the pivot of salvation."

Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis*

This article focuses on the *issei gyōnin*, a type of ascetic active on Mount Yudono (present-day Yamagata prefecture) in northern Japan during the Edo period (1600–1868).[1] More specifically, it examines the practice of mummifying these ascetics' corpses and the worship of the resulting mummies as living buddhas. I argue that the mummification of the *issei gyōnin* allowed these ascetics' charisma to extend beyond their biological deaths.

Although Mount Yudono is always described as a mountain, it is not. The mountain-essence of Yudono is metonymically represented by a large volcanic rock—called Gohōzen—out of which flows a warm spring (see figure 1). Located at the end of the Valley of Immortals (Senninzawa), Gohōzen was regarded as a geophysical manifestation of Mount Yudono's tutelary deity—Yudonosan Daigongen—on the veneration of which were centered all the ritual activities performed by the *issei gyōnin*.[2] The religious institutions of Yudono were administered by the interaction of three different types of religious professionals: fully ordained Shingon monks, married practitioners of Shugendō (the "Way of [ascetic] practices and miraculous results"), and *issei gyōnin*. Although the *issei gyōnin* maintained celibacy and adhered to the same ethical precepts that the monks did, they were not allowed to receive a standard monastic ordination. In addition, in spite of the fact that the *issei gyōnin* performed ascetic practices on the mountain, they did not take part in the mountain-entry ritual, which was crucial for the Shugendō practitioners. In this way, the *issei gyōnin* of Yudono were excluded from both the Buddhist monastic hierarchy and the Shugendō system of ranks and promotions.[3]

The popularity of the *issei gyōnin* derived from their performance of the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat (*sennichi-gyō*) (Naitō 1999, 96–100). This long self-seclusion ritual on Mount Yudono was thought to generate great religious merit not only for the ascetics themselves but also for their many devotees and patrons. This performance, while apparently a solitary endeavor, was possible because of the considerable financial and logistic support that *issei gyōnin* received from groups of lay devotees. Although the rhetoric of asceticism tends to portray the ascetic as an independent entity whose religious practices are characterized by secrecy and solitude, this heroic mask simply serves to hide the ascetic's unescapable

Figure 1: Gohōzen, upper part of Senninzawa, Yamagata prefecture. October 2014. Photo by the author.

necessity to rely on ordinary society to materially accomplish his practices and break the alleged veil of secrecy around them. An ascetic practice that remains perfectly secret is fundamentally useless, because it is bound to end without leaving any trace. On the contrary, the secrecy of asceticism is made to be transmitted, and therefore to become an "open secret," in order to establish the fame of the ascetic and his religious message. The validation of the extraordinariness of the ascetic performance must necessarily pass through the recognition of the ordinary society, which has created and nurtured it from the very beginning.

When a particularly eminent *issei gyōnin* died, his disciples and lay devotees would mummify his corpse by placing it into an interred sepulchral cell for a stipulated amount of time in order to dry up the tissues and facilitate the transformation into a "flesh-body icon" (*nikushinzō*), which was venerated as an "actual body of a buddha" (*sokushin-butsu*). This process shows that the agency of the ascetic stands on a sort of slippery stage and constantly manifests itself in a changing spectrum of forms. During life the ascetic exerted his authority on disciples and lay devotees, who in turn ratified it by offering their devotional and economic support for his practices. After death the agency of the ascetic momentarily withdrew, allowing other social actors to project their agency on the corpse for transforming it into an object of worship, i.e., the *sokushin-butsu*. Once the *sokushin-butsu* was successfully created, the apotheosis of the ascetic was fully realized, and his charisma could now be propelled from a historical level, i.e., that of the *issei gyōnin* as human actor, to a meta-historical one, i.e., that of the *issei gyōnin* as a deified entity.

Besides serving as an object that helped maintain the *issei gyōnin*'s authority after his death, the mummy represented the culmination of a process of mediation (Meyer 2006, 14–17), which contributed to reification of the *issei gyōnin*'s spiritual realization. The ultimate meaning of this aesthetic representation of the *issei gyōnin*'s corpse was to provide a tangible version of the Shingon School's soteriological paradigm of "becoming a buddha in this actual body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*),

which referred to the belief that it was possible to achieve buddhahood in this very lifetime and body.[4] Within the specific religious milieu of Mount Yudono, the *sokushin-butsu* can be interpreted as a local attempt by ascetics and lay members of religious confraternities (*kō*) to actualize and enact an otherwise intangible model about the ultimate nature of Buddhahood in esoteric teachings. The mummified corpse of the *issei gyōnin* offered, at the same time, a real glimpse of an authentic (because it was able to be experienced through the senses) epiphany of Buddhahood and a physical perpetuation of this status, thanks to the uncorrupted nature of the ascetic's human remains.

The *sokushin-butsu* differs from the standard Buddha's relics because it is not a fragmented part of an absent whole body. The *sokushin-butsu* does not metonymically represent something separated from itself but embodies the integrity of what it stands for. In other words, the *sokushin-butsu* is a metamorphosis of the ascetic's body, which communicates its perfection within reality through a tangible victory over the degenerative processes of death. The hybrid taxonomy of the *sokushin-butsu* is generated by its capacity to transversally engage multiple and heterogeneous forms of physicality such as the human body, the corpse, and the artificial body, namely the statue. Bringing together categories of reality that are usually kept separated, the *sokushin-butsu* triggers in the observer a sense of grotesque curiosity, which becomes a fundamental part of its devotional allure on various classes of worshippers.[5]

It seems clear that the *sokushin-butsu* was not conceived as a passive object but a sort of "quasi-object," which worked as a non-human actor endowed with the ability of mobilizing infinite interpretive meanings in its interactions with humans (Latour 1993, 55). For instance, the fact that the *sokushin-butsu* were occasionally removed from temples and exhibited in external processions underlines their kinetic agency as traveling mummified bodies that directly met with devotees without waiting for them to visit the temple. In a similar way, the ceremonial changing of the *sokushin-butsu*'s old clothes serves to evoke a cyclical reactivation of the soteriological power embedded in the mummified corpse as well as its status as living object of worship, which wears out stocks of robes because of its continuous benevolent interactions with the real world.

The surviving written documents that tell us about the *issei gyōnin*, while few in number, reveal a symbolical and practical continuity between the rituals performed by the ascetics on the mountain and the mummification of their corpses by devotees. For instance, the official documents composed by the warlords of Dewa province toward the end of the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568–1600) show that the military aristocracy often sponsored *issei gyōnin* ascetic practices. Similarly, the inscriptions on votive stelae that were erected to mark the end of the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat indicate that lay members of religious groups devoted to Mount Yudono funded *issei gyōnin* and their ascetic endeavors. As for the religious worldview of the *issei gyōnin*, much of this can be gleaned from hagiographies (*engi*) of *issei gyōnin* and from the personal notes of their disciples.[6]

All narrative representations of the *issei gyōnin* and their mummified corpses are comprised within a variegated range of scriptural sources, some of which depict

events according to the stylistic tropes of historiography and others according to those of hagiography. To paraphrase a passage of Hayden White's analysis about the structures of meta-history, we can say that the factuality of the ascetic's past becomes "available to us only through a poetic act of construction" (White 2014, xi). Both historical and meta-historical *issei gyōnin* are perpetually filtered by the distorting lens of historiographic and hagiographical narratives. Nevertheless, what remains fundamental for us is to seriously engage both these scriptural reproductions of the Yudono ascetics' past without pretending to assign a dominant position to one type of source over the other. Historiographies provide us with images of *issei gyōnin* plunged into the biological and factual limitations typical of their human condition, while hagiographies transmit representations of *issei gyōnin* characterized by the perfection of their transcendental condition. These multiple story variations or emplotments about *issei gyōnin* and *sokushin-butsu* show, on one hand, the inevitability of economic and logistic supports, which disciples and lay members of religious confraternities bestowed on the behalf of historical *issei gyōnin* to have them performing ascetic practices and to mummify their corpses after death. On the other hand, hagiographies and oral legends work to hide this scandalous dependency of the ascetic on society by recreating him and his mummified corpse on a meta-historical level of irreducible power.

