

BETWEEN THE PROFANE WORLD AND THE SPIRIT WORLD: A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF UPLANDS AND MOUNTAINS IN MĀORI AND JAPANESE FOLKLORE

CATHERINE KNIGHT *

Introduction

In the course of researching Japanese perceptions of their natural environment, and particularly the forested uplands which occupy nearly 70 per cent of the Japanese archipelago, the author has been struck by a number of parallels between the traditional Japanese and Māori conceptualisation of uplands and mountains.¹ Focusing on folk religion and folklore, this paper explores parallels in the way in which people of these two cultures have traditionally perceived, and interacted with, these environments. The paper will also highlight parallels in the way in which these perceptions developed, by exploring their respective environmental histories.

Mountains have been regarded as sacred spaces by many cultures throughout history: as Smethurst (2000: 36) observes, “mountains are worshipped by diverse peoples throughout the world, from the Amerian Indians, to the Chinese, to the Incas. Mountains figure prominently in the Old Testament, in Greek and Roman mythology, and in religions throughout the world”. Throughout these cultures, they are regarded as “places of revelation, centres of the universe, sources of life, pathways to heaven, abodes of the dead, temples of the gods, expressions of ultimate reality in its myriad manifestations” (Bernbaum 1995, p. xxiii). In many cultures, mountains are seen as the *axis mundi*, or cosmic axis which stands at the centre of the universe, linking together the different layers of human existence, a concept made famous by the eminent scholar of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade.²

* Catherine Knight is an independent researcher, specialising in New Zealand and Japanese environmental history. Her University of Canterbury doctoral thesis explored the human relationship with the Asiatic black bear through Japanese history. She works as an environmental policy analyst.

- 1 The author acknowledges the problems associated with the application of the term “traditional” (meaning “relating to customs, beliefs and practices handed down from generation to generation over a relatively long period of time”). Specifically, it is not always clear where “traditional beliefs” end and where “contemporary beliefs” begin. While acknowledging this ambiguity, the term is employed here to indicate that this paper makes no attempt to examine “contemporary” beliefs or perceptions of uplands and mountains in either culture.
- 2 However, as Bernbaum (1995: p.206–8) cautions, while this view of mountains is widespread, it is by no means universal, and attempts for find a central axis in every sacred mountain “runs into a host of exceptions that require ingenious, and even tortured, efforts to force them into a single pattern”—efforts that often ignore the ways in which the local people actually view the mountains.

Thus the following is an exploration of the folklore relating to uplands in Japanese and Maori cultures, and exploration which does not seek to find a common theme. It is therefore no surprise perhaps that both Japanese and Maori cultures regarded these places with both reverence and awe—nevertheless, there are striking similarities in the folklore relating to uplands that go beyond a general reverence for the realm of mountains as sacred space. Furthermore, this paper does not simply highlight the parallels in the way mountains are perceived in these two cultures—what is less ubiquitous, and therefore worthy of particular note is that in both cultures, the term that refers to mountains (*yama* in Japanese, *maunga* in Maori) also encompasses hills – generally forested hills. Therefore this term and the environmental sphere it refers to, traditionally overlapped with forest, particularly in the case of the Japan, where, conceptually, the two are inseparable. For this reason, this article will also explore comparisons in the way both cultures perceive the forest and the folklore and supernatural beings associated with this realm.

The author does not seek to claim that because there are particular similarities in the way the two cultures perceive their upland environment, they are somehow related in some essential way. It is undeniable however that the two cultures do share some key characteristics in terms of their cosmologies and the way in which they have traditionally interacted with their natural environment. Both have strong animistic, polytheistic traditions, sensing gods in all parts of nature, of which humanity is an integral part. In both cultures, people use ritual, taboo, geomancy and propitiation, such as the blessing of the land, to keep the god-infused world of nature favourably disposed to humans (Henshall 1994, p.16).

Definitions

The geographical realm which is the object of the discussion that follows first requires definition. As has already been noted, this paper explores perceptions of uplands, including, but not limited to, mountains. In English, a clear distinction is made between mountains and hills. A “mountain” is defined as “a large natural elevation of the earth’s surface, especially one high and steep in form (larger and higher than a hill) and with a summit of relatively small area”, while a “hill” is defined as “a natural elevation of the earth’s surface, or a small mountain (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 2002: p.1242, p.1844). However, in other languages, there is not always the same clear distinction made between equivalent terms.

In Japanese, the term “*yama*” is the most commonly used term to refer to mountainous or hilly environments. While it is often translated in English as “mountains”, it encompasses not only mountains, but upland terrain, generally forest covered. In Māori also, the term “*maunga*” is generally translated as “mountain”. However, the term is not only applied to mountains—it often refers to large hills, as is evident in the case of Maunganui (Mt. Maunganui) a 232 metre high hill at the entrance of Tauranga Harbour, the 182 metre high Maungakiekie (One Tree Hill) and the 135 metre high Maungarei (Mt Wellington) both in Auckland. Thus, in English, the term uplands,

which encompasses both mountains and hills, better encapsulates the geographical realm being explored in this paper.³

The geographies of New Zealand and Japan

Geographically, Japan and New Zealand are strikingly similar: they are both longitudinally narrow and latitudinally long archipelagos of similar land-mass, and of comparable distance from the respective poles. They are both prone to seismic activity, and predominantly mountainous. These factors have shaped their topography, vegetation and climate.

