

THE ROTARY NO TOMO

癒しの風が吹く

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紀伊半島にある高野、熊野、吉野と呼ばれる霊場と、ひたすら歩いてきた祈り道が「紀伊山地の霊場と参詣道」として世界遺産にとろうくされた。その場所は、日本列島のほぼ中央に位置している。

太陽、水、豊かな土。山に囲まれた田や畑で米や野菜を作るには欠くことのできないものである。農耕民族であったためだろうか、日本人は古代から、太陽、山。古い大木、滝など、あらゆる自然を神として感謝し、崇めてきた。深い山々に包み込まれ、自然に恵まれてきたこの地は、日本人に神々の存在を想像させたのだろう。古くから霊場として位置付けられてきた。緑豊かな巨木が聳え、澄んだ風が吹き抜ける霊場は、喧騒とした近代社会とは別の、落ち着いた雰囲気満ちていて、心のふるさとというにふさわしい。

歩くしか方法がなかった時代、山を縫い、谷を渡る道がついた。それが今回世界遺産に指定された参詣道・熊野古道である。アスファルトの舗装した道のように、思いのままに歩を進めることが出来ない道。この道は、単に点在する神社や寺を結ぶ手段ではなく、道そのものが神々を気づかせてくれる存在なのだと思う。自己主張を許さない道を、土の匂い、木々の放つ芳香、小鳥の鳴き声を体中に染み込ませながら歩いていく。汗と疲れの彼方に、生きている自分を感じる。生かされているのだという実感とともに、歩いていることが、ありがたくなってくる。

長い歳月を生きてきた樹々の間を歩いていると、この心地よさは「心を解き放つことができた素のままの自分を発見した快感」だと気づく。古人が、長い日時を費やして参詣した「蟻の熊野詣」。蟻のように連なって歩いた人々の、心の中が見えてくるようだ。

私は、訪れた人たちに言う。「皆さんが生きてこられた過去を、この場に置いてください。性別、年齢、貧富、それらを全部捨ててください。頭で考えるのも止めて下さい。今からは、足から伝わってくる自然を感じましょう」と。

悠久の営みが残る道は、私たちの暮らしのリズムからすれば非常に不便である。特に「熊野奥駈け」と呼ばれる道は、原生の山の尾根を7日間かけて歩く道である。険しい岩場や、急峻な尾根が続く。

視界を閉ざす事のない山頂から望む眺めは、美の極致の凄みがある。果てしなく連続する山並に、移りゆく日差しが描き出す青色の微妙な変化は、感嘆させずにはおかない迫力と、尽きぬ魅力を湛えているのだ。「俺は生きている！」「ありがとう！」と大声で叫びたくなるこの感動は、神を感じるほどに強烈である。

弘法大師が開いた高野、役の行者が開いた吉野、そして熊野本宮大社、熊野速玉大社、

熊野那智大社。これらの霊場に共通するのは、自然の中であって人々を受け入れているということだろう。

神仏と人との結びつきを象徴する祭りがある。2月6日の夜に行われる新宮市神倉神社の「お燈まつり」は、男の祭りといわれ、身を清め、白装束に身を固めた男達が腰に荒縄を巻き、松明を手に神社への石段を登る。もちろん、神々に仕えるのは男ばかりではなく、女性たちが家庭で、参詣道で応援する。巫女という女性の存在も忘れてはならないが、この祭りの主役は男達である。山上で火と煙に包まれた男達が松明を手に一斉に駆け下りるといふ、素朴で勇壮な火まつりだ。その様子を「山は火の滝下り竜」といふ。松明の炎の中で体験する「熱い」「煙い」に魅せられた男達が遠くからも参加している。

7月14日の昼に行われる那智勝浦町・熊野那智大社の「那智の火祭り」は、山の中腹にある神社から133メートル直下する日本一的那智滝まで運ぶ扇を、燃え盛る大松明を担いだ男達が石に円を描いて迎える、豪華で雅な火の祭りだ。山の斜面に陣取った観衆が見守っている。余談だが、祭りが終わると、石段に落ちた松明の燃え残りの炭をわれ先に拾っていくので、あっという間にきれいになる。その炭を拾うといいことがあるという言い伝えがあるからだ。