Issei gyōnin as on-demand ascetics

The oldest extant sources concerning the religious activities of the *issei gyōnin* are four petitions written between 1603 and 1604, according to which the Fudōin Temple in Satte (present-day Saitama prefecture) required an explanation about the institutional and religious status of a group of Yudono ascetics affiliated with the Komyōin Temple in the same village.[7] Pressured by Fudōin, Komyōin requested clarification about the *issei gyōnin* from three administrative temples of Mount Yudono.[8] The three temples explained that *issei gyōnin* had been present on the mountain since ancient times. They had made a vow to abandon the world in order to reach enlightenment and to devote their minds to ascetic practices. The temples also specified that *issei gyōnin* performed austerities to obtain salvation for themselves in the next rebirth and, at the same time, to transfer benefits to someone else.

This last point is particularly relevant because *issei gyōnin* were conceived of as on-demand ascetics (*daikan gyōja*), who accumulated great amounts of religious merit through the performance of virtuous practices on Mount Yudono as well as other mountains in the Tohoku and Kanto regions and subsequently shared this merit with the lay devotees who supported their religious activities economically and spiritually. For instance, a few months before the decisive battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Mogami Yoshiaki (1546–1614), the Dewa province warlord allied with Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), made a vow (*gan*) to be victorious in this fight and entrusted the *issei gyōnin* of Gassanji, an ascetic temple (*gyōnin-dera*) at Sagae, to assure his will was realized.[9] At the beginning of August, the *issei gyōnin* of

Gassanji Temple began an ascetic retreat of forty-eight days at Mount Yudono, together with 108 pilgrims, on behalf of Yoshiaki and Ieyasu.[10]

As on-demand ascetics, the *issei gyōnin* of Gassanji became the bearers of the vow expressed by Yoshiaki, which was realized thanks to the transfer of their meritorious ascetic power accumulated during the retreat at Mount Yudono. In other words, *issei gyōnin* worked as bridges between lay patrons and deities such as Yudonosan Daigongen or Dainichi Nyorai for the fulfillment of a specific vow. *Issei gyōnin* were a sort of "mercenary ascetic" who based their religious charisma on the circulation of soteriological merit accumulated via ascesis in exchange for financial and devotional support by lay members of society, who belonged to the upper classes of the military aristocracy as well as to subaltern classes. For example, in the first half of the Edo period small urban artisans and peasants gave rise to Yudonosan religious confraternities, which became increasingly involved in sponsoring *issei gyōnin* ascetic practices such as the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat to fulfill their personal vows. This demonstrates that *issei gyōnin* religious authority and charisma had a strong appeal to different types of social actors, who were not confined within a single class. Their appeal was instead characterized by social transversality, involving various types of patrons from the top end to the bottom of society. Therefore, the ascetics of Yudono were in the middle of a large devotional loop, which contradicts the misleading representation of the elites as exclusively interested in orthodoxy and the subaltern classes as receptacles of heterodoxy. As Dominick LaCapra points out in his analysis of Menocchio, the protagonist of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, both elites and subaltern classes simultaneously deal with orthodox as well as heterodox forms of religiosity (LaCapra 1985, 64–65). The dynamics of the ascetic practices associated with the *issei gyōnin* worked as a catalyst for poly-devotional and multi-social religious ideals, which provoked devotional interests in central as well as peripheral groups of social actors.

Even if the rhetorical discourse about asceticism invariably depicts the ascetic as an autarchic entity completely detached from society, the reality on the ground is very different. A long and complex ascetic practice such as the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat demanded a great deal of financial and logistical resources that no *issei gyōnin* would have been able to provide himself. As a religious virtuoso not engaged in producing food and the materials necessary for survival, the *issei gyōnin* depended entirely on society.

On Mount Yudono, the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat was practiced in two secluded valleys: Senninzawa and Genkai. For the *issei gyōnin* who performed this type of retreat at Senninzawa, all material support was provided by Yudonosan religious confraternity members who belonged to the mountain community of Tamugimata at the back entrance of the mountain, and for those at Genkai, from the village of Shizu at the front entrance. This support mainly consisted of food, water, changes of clothing, firewood, medicine, and maintenance work for the ascetic hut (*gyōya*) in which the ascetic dwelt for almost three years without leaving the mountain, even in the harsh winter season. During this retreat, the *issei gyōnin* abstained completely from the ten cereals, i.e., rice, wheat, soybeans, *azuki*, ses-

ame, buckwheat, millet, *sanwa* millet, corn, and chestnuts, and—for limited periods of time—increased the strictness of their diet by ingesting only leaves, bark, roots, and acorns (Naitō 1999, 96–97). This wood-eating ascesis (*mokujiki-gyō*) was conceived of as boosting the accumulation of ascetic powers of the *issei gyōnin*, and it became a sort of *imprimatur* and honorific title for the ascetic, who often had his name prefixed by the appellative of "wood-eater" (*mokujiki gyōja*).

The separated fire (*bekka*) was another fundamental element of the retreat because the *issei gyōnin* cooked their scanty meals on a purified flame that constantly burned in a fireplace at the center of the ascetic hut. It differed from the ordinary fire (*hirabi*) used in normal kitchens to prepare all types of food, including meat. The making and ingestion of food by the *issei gyōnin* was understood as a ritual activity, because they used the fireplace as a fire ritual platform to present offerings to the deities.[11] The ascetic hut itself and the mountainous landscape of Yudono were transformed into a ritual arena in which the *issei gyōnin* undertook purificatory and devotional practices on behalf of his lay patrons. According to the same logic, each day of the retreat was divided into three sections, during which the *issei gyōnin* made daily pilgrimages at dawn, noon, and evening to Gohōzen while performing ascetic practices (Watanabe 1964, 144–45).

The first day of the retreat started with an initial vow in which the *issei gyōnin* formally expressed his will to fulfill all the vows of his supporters through the ascetic merit accumulated during the self-seclusion period at Mount Yudono. The last day of the retreat was called the vow-fulfilling day. On this occasion, members of Yudonosan religious confraternities, Shugendō practitioners, and other *issei gyōnin* organized parades (*norikake*) to celebrate the successful descent of the *issei gyōnin* from the mountain and his mental perseverance and physical strength during the three years of fasting, meditation, and ascetic practices.[12] At the same time, the vow-fulfilling day was also when lay devotees and patrons of the *issei gyōnin* could collect the spiritual returns from the investment they had made in the ascetic through their material support of his asceticism.

This contractual aspect of the relationship between the *issei gyōnin* and his lay devotees and disciples was further ratified by the erection of ascetic stelae at Senninzawa or Genkai, which often reported: the beginning and concluding dates of the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat; the name of the *issei gyōnin* preceded by the appellative "wood-eating ascetic" and followed by the Buddhist title of Shōnin; the name of his principal disciple; and last, but not least, the names of all the villages, Yudonosan religious confraternities, and confraternity leaders (*sewanin*) who assured the retreat's success (Hori 1993, 233). If stelae were not built, paper registers were used to keep a record of the donations transferred from devotees to *issei gyōnin* to sponsor their ascetic practices. For example, at the temple of Kaikōji in the city of Sakata there is a register of the donations made by Yudonosan religious confraternity members affiliated with this temple to support the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat of Zenkai Shōnin (unknown–1881) in 1853. The donors' names are listed in descending order from the most munificent together with the amount bestowed and the village name (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Register of the offerings made by the confraternity members of Kaikōji in order to sponsor the one-thousand-day self-seclusion ritual of Zenkai Shōnin (unknown–1881) at Senninzawa in 1853. Kaikōji, Sakata, Yamagata prefecture. September 2014. Photo by the author.