The archipelago of Japan forms an arc in the Pacific Ocean to the east of the Asian continent. The land comprises the four large islands of Honshū (the mainland), Hokkaidō, Kyūshū, and Shikoku, together with many smaller islands. Japan's total land area is about 378,000 square kilometres. About 75 per cent of Japan's land surface is mountainous, with a mountain chain running through each of the main islands. Dense forest used to cover much of the land area, owing to the mountainous topography, volcanic soils, very high average annual rainfall and temperate climate. Now approximately 70 per cent of Japan is forested, most forests coinciding with mountainous terrain.⁴

New Zealand is an archipelago comprised of two large islands and several smaller islands, and is situated in the southwest Pacific Ocean south-east of Australia. Its land area is about 270,000 square kilometres. The country's location on the boundary of the Pacific and Indo-Australian tectonic plates has shaped its landforms; the resulting earth movements have produced hilly and mountainous terrain over two-thirds of the land. There are frequent earthquakes in most parts of the country and a zone of volcanic and geothermal activity in the central North Island (Ministry for the Environment 2007, p.36). Prior to human settlement, it is believed that New Zealand was almost entirely covered in forest, apart from higher altitude areas. Until European settlement began in earnest in the nineteenth century, most upland areas of New Zealand were densely forested (Anderson 2002, p.31).

The development of the Japanese perception of mountains

The Japanese term “*yama*” has already been noted. In Japan, the physical spheres of mountains, hills and forest (particularly natural forest) often coincide, and when the term *yama* is used, it generally refers to a physical realm which consists of forest-

3 In the discussion of the Japanese conceptualisation of hills and mountains, the Japanese term “*yama*” will also be used.

4 Only 60 per cent of that is indigenous forest—the remaining proportion is made up of introduced coniferous species.

covered upland or mountainous terrain.⁵ In Japan, the human relationship with the realm of *yama* has been one characterised by ambivalence; it is a sphere of nature which has been regarded with both fear and reverence, and it is a relationship that can be traced back hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

It is thought that Japan was first populated about 15,000 years ago, when the Japanese archipelago was connected to the Asian continent by a land bridge and people from the Eurasian continent started to migrate east, possibly following large game species. This period (approximately 200,000 to 10,500 B.C.) is called the Palaeolithic Period, and was characterised by a nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle. It was followed by the Jōmon Period (10,500–400 B.C.), named for the rope design used to decorate the pottery which characterised the period. While people continued to survive predominantly through hunting and the gathering of wild plants, they also began to practice some rudimentary forms of agriculture, which led in turn to a more settled lifestyle.

Tatsuo Kobayashi (2004), a professor of archaeology, postulates that the Japanese began “enculturing nature” in Jōmon times, as they began to lead more sedentary lifestyles. Whereas people in Palaeolithic Japan lived in a nomadic or semi-nomadic way, moving as the availability of resources necessitated and using temporary campsites largely undifferentiated from their surroundings, Jōmon people established village communities. It was at this time, Kobayashi (2004, p.175) suggests, that people began to assign cultural and spiritual significance to the geographical spheres that surrounded them, including the designation of a realm of the “other world”.

Hori (1953, cited in Blacker 1975, p.79) suggests that originally, when people lived primarily in coastal settlements, the “other world” was perceived as being the sea. However, at some stage in the late pre-historic period, as the Japanese established settlements further inland in response to climatic changes, their conception of the dwelling place of the deities also underwent a transition: shifting from sea to mountains. Hori suggests that as people lost sight of the sea and found themselves surrounded instead by high hills and mountains, their ideas about the source of life-giving power altered. Hills and mountains of strange and distinctive form, especially high conical hills and lower tree-covered hills, which rose suddenly from the flat plains below, may have appeared as though they were breaking into another plane, both physically and cosmologically. Hori argues that it is entirely natural that people would have come to see such hills as the dwelling place of spiritual beings and the source of life and fertility. Concomitant with this conceptual shift was the idea that the resting place of the souls of the dead was no longer the sea, but the hills and mountains (Blacker 1975, p.81).

One possible hint of this transition is found in a number of archaeological sites. At the Early Jōmon cemetery at Nakanoya Matsubara in Gunma Prefecture, there were

5 This is demonstrated by the fact that, following the extensive deforestation that took place preceding and during the Second World War, the sight of hills devoid of forest was so unnatural to the Japanese that they felt the need to qualify the term *yama* by referring to these bare hills as *hage-yama* (bald hills/mountains) (Knight 2003, p.31). In Takahata Isao's animated film about the destruction of forests in the hills around Tokyo for the construction of a suburban town, the hills are referred to as *noppera-oka* (bald hills).

several pit-dwellings surrounded by a plaza, which contained a cemetery comprising many graves. A tall standing stone stood over the cemetery, and the heads of the deceased people were positioned so that they were pointed towards this marker. Beyond this standing stone, stood the distant, yet distinctive shape of Mount Asama, suggesting that the village builders deliberately incorporated the mountain into the village landscape, and indeed, within the “line of sight” of their deceased ancestors. Another example of such “landscape design” incorporating a local mountain is that seen at the Early Jōmon Akyū site in Nagano Prefecture. Here, a series of large stones were positioned in the middle of the settlement. They formed an alignment of two parallel rows pointing towards the distant form of Mount Tateshina (Kobayashi 2004, p.175-6).⁶

As further evidence of this early perception of hills and mountains as the realm of the gods, Carmen Blacker (1975), an eminent scholar of Japanese religion and folklore, points to archaeological finds at prehistoric sites: of ritual tools found at the foot of certain hills which “unmistakably point to a cult of a deity dwelling on the summit” (Blacker, 1975, pp.79–80).⁷

