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Warrior of the Light

Volume 1

2008

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ISBN 978-0-557-01573-3

Published by Lulu

On the Road to Kumano

I got out of the train one afternoon in February 2001, and met Katsura, a 29 year-old Japanese woman.

- Welcome to the road to Kumano.

I looked beyond the station to the setting sun shining into my face. What was the road to Kumano? During the journey, I had tried to discover why it was that this remote place had been included on the program of my official visit, organized by the Japan Foundation. The interpreter told me that a friend of mine, Madoka Mayuzumi, had insisted I visit this place, although I only had five days and had to travel by car most of the time. Madoka had walked the Road to Santiago in 1999, and

thought this would be the best way of thanking me.

Back on the train, the interpreter had commented: “the people of Kumano are very strange”. I asked her what she meant by that, and she limited her answer to one word: “religiousness”. I decided not to press the matter: one can often ruin a good pilgrimage by reading all the leaflets, books, guidelines on the Internet, friends’ comments, and arrive at the place knowing everything one ought to be discovering for oneself, not allowing room for the most important element of any journey - the unexpected.

- Let us go over to the stone - said Katsura.

We walked a few meters to a small obelisk, inscribed on both sides, set on a corner - and fighting for space among pedestrians, a convenience store, passing cars and motorbikes. From

that point, the road to Kumano was divided in two.

- If you go to the left, you will take the pilgrimage along the path the emperor used to take. If you go to the right, you will take the path of the ordinary folk, said Katsura.

- The emperor's way may be more beautiful, but certainly the way of the ordinary folk will be livelier.

She seemed content with the answer. We got into the car and drove towards the snow-covered mountains. As she drove, Katsura explained some things about the place: Kumano is a type of peninsular full of hills, forests and valleys, where several religions live alongside one another in peace. The predominant ones are Buddhism and Shintoism (Japan's national religion, older than the influence of Buddha, based on the adoration of the forces of nature), but every type of faith

and spiritual manifestation can be found there.

- How many kilometers is the pilgrimage? -
I wanted to know.

Apparently, she didn't understand. I asked the interpreter to translate into Japanese, but even then Katsura appeared to be perplexed at my question.

- That depends on where you set off - she said finally.

- Of course. But in the case of the Road to Santiago, if you set off from Navarra it is about 700 kms. What about here?

- Here, the pilgrimages begin when you leave your home, and end when you return to it. In this case, since you live in Brazil, you must know the distance.

I didn't know, but the reply made sense. The pilgrimage is a stage on a journey: I remembered that after having gone on the road to Santiago, in Spain, I only really understood what had happened to me when I spent four months in Madrid, before returning home.

- We see things, and don't understand immediately - continued Katsura. You must leave behind the man you are used to being: he will remain there and only the good part continues to be nourished by the energy of the Goddess, who is a generous mother. The part which does you harm ends up dying for lack of nourishment, since the devil is too busy with other people, and has no time to take care of someone whose soul is not there.

For almost two hours we climbed a small, twisty road up the mountain, until we came to a sort of inn. Before I entered, Katsura commented:

- A woman lives here, we don't know how old she is, which is why we call her the Feminine Demon. I'm going down to the village nearby to fetch a woodcutter who will explain to you how you should follow the road.

Night had begun to fall, Katsura disappeared into the mist, and I stood there waiting for the Feminine Demon to open the door.

The woodcutter and the demon

At an inn lost in the mountains, a woman they call the Feminine Demon, dressed in a black kimono, came to greet me. I removed my shoes, entered the traditional Japanese room, and immediately realized that I would never be able to sleep in such a cold place. I asked the interpreter to request a heater; the old Japanese woman frowned and said I must get used to Shugendo.

- Shugendo?

But the woman had already disappeared, having instructed us to dine soon. Less than five minutes later we were seated around a sort of bonfire dug in into the ground, with a cauldron hanging from the ceiling, and fish on skewers lying around. Soon, my guide Katsura arrived with the woodcutter.

- He knows all about the road - said Katsura. - Ask anything you like.

- Before speaking, let us drink - said a woodcutter - sake (a type of Japanese wine made of rice) wards off bad spirits.

- It wards off bad spirits?

- The fermented drink is alive, goes from youth to old age. When it reaches maturity, it is capable of destroying the Spirit of Inhibition, the Spirit of Lack of Human Relationships, the Spirit of Fear and the Spirit of Anxiety. Howev-

er, if too much is drunk, it rebels and brings the spirit of defeat and aggression. It is all a question of knowing the point beyond which one may not go beyond.

We drank sake, and ate the fish roasting around the fire. The landlady joined us. I asked why people called her the Feminine Demon.

- Because no one knows where I was born, where I came from, my age. I decided to be a woman without a history, since my past only brought me pain; two atomic bombs exploding in my country, the end of moral and spiritual values, the suffering caused by people disappearing. One day I decided to start a new life: there are certain tragedies we can never understand. So I left it all behind, and came to this mountain. I help the Pilgrims, take care of the inn, and live each day as if it were my last. I enjoy meeting different people every day. I always meet strangers - like you, for instance. I had never met a Brazil-