In the case of the warlords who sponsored the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat of famous *issei gyōnin*, it is possible to know the amount of the offerings donated by a single patron and the frequency of these donations. For instance, in 1594, Naoe Kanetsugu (1559–1620) placed Mount Yudono under his military control and paid to have a One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat performed on his behalf by an *issei gyōnin*. Kanetsugu ordered that an offering of 270 liters of rice should be sent monthly to fund the food expenses of one *issei gyōnin* accompanied by ten men who shared the lodging with him. While the identity of the ten men is not known, it is possible that Kanetsugu followed the custom of flanking the *issei gyōnin* by low-ranking *samurai* with the double aim to help and control his religious commitment during the retreat. To this sum he added 180 liters of rice for the monthly offerings to the deities that the ascetic had to make on his behalf. The warlord annotated that the total annual cost of the retreat was 5,400 liters of rice.[13] In other words, during the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat an eminent *issei gyōnin* attracted an enormous flow of funds in comparison with the annual income of the estates of the two administrative temples at the front entrance of Mount Yudono, which amounted to 1,170 liters of rice for Hondōji and 810 liters of rice for Dainichiji (Ōtomo 1975, 274–75).

It is evident that such an extreme level of sponsorship also had direct implications for the balance of relations between *issei gyōnin* and devotees, which will be

discussed in the following pages. The more lay patrons provided donations for the religious practices performed by the ascetic, the more they became the ultimate owners of the *issei gyōnin*'s body during his life as well as after death. At this point the paradigm of authority turned upside down. The ascetic maintained for himself a façade of religious authority and charisma, which was actually substantiated and invented by devotees and disciples who were apparently relegated to a subaltern position but were actually the real producers of the ascetic's power.

Living corpse

The relationship between lay supporters and the *issei gyōnin* did not end with the death of the ascetic. On the contrary, funerary procedures were perceived of as a crucial moment to reinforce and even expand interaction with the ascetic. The majority of *issei gyōnin* were cremated and their memorial tablets were usually enshrined at the local temples with which they had an affiliation.[14] However, in the case of eminent *issei gyōnin* (i.e., those *issei gyōnin* who could gather around themselves a large group of devotees), the corpse received special funerary treatment in order to be mummified. Thanks to this process devotees and disciples could maintain karmic ties with the *issei gyōnin* even after his biological termination. For instance, a late-Edo-period hagiography of the eminent *issei gyōnin* Chūkai Shōnin (unknown–1755) gives the following description of the religious functions attributed to his *sokushin-butsu*:

> After the completion of his ascetic practices, [Chūkai] died on the dawn of the twenty-first day of the second month of 1755. A marvelous perfume spread in the room [of the sepulcher] and the ascetic appeared as if Dainichi Nyorai of the Womb Realm had surrounded him with beams of light. Thus, he became a buddha in this actual body in order to allow people to establish positive karmic ties with him and let everyone know his virtuous practices, which he performed in accordance with his vow.[15]

An essential passage for the transformation of the *issei gyōnin*'s corpse into a flesh-body icon was the construction of a special underground cell (*ishi no karōto*) in which the corpse was buried for a symbolic period of three years.[16] For instance, it is relevant to take into account the architecture of the underground cell built to bury the corpse of the eminent *issei gyōnin* Bukkai Shōnin (1827–1903). This underground cell is located on the southern side behind the main hall of the temple of Kannonji in Bukkai's native village of Murakami in Echigo province (present-day Niigata prefecture).

The twenty-eight stones that constitute its four walls (seven stones for each side) were carefully smoothed and a thin layer of river sand was used to seal the gaps. One large stone was placed at the bottom of the structure as a floor and three canopy-stones closed the upper part of the cell. Finally, an iron grid was installed in an elevated position from the bottom to suspend the coffin inside the cell and allow air to circulate around it. The coffin itself was not an ordinary one but was made of pine wood slabs almost six centimeters thick (twice as thick as normal) to help preserve the Bukkai's remains from possible water and insect damage. All the

carpenters and the masons who worked to build the coffin and underground cell were members of Yudonosan religious confraternities that had been founded by Bukkai at Murakami.[17]

The underground cell worked as a sort of hidden cavity in which the *issei gyōnin* went through an incubatory period similar to the seclusion in the mountain that Bukkai had performed at various times at Mount Yudono on the behalf of his devotees. The burial mound (*tsuka*), under which the underground cell was often built, was conceived of as a miniature Mount Yudono and the three years spent by the *issei gyōnin* within the underground cell became his last, and most perfect, One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat. With his corpse installed in the underground cell, the *issei gyōnin* was supposed to take advantage of his cadaveric status to perform the ultimate One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat, in which every type of biological need such as eating, drinking, sleeping, urinating, and defecating was completely overcome and substituted by a permanent condition of purity and meditative absorption. It can be said that the construction of the underground cell corresponded to a sort of architectural statement in which lay devotees and disciples pushed the ascetic practice of the *issei gyōnin* toward a level of paradigmatic

Figure 3: *Sokushin-butsu* of Zenkai Shōnin (1602–87). Edo period. Kannonji, Hishigata-mura, Niigata prefecture. Photo by Naitō Masatoshi.

perfection and, at the same time, unmistakably validated it through the creation of the *sokushin-butsu*, interpreted as aesthetic evidence of his religious achievement (see Figure 3).

The term "entering deep meditation and suspended animation" (*nyūjō*, Skt. *samādhi-praviṣṭa*) is often used in the texts about the origins of the *sokushin-butsu* to refer to the "vital functions" of the *issei gyōnin*'s corpse within the tomb.[18] The most advanced level of *nyūjō* corresponds to a "meditation wherein the practitioner abides comfortably in the manifest world" (*genpōrakujū*, Skt. *dṛṣṭa dharma-sukha vihāra*) enjoying the benefits of concentration (*jō*) in this real world, without being distracted or disturbed by it. This unmoving and cataleptic meditative focus, which was supposed to be realized by the *issei gyōnin* in the underground cell, fostered a sort of visual and conceptual conflation between the term *nyūjō* and the *rigor mortis* of the corpse.[19] In other words, from the point of view of the corpse, *nyūjō* corresponded to a sort of quasi-life, and from the point of view of the living body to a sort of quasi-death.

Very often, after the exhumation of the corpse from the underground cell, the mummification processes had to be done by the same persons who took care of the funerary procedures to transform the *issei gyōnin* into a *sokushin-butsu*. For instance, the desiccated corpse of Chūkai was repeatedly fumigated with candles and incense before being finally smeared with an extract of *Artemisia princeps* and persimmon juice to prevent putrefaction of the tissues. In the case of the *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsuryūkai, the abdomen has a surgical incision of eighteen centimeters and the anus was completely cut away from the corpse. All the internal organs were removed and the cavity of the thorax was filled with limestone to keep the *sokushin-butsu* dry.[20]

All of these complex and expensive funerary procedures, from the construction of the underground cell to the fumigation of the corpse for complete mummification, were undertaken by the *issei gyōnin*'s disciples and devotees, who claimed for themselves the right to increase the authority of the ascetic by transforming him into a living flesh-icon to satisfy their devotional needs. This raises an important question: was mummification requested by *issei gyōnin* prior to their death, or was the decision to mummify the corpse made by the disciples? In other words, did the *issei gyōnin* desire to become *sokushin-butsu* or was this a unilateral religious priority of their followers? An account found in the personal writings of the Sakata *samurai* Ikeda Gensai (1755–1852) sheds some light on this matter.

> In the summer of 1832 [the disciples of Tetsumonkai] dug out his corpse and put [it] in a sitting position. They exhibited (*kaichō*) [the corpse] at the Sairakuji Temple even if this was said to be against the will of Tetsumonkai. [His disciples] wrote on a banner "Tetsumon Shōnin *sokushin-butsu*." This was a most impudent thing, in my opinion. According to talk among the wood-eating ascetics in the temples, this was not the real corpse [of Tetsumonkai], but the corpse of another wood-eating ascetic called Kihonkai. Thus, his disciples regrettably soiled the precious virtue [of Tetsumonkai] because they were only interested in gaining money. I find this such a vain thing.[21]

In this extremely critical passage, Gensai refers to the corpse of Tetsumonkai as a passive object at the mercy of his greedy disciples who were solely interested in economically exploiting the sensorial titillation provoked by the sight of the *sokushin-butsu* in the minds of onlookers. We may suppose that the principal promoters and beneficiaries of the "spectacularization" of the *sokushin-butsu* were the same social actors who supported the *issei gyōnin* in life and kept accumulating religious and economic capital from the *sokushin-butsu* after his death. At the same time, we must be aware that later *issei gyōnin* such as Bukkai and Tetsumonkai himself were conscious of the aesthetic power of the *sokushin-butsu* in making religious ideals tangible and immediately communicable to devotees. For instance, in 1818 Tetsumonkai built the "Hall of the real buddhas" (Sokubutsu-dō) at Kaikōji to enshrine separately the two *sokushin-butsu* of Chūkai and Enmyōkai Shōnin (unknown–1822). Tetsumonkai also promoted the reclothing ceremony (*okoromo-gae*) for the *sokushin-butsu* of Honmyōkai at Honmyōji in Higashi Iwamoto village, while Bukkai funded the reconstruction of Chūrenji, in which the *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsumonkai is enshrined, after a fire in 1888 (Yamasawa 2009, 91). On one hand, the authority attributed to eminent *issei gyōnin* was derived from the sensory appeal of their *sokushin-butsu*, sponsored and realized thanks to the economic and practical support of lay devotees, while on the other hand, some eminent *issei gyōnin* autonomously organized important aspects of *sokushin-butsu* veneration concerning the commemoration of *issei gyōnin* of the past.

