Lineage of the Mountain Men

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In a mountain region way up along the Akui River from Tokushima, Shikoku, are found footprints of a legendary giant called Oh-hito. It seems that there are some more along the way toward Mt. Tsurugi. The trail extends into Kochi Prefecture beyond Mt. Tsurugi and Iyayama. In ancient times it was, so to speak, a route of culture.

In areas stretching from Iyayama to Shiraga-yama, they have legends of a mighty being called Yamachichi (Mountain Father) or Yamajichi (Mountain Grandfather). It was believed that in those days very tall red-faced (red-haired) hill people lived in the untrodden dense forests.

According to other kinds of legends, a Herculean farmer and hunter went into the high mountains and deified himself. This leads us to think that these hill tribes, mountain gods, and legendary mountain men are inseparably intermingled as scholars seem to believe. Meanwhile, Sedosaku, who cleared forests on Nakatsusan all by himself and came to be worshiped as a god, is said to have been a warrior by origin.

Still another kind of legend concerns fugitive Heike warriors, which states that they moved on among mountain after mountain in groups of a master and his followers. On their wanderings some of them stayed behind as settlers or local rulers at one place or another. The routes they followed extended as far as Yokokura-yama, Kochi Prefecture, beyond Iyayama. It is also thought that the presence of mountain ascetics upholding the religion of the sacred Kumano mountains is discernible in the history of the hill tribes. In some parts of these mountains, on the other hand, there remain a lot of legends of Kobo-daishi, a saint priest, a fact that leads us to realize that these areas were closely associated with Mt. Koya, where he founded his religion in the 9th century. He ruled over his territory just as the Shikoku hill tribes did.

Later, the decendent tribesmen-turned warriors fought for the South Clan
of Japan’s then Imperial Family. Finally, they persistently resisted the enemy from fertile plain lands, taking advantage of the Median Line, which served for them as routes of culture and trade. Down in the 17th century, the hill tribes again resisted feudalism. The lord of Tokushima employed Gennai, a hill warrior, in order to rule over the tribal region of Iyayama.

Throughout the following years up to the Meiji period, the hill tribes, unable to adapt themselves to principles governing rice-growing communities at low-lying areas, as well as adapting to general feudal systems, and the labor rent system that Gennai was allowed to impose on them as a reward for his loyalty to his lord, kept raising insurrection against the ruling class. It is recorded, moreover, that in later years their insurgency intensified, with far more people involved in riots. It is speculated that at the bottom of their actions was their desire to get back the freedom they had enjoyed at their hill farming regions.

There is still another legend that the mountain ranges of Shikoku are traces of the furrows where Giant Oh-hito raised taros. Actually, the hill tribes raised taros, varieties of grains and the like, independent of their feudalistic rulers, on their farmland formed by landslides along the Median Line and its surrounding areas. It is rightly said that these hill tribes, with their own culture of mountains and rivers, living on the uplands along the rivers are, after all, identified with legendary mountain people.