

Invention of “Self-Mummified Buddhas” in Japan and Its Historical Significance

Manabu Yamasawa, University of Tsukuba, Japan

The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Self-mummification is an aesthetic practice in which a monk goes into a hole underground and remains there without food, a fast designed to end in death and allow the monk to become a Buddha. While many historians have studied the Egyptian funerary practices of mummification, few researchers have studied self-mummification in Japan. This paper focuses on a monk named Tetsumonkai. Tetsumonkai died in 1829, and his mummified body was dug out and declared a Buddha in the flesh. In no way am I suggesting that the practice of self-mummification is a fiction or hoax; rather, this paper argues that even this artificial (inauthentic) processing of the body is significantly informed by a cultural ideology or philosophy, which I would like to discuss through archival work.

Keywords: “Instant” Buddha In The Flesh, Tetsumonkai, Yudonosan Kikyoshi, The Religion At Mt. Yudono, Religious Innovations

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Self-mummification is an aesthetic practice in which a monk goes into a hole underground and remains there without food, a fast designed to end in death and allow the monk to become sokushinbutsu, literally an “instant” Buddha in the flesh. As of today, six self-mummified monks are known to exist in Dewa Sanzan or The Three Mountains of Dewa in northern Japan that includes Mt. Yudono, an area often associated with the Shingon sect of Buddhism (Japan’s mummy research group, 1969; Togawa, 1986; Iwahana, 2003). While many historians have studied the Egyptian funerary practices of mummification, few researchers have studied self-mummification in Japan. This paper focuses on a monk named Tetsumonkai, arguably the most famous self-mummified Buddha in Japan, although his life is relatively unknown. Tetsumonkai died in 1829, and his mummified body was dug out and declared a Buddha in the flesh (Yamasawa, 2012).

In discussing Tetsumonkai, I am not so much interested in the actual practice of self-mummification as in the invention of the process. Though virtually unknown today, Tetsumonkai in fact never went into a hole in the ground. He died a natural death in the temple, and subsequently his body was buried. In one account, his body was hung from the ceiling of the temple and dehydrated by the use of charcoal fire and candles. In another account, saltwater was poured into his body to prevent it from rotting. In no way am I suggesting that the practice of self-mummification is a fiction or hoax; rather, this paper argues that even this artificial (inauthentic) processing of the body is significantly informed by religious philosophy, which I would like to discuss through archival work.

The Life and Religious Philosophy of Tetsumonkai

Tetsumonkai was reportedly born in 1759 and, in so far as can be ascertained from available records, he was poor, working as a ferryman transporting wood in the winter. At the age of 21, he became an ascetic practitioner and took the name issei gyonin. Over time he gained many followers and sometime around 1817, he began to call himself mokujiki gyoja, which is a kind of monk literally meaning “tree eating ascetic” in Japanese. He practiced asceticism for 2,000 days at Mt. Yudono in order to become an “instant” Buddha in the flesh, abstaining from food cooked with fire and refusing to eat meat obtained by killing animals, while subsisting on only nuts and grass. As far as I can tell, Tetsumonkai is the first issei gyonin who claimed to be a mokujiki gyoja. This means that he virtually declared himself the innovator of the religion at Mt. Yudono.

Tetsumonkai died in 1829 at the age of 71 and his remains were buried underground. In 1832, 1,000 days after his passing, his remains were dug up and designated sokushinbutsu, a self-mummified Buddha.

Legends about Tetsumonkai were created by his disciples. One of the most famous was about his phallus and held that, when he was young, he had a girlfriend and she followed him to the temple he belonged to. The story goes that Tetsumonkai cut off his own penis and gave it to her, thereby cutting off her libido, which gave her happiness and prosperity.

Interestingly, the mummified Tetsumonkai does lack male genitalia. And yet, Japan's mummy research group, sponsored by the Mainichi Newspapers in the 1960s, provided medical verification that the mummy lacks a scrotum, although this deficiency took place after Tetsumonkai's death (Japan's Mummy Research Group, 1969). Hence the legend about Tetsumonkai's self-castration seems to have been invented posthumously.

However, the invention that I am most interested in is deeper than any of the various legends about Tetsumonkai. It is the "myth" surrounding Tetsumonkai as a self-mummified Buddha, despite the fact that Tetsumonkai never in fact buried himself alive in a hole in order to engage in ascetic practices and fasting and thereby mummify himself. Instead, he was designated a self-mummified Buddha 1,000 days after his death and his body was preserved posthumously. Now, I am not suggesting that conceiving of Tetsumonkai as a self-mummified Buddha is either a hoax or fiction. Rather, I would like to suggest that by understanding the invention of the idea of Tetsumonkai as a self-mummified Buddha we can gain a new perspective on the religious issues surrounding self-mummification in Japan.