Constructions

The *ad hoc* funerary procedures that brought about the creation of the *sokushin-butsu* played a pivotal role in portraying the death of eminent *issei gyōnin* as a voluntary abandonment of the body (*shashin-gyō*) rather than a post-mortem treatment of the human remains of the ascetic. This portrayal had the *issei gyōnin* consciously entering the sepulcher to self-bury his body as the final step of a long ascetic path. The architectonic structure of the underground cell, which preserved a sort of bubble of air around the coffin, served to fuel the illusion that the *issei gyōnin* was alive and meditating within it. In contrast, the reality of the *issei gyōnin*'s death was probably extremely different. For instance, in 1829 Seikai Shōnin (1795–1872), the principal disciple of Tetsumonkai, composed a short memorial in which were recorded the last moments of his master.

> On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of 1825 [Tetsumonkai] departed from Kaikōji Temple. On the twenty-sixth day, he arrived at Senninzawa on Mount Yudono. After five years, he successfully finished the practice of seclusion in the mountain and went back to Kaikōji Temple on the nineteenth day of the eighth month of 1829. There were ceremonies of congratulation, but during the fifth and a half hour of the night of the eighteenth day of the tenth month of the same year, the Shōnin abruptly became ill and lay down on the ground. All his numerous followers were shocked. They started praying for the protection of various buddhas and gods and proposed different medications. Nevertheless, these medications did not have any relevant effect. Was this the final moment of

> his fixed karma? At the end, the power of the medicines was not enough. At the dawn of the eighth day of the twelfth month he put on his ascetic robes, held a rosary between the tips of his fingers and started reciting the Buddha's name three times. At that moment, he peacefully reached rebirth in the Pure Land as if he had been sleeping. It was a moving situation. . . .[22]

Seikai candidly described the death of Tetsumonkai as a natural event, which was probably due to the physical consumption caused by the practice of multiple One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreats on Mount Yudono and the numerous medical treatments unsuccessfully adopted to prevent his decease. The same text informs us that over the following days the body of Tetsumonkai was transported to Chūrenji, placed in a double coffin, and buried behind the Shinzan Gongen Hall (Shinzan Gongen-dō).

Nevertheless, hagiographies and oral legends about the death of eminent *issei gyōnin* invariably present the *sokushin-butsu* as the result of a prearranged abandonment of the body in which the *issei gyōnin* voluntarily entered the underground cell while still alive and kept chanting the *nenbutsu*, fasting, and meditating until death arrived.[23] Thanks to the ascetic merit accumulated performing "suspended animation inside the ground" (*dochū nyūjō*), the eminent *issei gyōnin* was able to naturally transform his corpse into a *sokushin-butsu*. The first aim of these oral and written narratives was to negate the inevitability of the human interventions for mummifying the ascetic's corpse. The *sokushin-butsu* was portrayed as a parthenogenetic phenomenon that was driven solely by the extraordinary body of the *issei gyōnin* and did not require or entail the interference of other social actors.

The second aim was to provide a fictionalized extension of eminent *issei gyōnin* so to expand their charisma and authority beyond the limits of the human condition. Oral legends as well as hagiographies concurred in creating this sort of *continuum* between historical *issei gyōnin* and meta-historical *issei gyōnin*, in which the construction of the second was based on—but not confined within—the alleged factuality of the first. Historical and meta-historical *issei gyōnin* developed an intimate relationship with each other but remained ultimately separate and independent. What is true on the historical level though is not necessarily true on the level of meta-history and vice versa. Nevertheless, history and meta-history do not contradict each other because they work on different levels of discourse. In a similar way, reflecting on the relationships between historiographic and hagiographic writings, Michel de Certeau underlines that every recorded event is always, necessarily, filtered by stylistic, descriptive, and conceptual modalities, which generate evanescent images of the past in order to provide the illusion of a meaningful present (de Certeau 1988, xxvii, 270). Following de Certeau's analysis to interpret the written sources about *issei gyōnin* and *sokushin-butsu*, the historiographic descriptions about the formation processes of the *sokushin-butsu* should not be subordinated to its meta-historical renderings expressed in hagiographies and oral legends. At the same time, it is misleading to obliterate meta-historical discourses of hagiographies and oral legends about the *sokushin-butsu* just because they are not congruent with the analytical paradigms of historiography.

Once the authority of eminent *issei gyōnin* was reified and made tangible through the *sokushin-butsu*, this "idol" in flesh and bones, which was conceived as a "materialized idea" (Gr. *eídōlon*) of ascetic perfection, autonomously started producing new meanings and discourses through the sensorial solicitation of devotees, who were transformed into religious spectators before it. Being a simulacrum or "something that imitates" (Lat. *simulāre*) the *sokushin-butsu* did not passively wait to be scanned by the human eye but was able to return the gaze. This proactive visual exchange from the mummy to the humans fostered the illusion of a vital presence embedded within the materiality of the mummified corpse. The expression of such devotional feelings generated a proliferation of oral and written discourses about the past and present deeds of the *sokushin-butsu*. For instance, after the enshrinement of the *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsumonkai at Chūrenji a considerable number of new oral legends were created about his life. One of the most successful tells of a young and wild Tetsumonkai who abruptly decided to abandon his dissolute life to become an *issei gyōnin*. While performing ascetic practices at Senninzawa a prostitute of Funabachō, the amusement district in Sakata, with whom he had had a liaison, came to him and implored him to return with her. Tetsumonkai told her to wait for a while, left the ascetic hut, and then reentered it, giving her a bundle containing his penis. He had castrated himself. Recovering from her initial shock, the prostitute enshrined Tetsumonkai's penis in her brothel, which was, from that moment on, blessed by a constant flow of clients. Even if the oral legend mentions the penis, the organ actually cut from the *sokushin-butsu* was the scrotum. The appellative for the scrotum of Tetsumonkai is "the cut of the previous life," which practically underlines the separation between the first part of the life of Tetsumonkai that was characterized by passions and violence and the second one during which he became an *issei gyōnin*. The scrotum is still preserved inside a small reliquary at Nangakuji Temple in Tsuruoka, where it is venerated as a hidden buddha (*hibutsu*) (Andō and Sakurai 1993, 67–69). Another legend reports that in 1821 Tesumonkai took part in an "external exhibition" (*dekaichō*) of Chūrenji's statue of Yudonosan Daigongen Dainichi Nyorai in Edo, which was then plagued by an eye disease causing blindness. He plucked out his left eye as an offering to the dragon god of the Sumida River and the plague immediately ended (Yamasawa 2009, 77).[24]

During the 1960s, a team of Japanese scholars, which included among others the historian of religions Matsumoto Akira and the folklorist Hori Ichirō (1910–74), formed the "Group for research of Japanese mummies" (Nihon miira kenkyū gurūpu) and made a medical analysis of the *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsumonkai. These examinations revealed that the *sokushin-butsu* was missing the left eye and the scrotum, which were certainly removed after the mummification of the corpse and not before (Andō and Sakurai 1993, 67–69). It is evident that the *sokushin-butsu* provided the chance for historical *issei gyōnin* to do deeds such as continuous self-mutilations of the body or infinite fasts that they would never have been able to do as living human beings. At the same time, the exterior shape of the *sokushin-butsu* was molded according to the newly created devotional patterns in order to add a further layer of truthfulness and factuality to these meta-historical narratives.

