

●Shinagawa Historical Museum Explanatory Sheet

The Mt. Fuji Worshipping Groups in Shinagawa

Mt. Fuji Worship and Shinagawa

Since ancient times, Japan has believed that the mountains are home to gods, and should be worshipped and respected. Mt. Fuji, the tallest mountain in Japan, garnered a particularly large number of worshippers.

According to a record from 1470 left by Nisshin, a Buddhist priest of the Nichiren sect, the Shinagawa sea merchant Suzuki Doin dispatched six of his officers to Mt. Fuji every year in June. At that time, making a pilgrimage to Mt. Fuji was believed to help prevent disasters, and shows that Mt. Fuji was already a pilgrimage site.

Fuji Worshippers and Fuji-Zuka

During the Edo Period, Mt. Fuji worship began to spread among the common people, and organizations formed throughout Japan to worship the mountain.

These groups created fuji-zuka, man-made small hills modeled after Mt. Fuji, to enshrine the god of Mt. Fuji, allowing the groups to pray to Mt. Fuji from afar, and offer them a proxy to climb in place of the real mountain. The “Shinagawa Fuji” located on the ground of Shinagawa Shrine was built in 1869 by the Mt. Fuji worshipping group Marukako.

In addition to worship, the Marukako group also offered fellowship and opportunities for leisure to its members.

The Opening of Shinagawa Fuji

There were previously six Mt. Fuji worshipping groups at Shinagawa Post Station. The Yamaseiko and the Marukako groups were offshoots of a larger group. While there are now fewer members, Marukako has still carried



▲ "Guide to the Mt. Fuji Pilgrimage" - Utagawa Sadahide (Hashimoto Gyokuransai), 1859, Shinagawa Historical Museum Collection

on its activities. At its peak Marukako had over 300 members. The group's primary activities were holding a mountain opening ceremony at Shinagawa Fuji, and climbing the real Mt. Fuji between late July and early August.

Even today, the mountain opening ceremony for Shinagawa Fuji is held on July 1st every year, same with Mt. Fuji. The Marukako members gather at Sengen Shrine next to Shinagawa Fuji dressed in ceremonial white clothing. They then climb Shinagawa Fuji together, and pray at the shrines on the slope of the hill and at its peak. The group also used to gather at its caretaking member's home to offer ritual prayers irregularly every month.



▲ Opening ceremony of Shinagawa Fuji (Designated Shinagawa City Intangible Cultural Property)

Climbing Mt. Fuji in the 1930s and 1940s

The Marukako group no longer climbs Mt. Fuji today, but it previously climbed the mountain in three-day and two-night or four-day and three-night trips. The below passage is based on an interview with Enomoto Jiro (deceased), a former representative of the Marukako group:

“Every year in June, the person who would take care of the Marukako pilgrims’ lodging at the base of Mt. Fuji would pay a visit to the group in Shinagawa. Each organization had their own fixed caretaker, and the Kikuya lodge in Fuji Yoshida cared for the Marukako group. In late June, we visited Mitake Shrine on the grounds of Shinagawa Shrine to determine the best day to climb Mt. Fuji. It was said that if we climbed the mountain on any other day than the one indicated at Mitake Shrine, we would meet with bad weather.

I first climbed Mt. Fuji in 1937 at the age of 12. We didn’t fix the age of a person’s first climbing in any particular way. On the day of our climb, 30 to 40 people set out early in the morning, and after stopping at the Kikuya lodge, we made a five-kilometer round trip on foot to the Yoshida Tainai (lava tree mold), for light exercise.

We then spent one night at the Kikuya lodge, and woke up at about 4 a.m. next morning to set off for the mountain dressed in white ritual clothing and carrying walking sticks. We first visited Kitaguchi-Hongu Fuji Sengen Shrine to offer prayers, rode a bus to the Umagaeshi stop, which was at an elevation of 1,420 meters, and from there we climbed the Yoshida-guchi Route. Because we entrusted all our belongings to two porters from the Kikuya lodge, we only had to carry water and snacks.

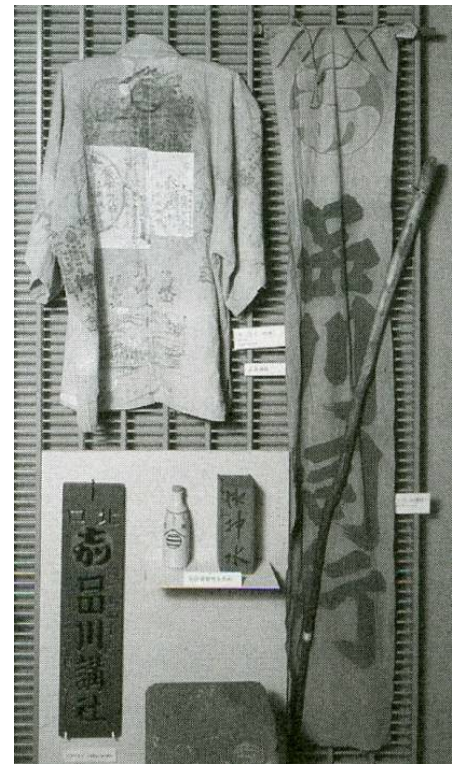


▲ Climbing Mt. Fuji in 1930s
(Picture provided by Enomoto Jiro)

We then visited the shrine at Mt. Kyogatake at an elevation of 2,386 meters to pray. When we reached the summit of Mt. Fuji (elevation 3,776 meters), we circled the volcanic rim clockwise and prayed near the Mt.

Fuji Weather Station (closed in 2004).

Next, we divided into one group that would continue circling the volcanic rim, and to other that would descend and circle the mid-points of Mt. Fuji. The first group then circled the rim once more and went down along the same Yoshida-guchi Route to the Eighth Station, where they stayed overnight in a lodge regularly used



▲ Artifacts related to Mt. Fuji Worship
(Donated by Enomoto Jiro, housed at Shinagawa Historical Museum)

by the Marukako group. The second group, which I belonged to, descended the mountain along the Gotemba-guchi Route to stay at the Mt. Hiei cave (currently, non-existent) at a height of 2,702 meters.

The next morning, we began circling the mid-points of Mt. Fuji. Before attempting the particularly difficult Osawa Crossing (impassable today), we chanted a portion of the sutra. After crossing, we rested at a small hut (non-existent) and had a lunch of udon noodles.

At the hut, I received a stamp on a piece of cloth given to me by the caretaker, which I later sewed to my white ritual clothing. I also received a paper, which I wrapped around the bottom of my walking stick. I then stopped using the stick for the rest of the trip.

We continued our decent, and at about 3:00 p.m. we arrived at Komitake Shrine, where we joined with the first group that circled the volcanic rim, and prayed at the shrine together. After that, we then returned to the Kikuya lodge by the Yoshida-guchi Route. We spent the night at the lodge and went back to Shinagawa the following day.

Several days later, we distributed the holy water we drew at the peak of Mt. Fuji among the members, and collected membership dues. This was the only time during the year when we collected membership dues.”