諸霊を慰める高野山の「ろうそく祭り」は、奥の院から御廟までの参道が10万本のローソクで埋め尽くされる。8月13日、墓石群や杉木立が浮き上がるローソクの灯りが幽玄の世界を描き出す。霊場ならではの趣だ。

水の祭りといえば、熊野速玉大社の「御船祭」で行われる「御船競漕」だ。総延長185キロの大河、熊野川の河口部で行われるまつりは、10艘の早舟が、御船島を目指して漕ぎ上がる勇壮な祭りで、生活を御船漕ぎ中心にして練習を重ねた若者達の真剣勝負。夕陽に光る飛沫と掛け声に、水と共に生きてきた人たちの心意気を感じる。兩岸を埋める人たちの拍手と声援を受けて御船島を三巡し、お旅所に駆け込んだ男の雄叫びが、拍手に包まれる。

熊野川は、川の古道でもあった。熊野本宮大社から熊野速玉大社までは川舟を利用したのである。何年か前のことだが、川舟を借り、手漕ぎで下ったことがある。兩岸の景色は視点が違うだけで新鮮だった。櫓と竿と櫂を使い分けた舟下りは予想以上に疲れた。だが、神倉神社の裏に当たる千穂が峰の絶壁に突き当たる角度で下り、御船島を過ぎて熊野速玉大社が見えたとき、平安時代の人たちの歓声を聞く思いがした。

どの道を選んでも、どの霊地へ参拝しても、人それぞれに胸を打つ何かに出会える。人の理屈など通用しないのがいい。ともかく歩を進めることだ。歩きつづけた結論として「歩きましょうよ」とそして「心を解き放ちましょうよ」と言いたい。それができるのが

「紀伊山地の霊場と参詣道」なのだから。

Fresh, Healing Breezes

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Sitting almost smack-dab in the center of the Japanese islands are the Kii Peninsula's sacred sites, Koya, Yoshino and Kumano. They and the road of prayer that winds between them are designated as World Heritage Site: Sacred sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii

Mountains Range and the Cultural Landscapes that Surround Them.

The sun, the water, the rich soil—are indispensable to the growing of rice and vegetables in the paddies and fields. Probably because we were farming people, the Japanese since ancient times have given

thanks to all facets of nature: the sun, the mountains, the old trees, the waterfalls, all have been divine spirits. The deep mountains blessed nature inspired the Japanese with the existence of gods and goddesses. The area has been considered sacred since ancient times.

Its mountain forests are filled with giant, green trees and clean, clear breezes waft through the sacred sites. The atmosphere

is calm, set aside from the roar of modern society, a delightful place where the heart and mind can rest.

In an age when the only way to get around was shank's mare, one wended one's way across the mountains and through the valleys. The path followed here was the Old Kumano Road, a sacred way that has been designated as an international asset. It's a road that you do not move forward on swiftly, just as you might want, certainly, not in the same way as you can on asphalt pavement. This road was not made as a way to connect the points on which shrines and temples lie, but as a means to make one aware of the existence of the gods.

If you walk along enwrapped in the smell of the soil, the fresh aroma emitted from the trees and the cheery voices of birdsong. Sweating with fatigue but satisfaction, you would sense the wonder of being truly alive and thankful for the feeling of being given life and the feelings that life gives.

When one hikes along through these trees whose ages are counted in centuries, one must realized how



TOP : Stone Steps surrounded with the mountain. © Yoichi Kendai

OPPOSITE PAGE : The "Nachi Fire Festival" held at the Kumano-Nachi Taisha Shrine on the afternoon of July 14. © Norio Maeda





The Otou Festival held on the evening of February 6, at the Kamikura Shrine. © Norio Maeda

nice to feel free. The ancients spent many days on this journey and they called it the Kumano pilgrimage of the ants. I can see now in your mind, those pilgrims wending their way up these trails like a long column of ants.

I say to those who are visitors here: "Leave the lives of your past here, behind you. Forget all that is worldly, your sex, your age, your work history, your richness or your poorness — all of your background. Put an end to all thought. Feel the nature that is now conveyed through your legs to your heart. Believe in the strengths that are within you and that have made you alive. Walk on in gratitude for all those who are with you."