The *sokushin-butsu* played a double role as both a matrix, which generated oral legends and hagiographies about the *issei gyōnin* as extraordinary men, and as a somatic *imprimatur*, the physicality of which served to sensorially validate the reality of hagiographical narratives. In other words, it is possible to think about the *sokushin-butsu* as an aesthetic elevator. On one hand, it lowered Buddhist and ascetic transcendental ideals to the level of reality, providing them with a material shape deriving from the mummified corpse of the *issei gyōnin*, while on the other hand, the *sokushin-butsu* lifted up the ascetic's body from the ordinariness of human reality to the extraordinariness of divine reality.

Full-body relic

The *sokushin-butsu* can be thought of as a relic (*shari*), but an extremely particular one.[25] The English term "relic," which comes from the Latin verb *relinquere* "to leave behind," is misleading in the case of the *sokushin-butsu*, because it is usually associated with the idea of a fragment that reminds one of a whole. For instance, the absence of the ascetic, following his death, is amended through the material presence of a part of his body that works as an interface to narrow the gap between sensory inaccessibility and a recognizable presence. In the case of the *sokushin-butsu* this metonymical logic of the *pars pro toto* does not apply, because the mummified corpse of the *issei gyōnin* is preserved in its wholeness as a full-body relic (*zenshin shari*, Skt. *śarīra saṃghāta*).

One of the first sources to mention this type of relic is the "Devadatta Chapter" of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Here the Buddha Śākyamuni explains that his evil cousin Devadatta is actually destined to become a buddha called God King (Skt. Devarāja) and his whole body will turn into a single relic after his extinction into nirvāṇa. This passage of the *Lotus Sūtra* underlines that the manifestation of the full-body relic of Devadatta involves human senses on a perceptive level, creating a sort of sensational or choreographic contemplation of his uncorrupted corpse shown within a gigantic *stūpa* studded with precious jewels.[26] Like Devadatta's full-body relic, the *sokushin-butsu* of an eminent *issei gyōnin* was venerated by devotees and disciples as a "continuator" or "spreader" of the ascetic's authority within contingent reality (Strong 2004, 229). The unabridged presence of the *sokushin-butsu* testifies that this type of flesh-body icon does not represent the *issei gyōnin*, but *is* the *issei gyōnin* in a different guise. At the same time, the *sokushin-butsu* can be considered as a "real symbol" not because it prefigures something other than itself but rather because it "throws something together" (Gr. *sumbállo*) and creates links between heterogeneous elements. In the specific case of the *sokushin-butsu* there is a strong "isomorphism" and a semiotic fertilization between three apparently oppositional elements: the living body, the corpse, and the statue (Faure 1998, 791).

To better understand this concept, it is interesting to consider a story about the relationship between relic veneration and the incorrupt body of the Buddha Kāśyapa reported in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*.[27] While traveling in the Kosala area, the Buddha made the body of Kāśyapa momentarily emerge from the ground in order to teach the proper ritual procedures for paying homage to relics. The

Buddha used the expression "undivided mass of bones" (Skt. *asthi*) to refer to the corpse of Kāśyapa when still buried underground. Once he made this marvelous chain of bones rise up from the earth into the air in order to be contemplated by everyone, the corpse of Kāśyapa is described as an "undivided mass of relics" (Skt. *śarīra*). The word *asthi* underlines the integrity of the entire structure of the corpse inside the sepulcher, and the term *śarīra* indicates the level of sacrality attributed to the incorrupt cadaver once outside the sepulcher. According to a similar logic, when the *issei gyōnin* was believed to practice *nyūjō* within the underground cell, the corpse of the ascetic realized the phase of *asthi*. Once the corpse was exhumed, properly desiccated, and exhibited in front of the devotees, the *sokushin-butsu* realized the phase of *śarīra*.

Another fundamental characteristic of all relics—*sokushin-butsu* included—is mobility. On specific occasions, the *sokushin-butsu* of eminent *issei gyōnin* were removed from temples and publicly displayed in processions, which often culminated with external exhibitions. The external exhibitions of the *sokushin-butsu* shared many similarities with the *translatio* ritual, during which early Christians transferred the human remains of a saint from one place, usually the sepulcher or the church, to a different location to be displayed before groups of devotees. The *translatio* implied the movement of the corpse of the saint among or toward people according to an opposite directionality compared to pilgrimage, during which people went to meet the sacred body of the saint (Brown 1981, 88). Similarly, the external exhibition of a full-body relic of an eminent *issei gyōnin* corresponded to a sort of inverted pilgrimage performed by the *sokushin-butsu* toward the devotees during which the immobility of death was replaced by a continuous movement through space and time. For instance, an entry in the administrative journal compiled by Rinkai Shōnin (1830–94), abbot of Kaikōji, states:

> 1882, ninth month, seventh day.
> Three persons departed [from Kaikōji] to exhibit [the *sokushin-butsu*]. They carried the real buddha (*sokubutsu sama*) on their shoulders.[28] One was Kōyama Risuke and also his son Iwakichi. Then, another man came from Tamura village in order to help them. Other people followed them on foot or riding horses.[29]

From Rinkai's description it emerges that exhibitions of the *sokushin-butsu* continued to take place even in the Meiji period and were organized by members of religious confraternities who probably transported the *sokushin-butsu* inside a sort of portable palanquin placed on their shoulders. The presence of other devotees or simple onlookers seems to suggest a sort of procession stretching along the roads of Sakata.

Another example of prolonged external exhibition is associated with the *sokushin-butsu* of Shinkai Shōnin, who came from Michinoku province and became an *issei gyōnin* affiliated with Chūrenji. After three years of ascetic training on Mount Yudono, Shinkai went back to his village where he organized various fundraising activities for the reconstruction of the temple of Renshōji in the city of Morioka, present-day Iwate prefecture. Shinkai died in 1868 and his corpse was sent back to Chūrenji, where it was buried behind the Hexagonal Hall (Rokkaku-dō) and subsequently transformed into a *sokushin-butsu*.

In the early years of the Meiji period, the devotees of Shinkai asked the *issei gyōnin* of Chūrenji for permission to take the full-body relic of Shinkai for an external exhibition in the village of Tsuchida-bashi. During the long journey from Dewa to Michinoku the *sokushin-butsu* of Shinkai was placed in a portable shrine carried by the members of various Yudono religious confraternities. When the external exhibition finished, the *sokushin-butsu* of Shinkai was, once again, returned to Chūrenji, where it disappeared in the fire that destroyed the temple in 1888 (Yahabachō shi hensan iinkai 1985, 839–43).

The external exhibition of Shinkai's full-body relic shows that in certain cases the ultimate property of the *sokushin-butsu* belonged to the *issei gyōnin* who resided in the temple with which the ascetic was affiliated, here Chūrenji. The devotees of Shinkai's native village were allowed to temporarily share the spiritual benefits that derived from enshrining the full-body relic of an eminent *issei gyōnin* in their village, but they could not reclaim any permanent rights over the *sokushin-butsu*. At the same time, the external exhibition of the full-body relic of Shinkai allowed the *issei gyōnin* to further reinforce his physical presence and authority among the communities of supporters, spreading the Mount Yudono cult and implicitly asserting the pivotal role of Chūrenji as the forge and strongbox of *sokushin-butsu*.