The conceptualisation of the uplands further developed within the highly fluid and regionalised framework of folk religion. Folk religious beliefs permeated every aspect of Japanese life long before the introduction or establishment of “formal religions” such as Buddhism and institutionalised Shinto. Within folk religion and folklore, *yama* came to be regarded as mysterious and frightening places, not only associated with death and the “other world” (*ikai*), but also inhabited by spirits and monsters (Kitamura 1995, p.116).⁸ In particular, mountains were perceived as being the realm of powerful deities called *yama no kami* (mountain deities). It is suggested by some scholars that the *yama no kami* was originally worshipped as a deity of reproduction of plants and animals, stemming from the notion that mountains have the power to cause the birth or rebirth of all beings (Hori 1966: 16–23). With the advent of agriculture in the Yayoi Period (400 B.C.–A.D. 250), the belief developed that the *yama no kami* descended from the mountains in spring to become the god (or guardian) of the agricultural fields, and then return to the mountains once the crops were harvested (Kitamura 1995, p.125; Hori 1966, p.7 Miyake 2001, p.79, p.85).⁹ Also connected with mountains being the source of life and the controlling the success of crops was their life-giving powers as watersheds or sources of streams. Many shrines were dedicated to the gods of surrounding mountains who were believed to bring the rain and protect the water

6 This is an element of landscape design still practised, in a more modern form, by the Japanese today. Termed *shakkei*, it refers to the design of a garden which deliberately includes a view of an aspect of the natural landscape outside the confines of the garden itself, such as a mountain or hills (Hendry 1987, p.88).

7 These are early examples of *yorishiro* (a medium in which a god temporarily resides, or through which it can interact with the earthly realm).

8 In Japan, an additional factor contributing to the *yama* being a realm inspiring fear was the fact that it was inhabited by wild, and potentially dangerous, animals such as bears, and the (now extinct) wolf.

9 A similar belief is also found in the folklore of Andean peoples, who believed the mountain deities were the guardians of the fields and livestock (Reinhard 1985, p.314).

sources essential to agriculture. Mountains were therefore seen as being integrally connected with agriculture (Hori, 1966: 6–7).

The apprehension with which the Japanese historically regarded mountains in particular is reflected in the word used to refer to mountain passes, that is, *tōge*. According to Hori (1966, p.6), this term originates from the word *tamuke*, “to offer”, because travellers would make an offering to the god of the pass in order to secure a safe passage through the mountains.¹⁰ There are many instances where large mounds of stones have accumulated after being left at such places as offerings by travellers. Volcanic mountains were regarded with particular intrepidation. This is epitomised by Osore-zan, literally “Mount Fear”, a volcanically active mountain located on the remote Shimokita Peninsula of northern Honshū. In local folklore, this has long been regarded as the final destination of the dead, and with the introduction of Buddhist thought, this association was also overlaid with an association with the Buddhist hell (Ivy 1995: 142–3).

Blacker (1975, p.84) suggests that originally, mountains were likely to have been regarded as inviolable to human entry, sacred places into which humans would dare not venture for fear of being subject to the *tatari*, or curse, of the deity presiding there. However, following the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, this perception of mountains underwent a transformation. Sacred mountains could be climbed, but only by those in a suitable state of ceremonial purity, and who, through the process of ascending the mountain and undergoing austerities, would have conferred upon them the spiritual powers of this sacred and powerful realm (See Figure 1).¹¹

It is also likely that the strict taboo associated with mountains softened over time to accommodate subsistence requirements, especially in the colder, northern regions of Japan, where it was not possible to live by agriculture alone. In these regions, people made a living through a combination of agriculture during the short growing season, and other activities such as wood-cutting, charcoal-making, swidden farming and hunting over the remainder of the year. It was among such people, whose livelihoods centred on the uplands, that the worship of the *yama no kami* in its original form (as guardian of the mountains) was particularly important. Like the Buddhist ascetics who sought spiritual benefits by entering the sacred realm of the mountains, these people also entered the mountains, only whilst observing strict rules of behaviour. For instance, the *matagi* hunters of Tōhoku used a special mountain argot that not only had the function of a kind of code language with which the hunters could communicate without revealing

10 Further, Hori notes that this custom is not unique to Japan. It is evident also in other far eastern countries such as Korea, Mongolia and Tibet (Hori 1966, p.7).

11 This idea that mountains are a sacred place, clearly delineated from the profane world and therefore only to be entered with due ritual and by those spiritually qualified to do so is not an uncommon one. In many traditional cultures, only those deemed to have appropriate spiritual power and purity may venture up sacred mountains without fear of provoking the anger of the gods or the spite of demons. In North America, for example, many Native American tribes believed that only people with the proper ritual preparation might climb to the summits of sacred peaks without being struck down by spirits. In the Bible, only Moses is regarded as holy enough to step onto the hallowed ground of Mountain Sinai and ascend the mountain (Bernbaum 1995: xxi).



Figure 1. A Japanese *Shugendō* priest contemplating the mountain landscape at sunrise (Photo: S. Schnell)

their intentions to the animals they sought to hunt, but was also more appropriate to the sacred realm of the mountains than the more profane language of the village (Kaneko 1993, p.101; Azumane 1993, p.9).¹² Singing, drinking or smoking were also prohibited while on a hunt in the mountains. Women were not permitted to enter the mountains and a *matagi* hunter could not sleep with his wife in the days preceding the hunt, as this would leave him “tainted” (Tōno Municipal Museum 1998, p.5).¹³

Building on Buddhist influences, a mountain-based religion, *Shugendō* (literally, way of the ascetic) became established in the ninth and tenth centuries. *Shugendō* is an amalgamation of folk-religious, Taoist and Buddhist beliefs and spiritual practices relating to sacred mountains (Miyake 2001, p.79). *Shugendō* shrines were established on

12 *Matagi* were hunters who lived in village communities in upland areas of northern Honshū. *Matagi* communities subsisted by hunting, gathering and fishing as well as some agriculture. Important game animals were the bear and the serow. The *matagi* tradition is thought to have become established as a distinct culture from around the mid-sixteenth century, when the development of a thriving market economy in Japan made it possible to make a living from selling meat, hides and other commodities derived from hunting.