The record we have of Tetsumonkai's death comes from a disciple named Seikai, and, according to it, Tetsumonkai fell ill on the night of October 18, 1829, and uttered his last wishes. Though not documented, we can safely speculate that he uttered a not-yet-fulfilled last wish to become an "instant" Buddha in the flesh. On December 8, he put on his religious clothes at dawn and held a rosary in his hand, and after chanting "Namu Amida Butsu" three times, died a natural death. Five days later, his remains were put in a casket.

In one account, his remains were subsequently hung from the temple ceiling and dried with charcoal and candle flames. In another account, his remains were transported to a sacred beach. His body was shielded by a curtain, and for three days and three nights saltwater was poured into his body so that it would not decay. This sight was so shocking to the aforementioned disciple Seikai, that he gave up his own desire of becoming a self-mummified Buddha himself.

The processing of mummifying Tetsumonkai seems to have set a precedent that was used for another monk, Tetsuryukai, one of the successors to Tetsumonkai. He died a natural death in 1881, and his body was subsequently laparotomized: after the cerebral matter and internal organs were removed from the body, the space was filled with limestone powder. Tetsuryukai was buried after this mummification process, and his mummified body was later dug out of the ground and declared an "instant" Buddha in the flesh. Neither Tetsumonkai nor Tetsuryukai went underground while alive to mummify themselves through ascetic practices and fasting. Instead their bodies—having undergone an artificial mummification process—were buried, as if they had gone underground as living monks, where they remained until being unearthed.

This invention of the quasi-self-mummified Buddha may seem to be inauthentic from a historical perspective. However, I would argue that such processing had its own religious justifications. To understand this we can turn to archival document, such as the *Yudonosan Kikyoshi* (1812), which describes the religious philosophy of Tetsumonkai. With regard to the human body, the document explains that human

beings have blood, flesh, brains, and organs, including the lung, heart, and bowels, wrapped in skin, and that dirty liquids such as oil, feces, and urine are continually excreted from the body. One can only stop themselves from secreting this filthy matter by fasting, which can clean the inside of the human body. This religious philosophy was behind the ascetic self-mummification practice based on fasting. In order to become an “instant” Buddha in the flesh, no filthy matter or bodily fluids can be inside one’s body at the time of death.

Now, consider the transformation of the two monks, Tetsumonkai and Tetsuryukai, into quasi-self-mummified Buddhas. These processes were not informed by a practical, biological, or scientific wisdom or methods for preventing the decay of the corpse. Rather, they were informed precisely by the religious teachings described in the document: that is, to become a Buddha in the flesh, one’s body would have to be cleansed of all filthy matter and bodily fluids. In the case of Tetsumonkai, this was accomplished by dehydrating the body through the use of a charcoal fire and candles or through pouring salt water into the body; in the case of Tetsuryukai, this was achieved through the laparotomy and removal of the cerebral matter and internal organs combined with the use of limestone powder to fill up the space. These religious and ritual procedures were justified and sanctioned by the teachings of the religion at Mt. Yudono and were hence accepted by disciples.

Thus Tetsumonkai—and his successor, Tetsuryukai—became “instant” Buddhas in the flesh. True, they are not self-mummified Buddhas. However, they were legitimately designated Buddhas and as such, they were widely worshipped.

Conclusions

Traditional historical studies of Tetsumonkai suggest that it is incorrect to define sokushinbutsu, an “instant” Buddha in the flesh, as a self-mummified Buddha. However, from a viewpoint of religious philosophy that I have discussed in this paper, the clear-cut boundary between the two ought to be questioned. The *Yudonosan Kikyoshi* is a document that records Tetsumonkai’s religious philosophy, which he created and taught while he was alive, and these same techniques were practiced by his disciples on his remains when he died. Thus, he mummified himself through his own religious ideas and was self-mummified in a way. No matter how one classifies him, Tetsumonkai was a crucial figure who made significant religious innovations to the practice of asceticism at Dewa Sanzan, The Three Mountains of Dewa, in Japan.

References

Iwahana, M. (2003). *Structure of Religious Zones in Dewa Sanzan, The Three Mountains of Dewa*. Tokyo: Iwata-shoin.

Japan's Mummy Research Group (Ed). (1969). *Study of Mummies in Japan*. Tokyo: Heibonsha.

Togawa, A. (1986). *Study of Shugendo in Dewa Sanzan, The Three Mountains of Dewa* (new ed.). Tokyo: Kosei Publishing.

Yamasawa, M. (2012). Historical Form where Mokujiki gyoja Tetsumonkai at Kaikoji Temple and his Followers connected in Mt. Yudono's Shugendo. In Association of Researchers on Local History (Ed.), *Landscape and Historical Image in Dewa-Shonai Area* (pp. 45–60). Tokyo: Yuzankaku.

Contact email: yamasawa.manabu.fm@u.tsukuba.ac.jp