So far we have discussed external exhibitions of *sokushin-butsu* in which organizers and spectators invariably were disciples of eminent *issei gyōnin* or local members of religious confraternities specifically dedicated to the veneration of Mount Yudono. It is relevant to consider if occasional pilgrims, who came from afar to perform religious practices at Dewa Sanzan without necessarily belonging to Yudonosan religious confraternities, had the same chance to cast a contemplative eye over the *sokushin-butsu*. From the brief narratives reported in travelers' journals, which provided logistic information on the pilgrimage routes and religious attractions along the way, it emerges that only a few pilgrims paid homage to the full-body relics of eminent *issei gyōnin*. For instance, in the second half of the seventeenth century Hosoda Keihō made a pilgrimage to Dewa Sanzan, departing from Tajima province, present-day Hyogo prefecture. He recorded the events of the pilgrimage in his traveler's journal. In the entry for the twenty-fourth day of the fifth month (unspecified year) he reported that: "The *sokushin-butsu* of Honmyōkai Shōnin is in the village of Iwamoto, which is almost twenty kilometers from Mount Haguro." In another travel journal from 1842, the pilgrim Suzuki Seisaburō Giman describes his visit to Chūrenji, noting that: "The price per person for [being admitted to] the external exhibition of the *sokushin sokubutsu* of Tetsumon Shōnin is twelve copper coins."[30]

Analyzing these descriptions it seems that the *soksushin-butsu* cult remained the prerogative of those Yudonosan religious confraternity members who supported the *issei gyōnin* during his life. Other groups of residents, who did not necessarily belong to Yudonosan religious confraternities, were occasionally granted visual access to the *sokushin-butsu* in special circumstances such as the external exhibitions for fundraising, but non-resident pilgrims were rarely involved in such devotional activities. This situation is even more striking if we consider that after the Meiji period most of the ascetic temples around Mount Yudono failed to survive

and those that did manage to do so were boosted economically by the permanent exhibition of the *sokushin-butsu* to visitors.

Archéiro-poiètic icons

In 1937 Kosugi Kazuo (1908–98) coined the term "flesh-body icons" to describe the mummified corpses of eminent Chan patriarchs of the Tang period (618–907) and extended this definition to analyze the *sokushin-butsu* of Yudono (Kosugi 1993, 277–79). Comparing the two types of mummies, Kosugi points out that the *sokushin-butsu* differed from the mummies of the Chan patriarchs because they derived their religious authority and charisma from not being manufactured by human actors. Starting from this analytical assumption, Kosugi ended up emphasizing what can be defined as the *archéiro-poiètic* dimension of the *sokushin-butsu*.

The word *archéiro-poièsys* is a compound made of the noun "origin/creator" (Gr. *arké*) and the verb "to make" (Gr. *poiéo*), which denotes a type of icon not made by the human hand but self-generated. The *archéiro-poiètic* icon is the image that a god produces of himself in order to donate it to human beings for veneration (Schmitt 2002, 218). For instance, the holy shroud can be considered an *archéiro-poiètic* icon or mark that Jesus created using his physical body to transmit his effigy to the present world. In the same way, the *sokushin-butsu* was interpreted as an icon of a divinized *issei gyōnin*, which was supposed to have been generated not through human intervention on inert matter but from the ascetic power that constantly imbued the physicality of the ascetic.

The materiality of the *sokushin-butsu* played a pivotal role in reinforcing its *archéiro-poiètic* dimension, because it was totally different from the usual type of religious simulacra produced through the manufacture of natural elements that had a specific economic value, such as wood, gold, or stone. The *sokushin-butsu* was made of extra-economic materials such as the flesh and bones of the *issei-gyōnin*, which were not referable to independent quotations calculable according to trading logics. At the same time, the extraneousness of the *sokushin-butsu* from the rules of the market did not prevent it from producing economic benefits. For instance, during external exhibitions the zero economic significance of the *sokushin-butsu* as *archéiro-poiètic* icon was skillfully exploited by disciples and religious confraternity members to receive a variety of devotional offerings, which allowed lay devotees to build meritorious karmic ties with the ascetic. Judging from the types of gifts donated to eminent *issei gyōnin* such as Tetsumonkai during life, these were not limited to money but included also foodstuffs, textiles, wood utensils, or agricultural tools.[31]

It is interesting to note that *sokushin-butsu* were not the only type of material image of eminent *issei gyōnin*. The exterior aspect of these ascetics was often fixed through wooden statues. In this case the statue underwent various "animation processes" (Gr. *stoicheiosis*) to activate its biological functions and transform inert matter into a living organism (Faure 1998, 785). For instance, in Matsuyama village close to the city of Sakata there is a small Fudō Hall (Fudō-dō), which still enshrines a wooden statue of Tetsumonkai. Another wooden statue of Tetsu-

monkai is located in the Kannon Hall (Kannon-dō) of the temple of Dōsenji in the village of Mikawa on the outskirt of Sakata (see Figure 4).[32] Two other wooden statues of Reiunkai Shōnin (dates unknown) and Zenkai Shōnin are enshrined in the main hall of Kaikōji in Sakata, which also hosts the *sokushin-butsu* of Chūkai and Enmyōkai.[33]

Both *sokushin-butsu* and wooden statues of eminent *issei gyōnin* change their monastic garments in reclothing rituals, which were often performed every Year of the Ox to commemorate the legendary ascent of Mount Yudono by Kūkai (774–835) and mark the most propitious time to make a pilgrimage to this site. Although we do not have extant written sources that specifically describe the reclothing rituals performed for the *sokushin-butsu* in the Edo period, they probably had much in common with analogous rituals practiced for the wooden statues of the *issei gyōnin*. For instance, Rinkai noted a reclothing ritual requested for a wooden statue of Tetsumonkai in the mid Meiji period.

> 1883, April, eighteenth day. Three persons came from the village of Hirono Shinden-mura. On the twentieth day of this month they have scheduled a performance of the reclothing ceremony for the wooden statue of Tetsumonkai Shōnin. Therefore, they requested of this temple a ceremony for the reinstallation of the spirit into the statue.[34]

Figure 4: Wooden statue of Tetsumonkai Shōnin (unknown–1829) with tufts of human beards inserted in the face. Edo period (nineteenth century). Fudō-dō, Matsuyama, Yamagata prefecture. November 2012. Photo by the author.

As in the case of Shinkai's devotees, confraternity members of Hirono Shinden-mura also desired to maintain a solid karmic tie with Tetsumonkai by carving a wooden statue of him and interacting with it as a living object through the performance of a reclothing ceremony. They requested the *issei gyōnin* of Kaikōji to take care of the ritual to remove the spirit from the statue as the preliminary step, before proceeding to the ritual undressing. When the change of the monastic robe was completed, the spirit of the ascetic was reintroduced into the statue or *sokushin-butsu* through a specific ritual for the reinstallation of the spirit.[35]

This veiling and dis-veiling of the *issei gyōnin*'s body in the guise of a wooden statue or *sokushin-butsu* served to make a *mise en scène* of a taxonomical regression of the simulacrum to the level of inert matter, which was immediately followed by a new progression toward the level of living body. In order to be manipulated by human actors the *sokushin-butsu* needed to be temporally switched off, and its nakedness marked a momentary suspension of its authority, which was fully restored through the reclothing ceremony. In other words, the ritual act of unclothing and reclothing the *sokushin-butsu* corresponded to a cyclical reenactment of the death and biological regeneration of the *issei gyōnin* through which the ascetic affirmed his religious power and the devotees renewed their devotional relationship with him.

The reclothing ceremony was also an occasion to maximize the capacity of the *sokushin-butsu* to literally emanate and spread new fragments of its authority. Displaying a typical quality of the Buddhist relics according to which a relic is able to generate other relics, the textile scraps of the old garments that covered the body of the *sokushin-butsu* were distributed among devotees as contact relics. These bits of fiber were sanctified through direct contact with the flesh of the *issei gyōnin*, which imbued them with salvific energy that devotees took for themselves by using them as protective amulets. For instance, in the village of Hishigata, present-day Niigata prefecture, the pieces of the garment worn by the *sokushin-butsu* of Zenkai Shōnin (1602–87) were believed to have healing effects for every type of disease from below the waist and specifically against ventral hernia. The skin particles of the same *sokushin-butsu*, which peeled off during the reclothing ceremony, were ingested by Zenkai's devotees as preventive treatment during epidemics (Andō 1961, 136). It is clear that the living or dead body of the *issei gyōnin*—be it a whole, a part, a wooden replica, or a contact relic—was always perceived of as an inexhaustible source of power and object of devotional practices for contemporaries as well as for posterity.