13 The taboo pertaining to women is not limited to the *matagi* tradition. In religious traditions also, women were not permitted to enter, or to go beyond a certain point on certain sacred mountains (see, for example, Blacker 1985, pp.215–6).

sacred mountains throughout Japan, but became particularly prevalent in the north-east of the main island of Honshū (Hori 1966, p.2). It is thought that the reason for *Shugendō* being so pervasive in this region may be related to the intimate connection between mountain ascetics (*shugenja* or *yamabushi*) and the *matagi* hunters of this region (Hori 1966, p.23).¹⁴ Indeed, according to the legends associated with *Shugendō*'s sacred sites, many of the founders of these sacred places first "discovered" the mountains after being led there by animals or hunters (Miyake 2001, p.117).

Another belief which developed further in Japanese folk religion concerns the relationship between mountains and the souls of the dead.¹⁵ Connected with this is the idea that the mountains are a meeting ground between the mortal world and the "other world" (or *sanchūikai*), which is itself predicated upon the belief that the other world exists somewhere beyond or above the mountains (Hori 1966, p.8).¹⁶ The close connection between death and mountains is reflected in the ancient practice of burying emperors in natural hills, or constructed mounds resembling hills, called *kofun*. Even in the Heian period (A.D. 794–1185), when *kofun* were no longer constructed, the emperor's mausoleum was still referred to as *yama* (mountain) and the official responsible for erecting the mausoleum was called *yama tsukuri no tsukusa* (literally, "the official who erects the mountain") (Sasaki 2006, p.17; Hori 1966, p.9). The belief that mountains are the dwelling place of the dead is evident in the *Manyōshū* (the oldest extant anthology of Japanese poems, compiled in the eighth century): fifty-one poems refer to the soul of the dead resting on a mountain, a rock or a mountain valley (Hori 1966, p.8).

The role of the *yama* as a meeting place between the mortal world and "other world" is also reflected in the *bon* festival, still a popular annual festival today. This festival is marked in some places by the lighting of large bonfires (*bonbi*) on mountaintops or hilltops to welcome or send back the spirits of ancestors, who are thought to return to their places of birth in July or August each year (Hori 1966, p.11). The tradition of burying the deceased in the mountains is still reflected in the language used about death in some regions. For instance, Sasaki (2006, pp.17–8) notes that in Mukō City in Kyōto, where there are many historical tombs in the surrounding hills, people use expressions such as "that old man will soon be going to the mountains" and "his path to the mountains is already decided". In the well-known novelist Kawabata

14 The *shugenja* or *yamabushi* (literally "one who bows down to the mountains") were mountain ascetic practitioners of the *Shugendō* sect who carried out ascetic training and religious rituals in the mountains.

15 This notion that mountains are both the physical and symbolic place of the dead is also evident in other cultures. In the folklore of the Andean peoples, mountains were believed to be the dwelling place of the dead also (Reinhard 1985, p.314). In India, festivals and religious observances to benefit the dead are held on mountains and sacred hills (Hori 1966, pp.4–5).

16 Ivy notes how this concept of the other-world found in Japanese folklore, "with post-medieval Buddhist conceptions which projected symbolic itineraries of pure lands (*jōdo*) and polluted hells (*jigoku*) onto mountains, creating a doubled structure of mountains as both literal and figurative domains of death" (Ivy 1995 p.143).

Yasunari's novel "The sound of the mountain", the sound of the mountain portends death (Kawabata 1981, p.10).

As has been seen, the Japanese have long perceived the realm of *yama* as the domain of the gods, the dwelling place of the souls of the dead, and an intermediary zone between the profane and sacred worlds. The *yama no kami* was traditionally worshipped by those whose livelihoods centred on the mountains, and there are many rituals, among *matagi* hunters in particular, to placate the deity and keep it in good temper.¹⁷ Historically, shamans and religious ascetics have carried out rituals and subjected themselves to austerities on mountains in order to gain the sacred powers of this spiritually powerful realm.

The Māori understanding of mountains and hills (maunga)

Mountains and hills, or *maunga*, also play a central role in the Māori view of themselves within the world. Many tribes had a special relationship with one particular mountain within their territory which was regarded as *tapu*, and to which the tribe looked for signs foretelling the future (Orbell 1985, p.47). Even today, when giving a traditional self-introduction, or *mihi*, a Māori person makes associations between themselves and their tribal mountain, river and other local geographical features. This information, along with the person's *whakapapa* (genealogy or ancestral ties) is viewed as being more important than knowing individual information about the person.

Though there is far from unanimous agreement, it is thought that the first permanent Polynesian settlement of New Zealand occurred around A.D. 1300 (Irwin & Walrond 2007).¹⁸ As migrants from the Pacific Islands, Māori were accustomed to living in coastal areas in a much warmer climate. In New Zealand too, the Māori initially spent much of their time on the coasts, by river mouths and harbours (Orbell 1985, p.9). During the first centuries of settlement some crops were grown in the warmest and most fertile places, but people lived primarily by hunting, fishing and food-gathering. The east coast of the South Island was one of the favoured areas at this time, as the region had abundant moa (a species of large flightless bird, now extinct) and seals. But by the early fifteenth century the climate was becoming colder, moa were disappearing and seal populations diminishing due to over-hunting. As a consequence of these changes in their environment, the Māori population became increasingly concentrated in the North Island, which was warmer and more conducive to agriculture (Orbell 1985, pp.7–8).

