

# Media and its Effect on Aum Shinrikyō

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# 1 Evaluation of Sources

Aum Shinrikyō is a doomsday cult that was based in Japan, which is primarily known for their Sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system. It thrived on the spiritual void in the 80's and 90's, and used popular culture for their recruitment. A cult lives and breathes on its members and perception, just think about the siege of the Branch Divisions at Waco, Texas, the mass murder suicides of the Order of the Solar Temple, and Jonestown. Cults get violent when their practices get brought to the light. So, to what extent can the popularity and the downfall of Aum Shinrikyō be attributed to the media?

## 1.1 “Reactions to the Aum Affair”

“Reactions to the Aum Affair: The Rise of the ‘Anti-Cult’ Movement in Japan.” is an essay based on a paper presented at the annual meeting of American Academy of Religion in 1996<sup>1</sup>. It was published in the 21<sup>st</sup> .Volume of the annual Bulletin for the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. This separates the “Aum Affair”, the time between being approved as a religious institution and the gas attacks, into four different periods. The first period was as it budded into its current form, the second is the beginning of negative press, the third is a time where “intellectuals<sup>2</sup> reevaluated” Aum Shinrikyō, and finally, the fourth is the gas attacks to their downfall. This resource is valuable because of how it tracks the criticism of the cult and the way Aum Shinrikyō responded. Their typical response being murder. This paper showed the causal relationship between the level of criticism and violence which led to their downfall. The main issue with this paper is that it does not explain the media practices used by Aum Shinrikyō, the cultural context, or what made them gain so much power. The main purpose of this paper was to show how new religious or spiritual movements can clash with culture at large for an academic conference.

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1. Manabu Watanabe, “Reactions to the Aum Affair” [in en], *Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 21 (1997): 17.

2. *Ibid.*, 33.

## 1.2 *The Cult at the End of the World* — WIRED

This source is a WIRED article in 1996<sup>3</sup>. This was one year after the infamous gas attack. The main purpose the article is to illustrate the sort of people that would get sucked into this cult, the Otaku. An otaku is a nerd that immerses themselves in anime, manga, and Japanese cartoons and popular culture to the point of becoming detached with reality and is generally a derogatory term. The stereotype is also focused around nerdy men. The article reflects the mainstream perception of the cult members being lost, young, otaku men. It gives a few second hand accounts from former cult members and highlights examples of prominent scientists that got taken in. The limitations are that there are no examples of their recruitment materials that cater to otaku, and how they continue with the stereotype of demeaning otaku. They mention the societal issues, but attributed most of the recruitment to violent anime and science fiction stories. This article also shows the attitude toward the cult at time when they were at their most well-known.

## 2 Introduction To Aum

Aum Shinrikyō is a Japanese cult that started operating in 1987 and was granted status as a Religious Corporation in 1989 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. The cult was started by Asahara Shoko, birth-name Chizuo Matsumoto, who is believed to be subject to *pseudologia phantastica*<sup>4</sup>, otherwise known as pathological lying. He later developed severe incarceration psychosis<sup>5</sup> over the course of his trials before getting the death penalty. The disconnection between reality and story, and sometimes violent actions taken by pathological liars to maintain their story, point to why media caused such violence by Asahara and his

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3. *The Cult at the End of the World* — WIRED, accessed February 22, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/1996/07/aum/>.

4. Kyle B. Olson, “Aum Shinrikyo: Once and Future Threat?,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 5, no. 4 (August 1999): 5, accessed January 17, 2019, doi:10.3201/eid0504.990409, [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/5/4/99-0409\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/5/4/99-0409_article).

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

followers. Aum is an outstretch of a larger ‘New Religion’ wave in Japan, and was, in many ways, an offshoot of Agonshu<sup>6</sup>. During his time with Agonshu, he started to mix Buddhism and Yoga. Yoga, in the religious sense, being one of the six orthodox schools of Hinduism. With his connection to Yoga, he chose Shiva, “The Destroyer”, as his main deity. For his own Buddhist practice, he went to Tantra Vajrayana which is a Tibetan esoteric Buddhist sect. Asahara took the basic ideas from Agonshu and synthesized them with other religious practices to create a system that applies to a broader range of people. He mixed disparate ideas from generally peaceful religious practices to form a foundation for violence and control.