The path bring you back to

ancient is extremely out of line with the rhythm of our daily lives. The road known as the Kumano Rear Trot takes seven days to traverse along the mountain spine. It is long series of steep rocks and sharp mountain ridges.

The view from the top of the mountain sweeps a scene of rare beauty. The subtle changes of blue and green that the sunlight draws as it moves along the never-ending series of mountain spines, have a power to suppress the desire to cry out at the compelling nature of this beauty. "I am alive. Oh, thanks be to that." The feeling is one that makes you want to shout, so strong that one can feel the presence of God.

As Japanese holy site, Kobo Daishi founded Koya-san and En-no-

Gyoja founded Yoshino, Then laid the groundwork for the Kumano-Hongu Taisha Shrine, the Kumano-Hayatama Taisha Shrine, and the Kumano-Nachi Taisha Shrine. What common to all of these shrines is that they take the human and place it in the midst of nature.

There are the festivals that led one know how the Japanese think the gods, goddesses and the Bodhisatva. The Otou Festival held on the evening of February 6, at the Kamikura Shrine in Shingu City, Wakayama is called a male festival. As a means of purifying the mind and body, the men clad themselves in white and tie rough rope around their wastes. Carrying torches, they climb the stone stairs to the shrine.

Those who celebrate the gods

are not just men, of course, for we cannot forget the women who are called *Miko* (shrine maidens). However, the main actors in the drama are men. Engulfed in fire and smoke at the top of the mountain, the men hold their torches and then run downward. The festival of fire is one that is simple, but bold. As the men run down the hill, the apparent stream of fire is like a waterfall and that gives this part of the festival the name "dragon-fire waterfall." Some of the participants have traveled many miles to experience the feeling of being caught up in smoke and fire.

The "Nachi Fire Festival" held at the Kumano-Nachi Taisha Shrine in the town of Nachi-Katsuura, on the afternoon of July 14, *Ogi-Mikoshi* (literally, "portable shrines with fans") are carried down to the basin of Nachi Falls and welcomed by men with flaming torches. It is a magnificent and beautiful fire festival.

Tourists line the mountain slopes to watch this scene. When the festival is over, they gather up the ashes that have fallen from the torches and, in what seems an instant, render the stairs clean. They believe the ashes make them happy. The Nachi Falls have a straight drop down of 133 meters (approx. 150 yard), the highest in Japan.

On 13 August the "Candle Festival" on Koya-san is for the comfort of all souls. A part of the main path from the entrance of the Okunoin area to the Torodo, one of the buildings in the area is covered with 100,000 candles. The candlelight floats up between stone graves and rows of cedar trees to depict the spirit world of the

departed souls.

One of the area's water festivals is the boat race festival held by the Kumano-Hayatama Taisha Shrine. The festival takes place at the mouth of the Kumano River, a large river 185 kilometers (approx. 100 miles) long. The race consists of ten boats with oarsmen rowing fast to the Mifune Island.

It's a serious race among young men who have practiced many hours a day, almost totally devoting their lives to the oars. The glistening splash of water in the evening sunlight, the voices calling out gives one an idea of what it is like to live on the river. The people on both banks applaud and cheer the oarsmen, and the winner is admired with the sound of clapping hands.

The Kumano River has been a water way since ancient times. Riverboats plied their way back and forth between the Kumano-Hongu Taisha Shrine and the Kumano-Hayatama Taisha Shrine. I once rented a boat and rowed down the river myself many years ago. The view of both banks from the boat looked different as usual.

Learning the skill of using the oar, pole and rudder tired me out more than I had expected. I rowed toward Chihogamine, a mountain that sits behind the Kamikura Shrine, passing the Mifune Island, and when the Kumano-Hayatama Taisha Shrine came into view, I was almost able to hear the voices of the people from the Heian Period (the end of A.D. 8-A.D. 12), ten centuries ago.

Walk forward without thinking anything. Whichever road you choose, or whichever shrines or temples you visit, you will find something touch your heart; even you are not Japanese. That is why I would like you to visit this place; the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range.



Nachi Falls © Yoichi Kendai