17 Although this divinity is portrayed as both male and female, scholars suggest that it was originally thought to be female. The perceived gender of the *yama no kami* appears to have depended to a large extent on people's occupation and lifestyle: while lowland villagers tended to see the deity as male, upland dwellers, particularly those engaged in hunting, swidden farming, woodcutting and charcoal-making, tended to see the deity as female (Schnell 2007: 863-880).

18 Irwin & Walrond (2007) note that many methods have been used to determine the date of earliest permanent Polynesian settlement in New Zealand, with all results showing considerable agreement on the 1300 date.

As important protein sources such as moa and seal populations diminished, and the human population increased, there came to be an increasing reliance on horticulture. The kumara, or sweet potato, was grown in the warmer northern regions, and the growth of fernroot, the rhizome of the bracken fern, a native plant of New Zealand, was actively encouraged (Orbell 1985, pp.7–8). It is possibly for this purpose that the extensive clearing of forest in lowland areas took place, particularly on the east coast of the South Island, the Hawkes Bay and the north-east of the North Island, largely by fire (Anderson 2002, p.31). This extensive forest clearance is likely to have increased the distinction between the thickly forested uplands and the more lightly vegetated and readily accessible low-lands.

While there is no evidence of this in the literature, it is this author's suggestion that the Māori spiritual relationship with mountains may have developed in much the same way as the pre-historic Japanese relationship did—albeit many hundreds of years later. For example, a belief among Māori, which persists today, is that the spirit of the dead departs the land and makes its way over the oceans to the distant mythical land,



Figure 2. A peak in the New Zealand Southern Alps with beech forest in the foreground (Photo: P. Knight).

Hawaiki. It is likely that the migrants who first settled in New Zealand brought this belief with them from Polynesia, as it is common throughout the islands of Polynesia (Pomare & Cowan 1987, p.48). However, over time, the Māori developed beliefs which connected mountains with the souls of the dead. As is the case of the early Japanese, it is likely that for coastal-dwellers, who relied on the sea for their survival, the ocean would have had a prominent place in the imagination as a powerful and seemingly limitless life-giving realm. However, as people moved inland to accommodate growing populations and changes in climate and resource availability, it is natural that the uplands and mountains, which are a dominant feature of the inland landscape, would have become more central to their imagination and cosmos.

Like the Japanese, the Māori came to conceptualise the uplands as an intermediary zone between the human and spirit world (Orbell 1985, p.93). Large hills and mountains were seen as the realm of the gods (*atua*) and supernatural beings, and the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. The peaks of mountains were especially sacred, or *tapu*, and most Māori were apprehensive about venturing to the mountain tops (Orbell 1985, p.47).

Many mountains and hills were believed to be the homes of *patupaiarehe*, or fairies. According to folklore, these fairies resembled humans in their appearance, but unlike the Māori, had white skin. They shunned the light and were encountered mainly at night or in misty places such as the hilltops at daybreak. The occasional birth of albino children was explained by an “intimate” encounter between a human woman and a fairy man. Fairies were often thought to live on the peaks of tribal mountains, and their perceived presence may have served to reinforce the sacredness or *tapu* status of these peaks (Orbell 1985, p.50; Pomare and Cowan 1987, p.226).

Describing his ascent of Mount Egmont (Mount Taranaki) in 1839, Ernst Dieffenbach, an explorer and naturalist, provides rare insight into the awe with which Māori perceived mountains. He recounts that when his party reached “the limits of perpetual snow” on Mount Taranaki, his two Māori guides, “... squatted down, took out their books, and began to pray”. It seems that no-one had ever climbed so high up the mountain before, and the guides refused to go any further, not only because their uncovered feet were suffering from the severe cold, but “on account of their superstitious fears”. He further states: “...the savage views such scenes [being so high up a mountain] with superstitious dread. To him the mountains are peopled with mysterious and misshapen animals ... a supernatural spirit breathes on him in the evening breeze, or is heard in the rolling of loose stones” (Dieffenbach 1843, pp.155–6).

Most Māori would have had little cause to visit the uplands and mountains, being able to access a plenitude of resources closer to their villages and in more accessible terrain.¹⁹ At the same time, there were many reasons to avoid them: not only were they regarded with apprehension associated with the presence of the gods, fairy people and

19 The Urewera (or Tuhoe people) Māori were one notable exception. They were one of the Toi tribes, who originally inhabited the Bay of Plenty coastal district. However, increasing population pressure forced them to move into the dense forest of the Urewera highlands surrounding Waikaremoana lake about A.D. 1500 (McLintock (ed.) 1966, p.197; Orbell 1985, p.10).

wild men, the uplands were also a source of more “worldly” dangers owing to their rugged terrain and unpredictable weather. Those who most frequently ventured into the mountains were hunters, war parties crossing mountain ranges to make surprise attacks on settlements on the other side, and *tohunga*, or priestly experts, who would retreat to the mountains to gather herbal remedies and to commune with the gods who lived there.²⁰ Ordinary people would often seek the protection of *tohunga* when venturing into the mountains (Maclean 1994, p.60).

Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that Māori were unfamiliar with hill or mountain terrain (Pawson 2002, p.138). For instance, archaeological evidence suggests that the Māori, probably moa hunters, explored the Tararua Ranges in the south of the North Island as early as the twelfth century (Maclean 1994, p.60). In 1859, accompanied by four Māori guides, Lieutenant-Governor Eyre ascended Tapuae o Uenuku, the prominent peak in the inland Kaikoura Range in the South Island. He found a network of trails across the Southern Alps, connecting population centres in the east with sites of jade in the west and with inland food sources (Pascoe 1952, p.64).