Conclusion

The *sokushin-butsu* is an organic stage on which takes place a ritual *mise en scène* aimed at displaying a reification of the esoteric Buddhist concept of becoming a buddha in this actual body. Performing austerities such as the One Thousand Days Ascetic Retreat on Mount Yudono, *issei gyōnin* tried to realize the vows of their lay supporters as well as the transcendental ideal of transmuting the human body into a buddha body. Lay devotees and patrons from Yudonosan religious confra-

ternities played a pivotal role in providing economic and religious support to *issei gyōnin* while pursuing this ascetic paradigm of perfection. In return for devotional and monetary investments of which the *issei gyōnin* was the beneficiary during life, a tangible and sensorial proof of his metaphysical achievements became an absolute necessity after his death. Therefore, the *sokushin-butsu* was created as an extreme attempt to overcome the aporia of providing a verifiable and stable form to an elusive and ambiguous esoteric ideal such as the realization of perfect buddhahood here and now.

Analyzing the concept of "becoming a buddha in this actual body," which is central to esoteric Buddhism, Fabio Rambelli describes it as "a *performative* process, in which social position and ritual practices transform the masterful practitioner's body into an 'image' of the Buddha-body" (Rambelli and Reinders 2012, 14). In the case of the mummified corpses of the *issei gyōnin*, the *sokushin-butsu* can be considered as one local example of such performative practices. The funerary aesthetics, which filter the transcendental ideal of becoming a buddha in this actual body, have the double meaning of reifying the abstract and verifying the ineffable. It is exactly this sensorial verifiability of the *sokushin-butsu* that transforms a flesh-body icon into a sort of legal seal or palpable imprint left on the immaterial surface of Buddhist soteriological discourse.

The *sokushin-butsu* has a consolatory effect on the spectator/devotee, because it is not a *memento mori* or a representation of impermanence but an authentic embodiment of a present memory of a future event. This retroactive sight of something that will be completely achieved only in a remote future reassures the ordinary devotee, who stands in front of the *sokushin-butsu*, about an existing possibility to become a buddha in this actual body as the *issei gyōnin* had already done for himself, transforming into a living image of the buddha Dainichi Nyorai of Yudono. The temporality, which characterizes the *sokushin-butsu*, is a sort of chronotope where the memorialization of the *issei gyōnin*'s authority in the past serves to affirm the protection of the devotee in the present and boost the indubitability of his salvation in the future. In a similar way, historiographic and hagiographic writings—although with different stylistic and argumentative tropes—concur in memorializing versions of the past on behalf of the ascetic, which are functional for his legitimation in the present and, at the same time, are already pointing toward his deification in the future. The two halves of the ascetic's physicality, namely the living body and the mummified corpse, simultaneously work as passive receptacles and active generators for transmitting devotional practices and logics.

As *archéiro-poiètic* icon—or full-body relic in Buddhist terms—the *sokushin-butsu* manifests its agency in relation to contingent reality not only in utopian terms but also in dystopian ones. The *sokushin-butsu* is an inexhaustible matrix of religious and social discourses, which can never be fully controlled because they are spontaneously generated from the sensorial encounter between the devotee and the flesh-body icon. Being a living idol—or a materialized idea—the *sokushin-butsu* always engages the eyes of the spectators, inspiring in them a polyphony of sensations, some of which are characterized by criticality or innovation. For instance, the sight of the *sokushin-butsu* caused some devotees to produce a wide

variety of interpretations. Some were more eulogizing—the oral legends and hagiographies, for example—while others, Ikeda Gensai, for instance, were far more critical. Every time a religious object takes shape, the apparent stability of its external form, which corresponds to a temporary fixation of the transcendental ideal, already contains the germs for future expansion and manipulation of the same ideal. Similarly, the aesthetics of the *sokushin-butsu* can be considered as religious propaganda and, at the same time, counter-propaganda.

The ambiguity of the message delivered by the *sokushin-butsu* brought different social actors such as religious professionals, lay devotees, and ruling elites to test their authority in relation to the ascetic's body according to multiple modalities. For instance, after the promulgation of the new Penal Code in 1880, according to which sepulcher desecration and corpse destruction were identified as crimes punishable with imprisonment, there was a slowdown in the formation and exhibition of *sokushin-butsu*, even if *issei gyōnin* continued to perform their ascetic practices in this period as well. It is probable that the physicality of the *sokushin-butsu* started to be perceived as an antinomic element in open dissonance with the new social and religious milieu frantically orchestrated by the Meiji oligarchs. The funerary procedures to transform the corpse of eminent *issei gyōnin* into *sokushin-butsu* were reframed according to a different jurisprudential taxonomy, which made them shift from devotional operations to destabilizing acts against society.

The "mediation process" through which the ascetic's authority was materialized in the guise of a flesh-body icon perceivable and interpretable via sensorial functions by everyone became the ultimate step to affirm and expand the religious charisma of eminent *issei gyōnin*. Because this procedure of sacralization was based on aesthetic strategies, which involved the physical dimension of the *issei gyōnin* as well as the sensorial faculties of devotees, it was impossible to regulate the rhizomatic proliferation of meanings—some utopian, some dystopian—associated with the *sokushin-butsu*. For instance, most of the devotees who belonged to the Yudonosan religious confraternities emphasized the utopian dimension of the *sokushin-butsu*, which were portrayed as sources of worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*), models of ascetic perfection, or paradigms of future salvation. However, others such as Ikeda Gensai interpreted the *sokushin-butsu* as an impious exploitation of the *issei gyōnin*'s corpse, while still others—such as the Meiji oligarchs—saw in any type of artificial transformation of the cadaver a disturbing threat to the unity of the political and social body. This ambiguity and irreducibility to a mono-interpretative dimension of the human body in all its expressions makes the *sokushin-butsu* of Mount Yudono just as relevant today as it was in the Edo period.

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Notes

1. In the second half of the seventeenth century Mount Yudono started to be considered as the Inner Precinct of the Three Mountains of Dewa (Dewa Sanzan), along with Mount Haguro and Mount Gassan. Before this period the Dewa Sanzan had a flexible structure, which alternatively included Mount Chōkai in the north or Mount Hayama in the south. Mount Yudono was considered as the shared Inner Precinct for all the sacred mountains of the area. For more details, see Suzuki (2015, 35–36).

2. For instance, in the *Ima Kumano Daigongen engi* [Foundation story of the present Kumano Daigongen; 1740] Yudono is defined as the "august shrine mountain," in which the natural body of Gohōzen replaces the architectural body of a shrine. See Kawasoe Taketane and Niino Naoyoshi (1990, 131–32).

3. The *Saihentō no jōjō kakuji* [Memorandum of the new interrogation about various situations; 1666] reports details on the extra-hierarchical status of the *issei gyōnin* within Buddhist institutions. For the original text, see Watanabe (1964, 21).

4. The term *sokushin-butsu*, which is used to describe the mummified bodies of eminent *issei gyōnin*, derives from adaptations of the Shingon ideal of "becoming a buddha in this actual body" and the Tendai doctrine of the "original enlightenment" (*hongaku shisō*) to the Shugendō ritual procedures and doctrinal discourse about the performance of ascetic practices on the mountain. For more details, see Asada (2000, 153, 165).

5. Already in the Edo period the mummified bodies of eminent *issei gyōnin* were defined according to different nomenclatures, which covered a great semantic range from "mummies of the mountain," with an emphasis on their aspect of anatomical mirabilia (*misemono*), to the more Buddhist terminology of *sokushin-butsu*. For instance, see the *Mannen fukyū oboegaki* [Records of an infinite detachment, 1704–11] in Iwahana (1992, 64).

6. The term *engi* is usually translated as "foundation story," but in this context *engi* are used to provide narratives about the life of eminent *issei gyōnin*. Therefore, I prefer to render the term as "hagiography."

7. Satte Fudōin in Musashi province was one of the two headquarters of the Honzan branch of Shugendō that supervised Shugendō temples in the Kantō region and their financial organization. The other supervisory temple was Gyokuryūbō in Odawara, Sagami province. See Yamauchi (2007, 30).