Nineteenth century accounts by European surveyors and explorers tell us that, in the South Island, Māori would go into the mountains to trap birds, such as the weka (woodhen) and kakapo (night parrot), and rats, particularly between March and August when they were fattened up on berries (Waitangi Tribunal 1991, p.197). For instance, the surveyor John Barnicoat recorded that the Māori of the lower South Island would “sometimes make excursions to the Snowy mountains and catch 300 woodhens per night” (Pawson 2002, p.138).

Furthermore, the experience of early explorers shows how dependent they were on their Māori guides, in whom they entrusted their lives (Maclean 1994, p.61). For instance, Dieffenbach made two attempts to climb Mount Taranaki in 1839, accompanied on both occasions by Māori guides. When the famous surveyors Charles Heaphy and Thomas Brunner undertook their epic journey from Nelson down to the South Island West Coast in 1856, they were also accompanied by a Māori guide. Other routes in New Zealand, such as the Harper Pass from Canterbury to the West Coast of the South Island were “discovered” by explorers accompanied by Māori guides (Pawson 2002, pp.138–9).

Thus, the traditional Māori relationship with mountains presents two contrasting aspects. It was on the one hand one of intimacy, reflected in the tradition of each tribe identifying with a “tribal mountain”, a mountain which was regarded as particularly sacred. At the same time, mountains were a source of apprehension: they were the dwelling place of gods, supernatural beings and the resting place of souls of the dead—a place where only those with a specific purpose or mandate dared venture.

20 A *tohunga* is an expert practitioner of any skill or art, religious or otherwise. *Tohunga* may include expert priests, healers, navigators, carvers, builders, teachers and advisors.

Discussion: exploring parallels

From even this cursory overview of the traditional Māori and Japanese perception of mountains, some key parallels can be discerned. Pivotal to the worldview of both cultures is the perception of mountains as an intermediary zone between the human and spirit world, but there are also a number of other parallels apparent. This discussion will explore each of these common aspects in turn.

In both Māori and Japanese folklore, mountains were the dwelling place of supernatural beings. In Māori folklore, there was a belief that fairy people inhabited the uplands. In many ways, these fairy people resembled humans, but had a distinctive sense of “other” about them. Similarly, in Japanese folklore, particularly in the mountainous north-east of Honshū, there were numerous tales about “mountain people”, or *yamabito*. *The Legends of Tono*, a collection of tales and folklore collected in the small town of Tonō located in a mountainous region in the north-east of Japan, is rich in such tales. For instance, it recounts tales of encounters with ghostly white-faced women with long trailing hair whose feet do not touch the ground when they run, often moaning or screaming, through the forest, and tall men with bright-red eyes who were said to be *yama no kami* (mountain deities) (Yanagita 1975, p. 32, pp.61–62).

A further common aspect of folklore in both cultures is the notion that these upland-dwelling people are descendents of earlier inhabitants of the land, who, through warfare or subjugation, took refuge in the uplands. In Māori folklore, there is the idea that the fairy people are descendants of a people who had inhabited New Zealand before the arrival of the Māori and were subsequently displaced by them, or that they were a people banished to the hills by the powerful *tohunga* Ngatoro-i-rangi after his arrival from Hawaiki (Orbell 1984, p.50). In Japan, it is suggested by some that the mountain people are descendants of the indigenous race which inhabited Japan before the arrival of the later immigrants from East Asia (who became known as the Yamato Japanese), and who were subjugated by the Yamato armies in the eighth century (Kuji 2002, p.204).

In Māori folklore, mountains and large hills are the domain of *atua* and are therefore regarded as sacred. In the same way, the Japanese traditionally believed that the mountains were the domain of the *yama no kami*. In both cases, the gods were treated with reverence and respect by those entering the realm of the uplands. For instance, the *matagi* hunter would pray to the mountain deity before commencing a hunt in the mountains, asking for her permission to kill creatures under her guardianship. According to Māori folklore, the forest (which thickly clothed the uplands) was under the protection of certain gods, the principal one being Tāne. The god was guardian of the birds and trees, and needed to be placated when something under his guardianship was taken. For instance when a tree was felled, an invocation and offering would be made to appease Tāne. Similarly, the fowling season was marked by a number of restrictions and rituals designed to placate this god (Lewis 1982, p.33; Best 1977, p.6). Best (1977, p.128) further states that the Māori “endured with indomitable patience most irksome restrictions, lest he offend mythical beings, *atua* and tutelary guardians born of his imagination, and so fail to obtain a necessary supply of food. He knew that Tāne, overlord of the forest, its products and denizens, must ever be in his thoughts, ever placated and respected...”.

One key difference between the two cultures is that while the Japanese had a traditionally agricultural-based economy, in which water supply was essential to the success of the annual harvests, the Māori relied more heavily on bird trapping, fishing and gathering of wild foods (though they did engage in plant cultivation as well). Therefore there is a difference in the emphasis placed on the mountains as a source of water. There is no doubt that in Māori culture, there was recognition of the mountains as a source of streams, however, their importance as a source of food and timber was of greater consequence to daily subsistence. Therefore propitiation focused on the god of the forest as a guardian of trees and animals. In Japan, for lowland farmers who comprised the majority of the population, propitiation was focused on the mountain deity's role as the guardian of agriculture (through its control of water supply).