8. The only three administrative temples mentioned in the four extant petitions are: Hondōji, Dainichiji, and Dainichibō. Chūrenji was probably excluded because there were no *issei gyōnin* belonging to it that were affiliated with Kōmyōin. A copy of each petition was also sent to the superintendent for shrines and temples in Edo. See Watanabe (1964, 103–4); for the original text of the third petition composed in 1604, see Watanabe (1964, 105).

9. The text that reports this episode is the *Gebi saku shojō* [Letter of a humble monk; 1601]; see Yamagataken shi hensan kaigiin (1979, 215).

10. The number 108 refers to the Buddhist concept of the 108 afflictions, which constitute a serious impediment to the attainment of enlightenment. The length of forty-eight days for the ascetic retreat reminds us of the forty-eight vows of the buddha Amida to save all sentient beings.

11. In the *Kikeishi* [Record of evidence; 1812] the eminent *issei gyōnin* Tetsumonkai (unknown–1829) explains the difference between ordinary fire and separated fire and the religious and ritual meaning of the separated fire. For the original text, see Watanabe (1964, 3–4).

12. The term *norikake* makes reference to the practice of having the *issei gyōnin* ride a horse along the path from Senninzawa to the villages around Mount Yudono. The feast for the end

of this retreat is also called *nagamochi* to emphasize the long wait and high expectations of those who supported the *issei gyōnin* and wanted to share the benefits of his ascetic empowerment. See Togawa (1974, 63).

13. For the original text *Yudono kyonen ryūgan no bun* [Division of the offerings for the past year vow at Yudono; 1594], see Togawa (1982, 425–26).

14. The *Yudonosan issei gyōnin hatto jōjō no koto* [Edict on the various situations concerning the *issei gyōnin* of Mount Yudono; 1670] reports the standard funerary procedures to be followed in case of a non-eminent *issei gyōnin*'s death. For the original text, see Watanabe (1964, 131).

15. Chūkai Shōnin was a low-ranking *samurai* and the cousin of the eminent *issei gyōnin*, Honmyōkai Shōnin (unknown–1683), to whom belongs the oldest extant *sokushin-butsu* of Yudono. For the original text of the *Sokubutsu Chūkai Shōnin ryaku engi* [Abbreviated hagiography of the real buddha Chūkai; late Edo period], see Kudō (1977, 701).

16. Even if three years was the formal period during which the corpse of the ascetic was supposed to reside within the subterranean cell, most of the *issei gyōnin* were actually exhumed before the end of the three years to prevent the risk of putrefaction. For instance, Tetsuryūkai (1819–81) was exhumed the same year as his death. See Togawa (1974, 131–32, 136–37).

17. In 1966 Naitō Masatoshi interviewed the shrine-carpenter Ishii Tomozaemon (1886–unknown) who participated in the construction of the special wood coffin for the body of Bukkai Shōnin. See Naitō (1999, 205–9).

18. The compound *nyūjō* is an abbreviation of the term *nyūzenjō*, which means to enter meditation (*zen*, Skt. *dhyāna*) and deep concentration (*jō*, Skt. *samādhi*).

19. A similar semantic conflation also takes place in India where the expression "entering *samādhi*" refers to the inhumation of the corpse of the ascetic inside the sepulcher and, at the same time, to his biological condition within it. See Parry (1982, 96).

20. The *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsuryūkai presents a cut on the belly, which had been sutured with thirteen stitches made with a gut-string of cotton according to a surgical technique that was probably influenced by the new medical practices tested by the scholars of Western learning. Naitō Masatoshi points out the suggestive hypothesis that three leaders of Tetsuryūkai's confraternity could have helped the famous scholar of Western learning and physician, Ozeki San'ei (1787–1839), in carrying out autopsies on corpses in the city of Tsurugaoka. The *sewanin* subsequently put into practice these dissecting techniques to create the *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsuryūkai. See Naitō (1999, 180).

21. Kihonkai was an *issei gyōnin* affiliated with Nangakuji in Tsuruoka who later became a disciple of Tetsumonkai. For the original text of the *Kōsairoku* [Record of Kōsai; 1801–50], see Yamasawa (2009, 90).

22. In 1965 Naitō Masatoshi together with the abbot of Kaikōji, Rev. Itō Eikō, conducted an investigation at the house of Machino Jinjūrō in the village of Narita Shinden where he discovered the *Kirokuchō* [Record register; 1829], now known as the *Seikai monjo* [Document of Seikai]. For the original text, see Naitō (1999, 168–69).

23. For a transcription of some oral legends about the *sokushin-butsu*, see Togawa (1972, 126–29).

24. From the legend of self-excision of the eye, Tetsumonkai derived the posthumous name of Merciful Eye (Kegan'in). See Andō (1961, 108).

25. The Sanskrit term *śarīra* literally means "body" or "solid matter" and is usually rendered in the classical Chinese translations of Buddhist texts as body (*shin*), material body (*shiki-shin*), form (*gyō*), or physicality (*keishitsu*).

26. For an English translation of this passage, see Hurvitz (2009, 181). For the original text see *Myohōrengekyō* [Sūtra of the lotus blossom of the fine Dharma], T 262, 9.35a8–9.

27. For the original Sanskrit text, see *Gilgit Manuscripts* 3, 1:73–79 and *Divyāvadāna* 465–69; 76–80. I quote this episode from Strong (2004, 34–36).

28. It is not clear which *sokushin-butsu* were involved in this external exhibition that was performed to raise funds on behalf of Kaikōji. It may have been the *sokushin-butsu* of Chūkai or

that of Enmyōkai, both of whom were enshrined at Kaikōji. Otherwise, it might have been the *sokushin-butsu* of Tetsumonkai, who was the abbot of Chūrenji, with which Kaikōji was affiliated.

29. For the original text of the *Kaikōji dai jūyon sei Jisen Rinkai dai jimu nikki* [Journal of the temple administration of the fourteenth chief monk of Kaikōji Jisen Rinkai; 1882–83] composed by Rinkai, see Itō (2013, 1:62). This journal of Rinkai was discovered by Rev. Itō Ryūbun, the abbot of Kaikōji Temple, in 2008 during work to renovate the main hall. Rev. Itō made a translation of the cursive style of the main body of the journal except for the final part of the text. The initial and terminal pages of the journal are greatly damaged by insects, but deciphering is still possible. I am grateful to Rev. Itō for letting me have access to this source.

30. For the original text of the *Dewa Sanzan dōchūki* [Dewa Sanzan traveler's journal; late seventeenth century], see Iwahana (1996, 154–55). For the original text of the *Mogami Shōnai Echigo dōchūki* [Mogami Shōnai Echigo traveler's journal; 1842], see Iwahana (1996, 129).

31. This aspect shows that most of the donors, who often belonged to Yudonosan religious confraternities and sustained the cult of the *issei gyōnin* and their *sokushin-butsu*, were peasants, small artisans, and carpenters. See Yamasawa (2009, 87).

32. The Mikawa devotees of Tetsumonkai built the Kannon Hall in order to enshrine the statue of the *issei gyōnin*, but in 1917 they decided to donate the entire hall to Dōsenji because nobody could take care of the building anymore. In 2013 the abbot of Dōsenji sponsored a restoration of the statue, which obliterated all the typical traits of the external appearance of the *issei gyōnin*. The present statue of Tetsumonkai simply shows the features of a Zen monk rather than an ascetic of Mount Yudono.

33. It is probable that Reiunkai and Zenkai were not transformed into *sokushin-butsu* after death because of the promulgation of the new Penal Code in 1880, which penalized the exhumation and treatment of corpses for whatever reason. See Naitō (1999, 179).

34. For the original text of the *Kaikōji dai jūshi sei Jisen Rinkai dai jimu nikki* composed by Rinkai, see Itō (2013, 2:266).

35. In the reclothing ritual performed for the *sokushin-butsu* of Shinnyokai (unknown–1783) at Dainichibō on June 1, 2015, the rituals for removing and reinstalling the spirit of the *issei gyōnin* opened and closed the ceremony. In the case of Shinnyokai, the present abbot of the Dainichibō, Rev. Endō Yūkaku, decided that the reclothing ritual should be practiced every six years instead of the canonical twelve years. Thanks to this the number of protective amulets, which were made with the old garments of the *sokushin-butsu* of Shinnyokai, drastically increased.

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