In both cultures, mountain peaks were regarded as especially sacred. In Māori folklore, there are many stories about terrible spirits that lived on the peaks of these mountains, and it was said that their summits could not be reached (Orbell 1985, p.47). In pre-Buddhist Japan too, peaks were viewed as taboo and inviolable to human entry, but this changed under the influence of Buddhism: though peaks remained sacred, it was seen as spiritually beneficial for religious adherents to climb to the peaks, provided they followed a strict code of conduct. Thus, in Japan, owing to their especially sacred nature, mountain peaks have long been the site of ascetic rituals and the destination of religious pilgrimages. Many mountain peaks are marked by small shrines (Hori 1966, p.1, p.9; Blacker 1975, p.280), and historically, it was common practice for pilgrims to erect *iwasaka* (rock cairns) on mountain-tops to mark their religious pilgrimage to the peak (Hori 1966, p.7) (See Figures 3 and 4).²¹

Severe weather in the mountains or hills was seen as a portent in both Māori and Japanese culture. According to Māori folklore, lightning flashing over a *tapu* mountain could either be seen as a good or bad omen for the tribe in question, depending on the direction in which it struck. For example, according to tribal beliefs relating to Maungaroa, a hill of 637 metres in the Waikato region, lightening flashing downward above the hill was a portent of the death of an elder (*rangatira*) of the tribe (Pomare & Cowen 1987, pp. 226–7). Thunder over a mountain or hill could be interpreted as the voice of an ancestral spirit (Orbell 1985, pp.47–8). The appearance of a tribe's sacred mountain was also used to predict weather, and thus act as an aid to determine whether it was safe to embark on a journey (Pomare & Cowen 1987, p.228). Mountain guides interpreted poor weather as indicative of the displeasure of the *atua* (Pawson 2002, p.138). Similarly, in Japan, *matagi* hunters would interpret stormy weather as a sign that the mountain deity was displeased (Tōno Municipal Museum 1998, p.5).²²

21 Edward Morse, a pioneer of Japanese archaeology and natural history, wrote in 1917 how every high mountain top in Japan had its own shrine and that “some of them are piously worshipped by thousands of people who climb there in summer after many miles of arduous travel (Morse 1917, p.95; as cited in Hori 1966, p.1).

22 One reason for her displeasure could be jealousy at a woman more beautiful than her entering the mountains. For this reason, *matagi* hunters would carry with them such things as the (particularly grotesque) dried body of an *okoze*, or stone fish, to keep her in good temper (Tōno Municipal Museum 1998, p.13).



Figure 3. A small shrine on the summit of Daitenshō, a mountain in the Northern Alps, Japan (Photo: S. Schnell)



Figure 4. An example of a stone cairn (*iwasaka*) on a mountain in the Northern Alps. (Photo: S. Schnell).

According to Māori beliefs, the prosperity and fruitfulness of the forest of the plains and uplands is represented by the life-principle or *mauri* of such forest. *Mauri* is an immaterial quality, but can also be embodied within a material object, known by the same name. The material *mauri* was usually a stone, and it was carefully concealed in the forest. It acted as a shrine or abiding place for the spirit-gods in whose care the forest was placed. When a *mauri* was placed in a forest, such as at the base of a tree known as a good place to trap birds, the *tohunga* who placed it there would obtain a lizard and liberate it at the spot, and this creature was supposed to act as a guardian or caretaker of the *mauri* (Best 1977, p.7). This concept of a material embodiment of *mauri* very closely resembles the Japanese idea of *yorishiro*; the place (or object or person) inhabited by a deity's spirit when it descends for a religious ceremony or when possessing a person. Ancient forms of *yorishiro* include divine trees (*himorogi*), rock cairns (*iwasaka*), and the various hand-held ritual implements generally referred to as *torimono*. In particular, the rituals at divine trees and rock cairns reflect the belief that *kami* are particularly drawn to natural forests, groves, and rocks; this belief led to practices such as erecting trees at ritual sites and decorating them with objects into which the *kami* might descend.

Given that the mountains were seen as a realm of physical nature which forms an intermediary zone between the human and spirit world, it is axiomatic that the people most comfortable in that realm were those who fulfilled the role of human intermediaries between these two worlds in daily life. In Māori culture, it was the *tohunga* who entered the forested mountains to collect plants for medicinal purposes or to commune with the gods. Similarly, in Japanese culture, the mountains were the realm of shamans and mountain ascetic practitioners (*yamabushi* or *shugenja*), who acted as mediators between the human and spiritual or supernatural worlds.

Interconnected with the idea that the mountains are a kind of intermediary realm between the spirit and human worlds is the strong association of this geographical realm with death and ancestors. In some Māori tribes, the bones of high-ranking men and women were deposited on the tribe's sacred mountain. For instance, in the case of the Ngati Awa tribe in the Bay of Plenty, the bones of most men and women were placed in caves at the foot of the mountain, but the remains of people of especially distinguished descent were carried to the summit, where they were lowered into a deep chasm (Orbell 1985, p.47). This strong association between death and the realm of mountains is also evident in Japanese culture, as reflected in the ancient custom of locating the tombs of important people in the mountains, and festivals, which continue to be practised to this day, in which fires are lit on hillsides to invite ancestors back to visit the earthly realm at certain times of year.

Conclusions

Mountains have been perceived as sacred and spiritual realms throughout history and in many cultures. As the Japanese and Māori cultures share a strong animistic, polytheistic tradition, and geographies characterised by forested uplands and mountain

ranges dominating the inland landscape, it is not unexpected that there are striking parallels in the way uplands were perceived in these cultures. In both cultures, uplands were perceived as an intermediary realm between the human world and “other world”, a realm where the spirits (and sometimes the physical bodies) of the dead dwell. People in both cultures experienced gods and supernatural beings in this realm, and propitiation of the deities was an every day part of traditional life.

What is less universal is the conceptualisation of an environmental sphere that encompasses not only mountains, but hills—generally forested. Whereas in English and other European traditions a mountain is regarded, both linguistically and conceptually, as distinct from the less majestic ‘hill’, this is not the case in Japanese and Māori cultures. Moreover, *yama* and *maunga*, were (prior to the intensive development of the last century or so) generally forest-covered, and this is encapsulated in these respective terms, particularly in the case of *yama*. In Japan, wet-rice farming formed an integral part of the traditional economy, therefore the importance of the uplands as a source of water was emphasised (though hunters and woodcutters saw the mountain deity as guardian of animals and trees also). In the case of the Māori, the emphasis was on the forested uplands as a source of food and timber, and propitiation of the god of the forest focused on the deity’s role as guardian of animals and trees.

References

- Anderson, Atholl. 2002. A fragile plenty: pre-European Maori and the New Zealand Environment in Pawson, E. & Brooking, T. *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp. 19 – 34.
- Azumane Chimao. 1993. *SOS tsukinowaguma (Asiatic black bear SOS)*. Morioka: Iwate Nippō Newspaper Company.
- Bernbaum, Edwin. 1997. *Sacred mountains of the world*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Best, Elsdon. 1977 (first published 1942). *Forest lore of the Māori : with methods of snaring, trapping, and preserving birds and rats, uses of berries, roots, fern-root, and forest products, with mythological notes on origins, karakia used, etc.* Wellington: E.C. Keating, Government Printer.
- Blacker, Carmen. 1975. *The catalpa bow: a study of shamanistic practices in Japan*. Torquay: The Devonshire Press.
- Chiba, T. 1995. Sanchūkairon josetsu (An introduction to the theory of the mountains as ‘the other world’). In Kawai, M. & Hanihara, K. (eds), *Dōbutsu to bunmei (Animals and civilization)*. (pp. 26–51). Tokyo: Asakura Books.
- Dieffenbach, Ernst. 1843. *Travels in New Zealand* (vol. 1). London: John Murray, Albemarle Street.
- Hendry, Joy. 1987. *Understanding Japanese society*. London, New York: Croom Helm.
- Henshall, Kenneth. 1994. Observations on geomentality in New Zealand and Japan. *Papers in East Asian Studies*. 4.
- Hori, Ichiro. 1966. Mountains and their importance for the idea of the other world in Japanese folk religion. *History of religions*, 6(1), 1–23.

- Irwin, Geoff and Walrond Carl. 2008. 'When was New Zealand first settled?', *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, retrieved from <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/NewZealanders/MaoriNewZealanders/WhenWasNewZealandFirstSettled/en>
- Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. *Discourses of the vanishing: modernity, phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnston, R. J., Gregory, Derek, & Smith, David, M. (eds.) (1994). *The dictionary of human geography*. (3rd Edition). Oxford: Blackwell Reference.
- Kaneko Hiroyuki. 1993. Nushi, oyaji (Master, old man). In Gifuken Hōnyūrei Chōsa Kenkyūkai (ed.), *Tsukinowaguma: horobiyuku mori no ōja (Asiatic black bear: a threatened king of the forest)*. (pp. 101–2). Gifu: Gifu Shinbun.
- Kawabata, Y., & Seidensticker, E. M. (trans.). 1981. *The sound of the mountain*. New York, New York: Perigee Books.
- Kitamura, M. 1995. *Shinrin to Nihonjin: mori no kokoro ni semaru (Japanese and forests: A study of the spirit of the woods)*. Tokyo: Shōgakukan.
- Knight, John. 2003. *Waiting for wolves in Japan: An anthropological study of people-wildlife relations*. Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press.
- Kobayashi, Tatsuo. 2004. *Jōmon Reflections*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Lewis, David. 1982. *The Maori: heirs of Tane*. London: Orbis Publishing.
- Maclean, Chris. 1994. *Tararua, the story of a mountain range*. Wellington: Whitcombe Press.
- McIntock, A. H. (ed.). 1966. *An encyclopaedia of New Zealand (vol. 3)*. Wellington: R.E. Owen, Government Printer.
- Ministry for the Environment. 2007. *Environment New Zealand 2007*. Wellington: Ministry for the Environment.
- Miyake, Hitoshi. 2001. *Shugendō: essays on the structure of Japanese folk religion*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan.
- Orbell, Margaret. 1985. *The natural world of the Maori*. Auckland: Collins: David Bateman.
- Pawson, Eric. 2002. *The meaning of mountains*. In Pawson, E. & Brooking, T. (2002) *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp. 136–150.
- Pascoe, John Dobrée. 1952. *Land uplifted high*. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.
- Pomare, Maui and Cowen, James. 1987. *Legends of the Maori* (vol. 1). Auckland: Southern Reprints.
- Reinhard, Johan. 1985. Sacred mountains: an ethno-archaeological study of High Andean ruins. *Mountain Research and Development*, (5)4, pp. 299-317
- Sasaki, K. 2006. *Yama no kami to Nihonjin (The mountain deity and the Japanese)*. Tokyo: Yōsensha.
- Schnell, Scott. 2007. Are mountain gods vindictive? Competing images of the Japanese alpine landscape. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 13(4), 863-880 (18).
- Smethurst, David. 2000. Mountain Geography, *Geographical Review*, 90(1), 35-56.
- Tōno Municipal Museum. 1998. *Yamadachi: ushinawareyuku kari no shūzoku (Yamadachi: hunting folklore fading away)*. Ichinoseki: Kawashima Printing.

- Trumble, William R. and Stevenson, Angus (eds.). 2002. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (fifth edition). Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Waitangi Tribunal. 1991. *The Ngai Tahu Report (Wai 27)* (Vol. 2). Wellington: Brooker and Friend Ltd.
- Yanagita, K., Morse, E. (trans.). 1975. *The legends of Tono*. Tokyo: Japan Foundation.