## 2.1 Beliefs

The beliefs of Aum are a complex mix of Buddhism, Yoga, and aspects of Christianity, more specifically the idea of a messianic leader<sup>7</sup>. For Buddhism, the Vajrayana tradition is a subcategory of the Mahayana sutras and the borrowed the idea of Ten Realms (jikkai) from the Lotus sutra. When someone is reincarnated based on their karma (level of morality as determined by their actions and thoughts), they could return to any of the six rebirth realms: Hell, Hungry Ghosts (pretas), Beasts, Titans (Asuras), and Humans<sup>8</sup>. Aum also uses the idea of the Three Ages of Buddhism: shōbō, zōhō, and mappō. Shōbō is the period where Dharma (behavior in accordance to the cosmic law) is at its highest, and Mappō, the Degenerate age, is where Dharma has all but disappeared. Asahara claimed that he had awoken his Kundalini (serpent power) which is located in the lower spine. It is seen as the origin of supernatural and the energy source for spiritual. Later, Asahara co-opted the idea of Poa, or phowa, from more violent esoteric Buddhist sects. Poa is a Tibetan term for the

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6. Manabu Watanabe, “Religion and violence in Japan today: A chronological and doctrinal analysis of Aum Shinrikyo” [in en], *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 4 (December 1998): 82,83, accessed February 23, 2019, doi:[10.1080/09546559808427483](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559808427483), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546559808427483>.

7. Daniel A. Metraux, “Religious Terrorism in Japan: The Fatal Appeal of Aum Shinrikyo,” *Asian Survey* 35, no. 12 (December 1995): 1144, accessed February 23, 2019, doi:[10.2307/2645835](https://doi.org/10.2307/2645835), <http://as.ucpress.edu/cgi/doi/10.2307/2645835>.

8. Watanabe, “Religion and violence in Japan today,” 83.

transference of consciousness, or, in other words, death. A skilled enough practitioner could transfer a consciousness to a higher realm. Asahara weaponized this concept to make killing at his order virtuous.

One of Aum's central beliefs was that the world was in such a state of moral decline that a beast is more likely to reincarnate to a higher realm than a human. Asahara he had a revelation through Shiva and has reached the tenth realm of buddhahood. Shiva had told him that he would bring in a age of shōbō, and usher in Shambhala. Poa then purifies the social Dharma from the state during Mappō, raising the Dharma of the new kingdom and raising a human from the realm of hell. The goal of Aum was to cause the Harumagedon, or Armageddon, to cause the second period of Shōbō.

## 3 Media

### 3.1 Recruitment

Since Aum preaches about societal decay, the people influenced by the cult would, in general, be the outcasts. In Japanese culture, the socially inept and isolated are the otaku. If a person is so deeply interested or addicted to something to the point they are dysfunctional, then they are an Otaku. There are train Otaku or art otaku, but the colloquial use of otaku is in reference to anime, Japanese cartoons. Some of these otaku where taken out of top scientific university. Those being the type of anti-social nerds that thrive in academic or scientific studies, but fail to live a complete life beyond that. Appealing to otaku culture and outcasts as well as giving people a broader purpose and superiority were some of the draws for the cult. Aum and their image of Harumagedon parallel the post-apocalyptic anime of *Space Battleship Yamato* and *Akira* and the idea of battle between a smaller righteous

force prevailing is similar to *Mobile Suit Gundam*<sup>9</sup>. Given Asahara's blurring of reality and fiction, he drew parallels between these franchises and Aum.

Beyond the over-sensationalized news articles about the dangers of Otaku<sup>10,11</sup>, the disillusionment of the youth can be somewhat attributed the culture in post-WW2 Japan and the development of postmodernism in Japan. With the addition of Western culture, capitalism and industrialization, the centuries old Japanese culture and narratives started to morph. Hiroki Azuma, a Japanese philosopher and cultural critic, states that the Anime that Aum takes inspiration from where from 'The Period of Fictions'. The Period of Fictions was when people were still looking for the old stories to make it through modern life, and Aum comes it to provide similar catharsis for its followers. It would then make sense that Aum would borrow aspects from these franchises or cater to similar audiences.

There are several specific examples of Aum recruitment material, but a new offshoot, Aleph, has rights to all of it. Aleph somewhat restricts the old material and send copyright strikes against illegal uploads. Despite that, there are some open Aum Anime<sup>12,13</sup>.

Figure 2 and 1 are examples of Aum publications in three different styles of Manga. These types of materials emphasize Asahara's powers. For example, Figure 1a is a manga called *My Guru* where they test his body for resistance, and his body, strangely, has none. The lack of resistance shows his attunement with energy. In *Aum Shinrikyo Anime* Asahara is shown connecting to others spiritually, astral traveling, and levitating with a sideshow of pictures of Asahara at the end. *AUM animation SOSEIKI* is a story of two naked people akin to Adam and Eve interspersed with strange images of cities and fields of grain. The

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9. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams, *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime* [in en], Google-Books-ID: 1eFnjcvxul4C (M.E. Sharpe, 2008).

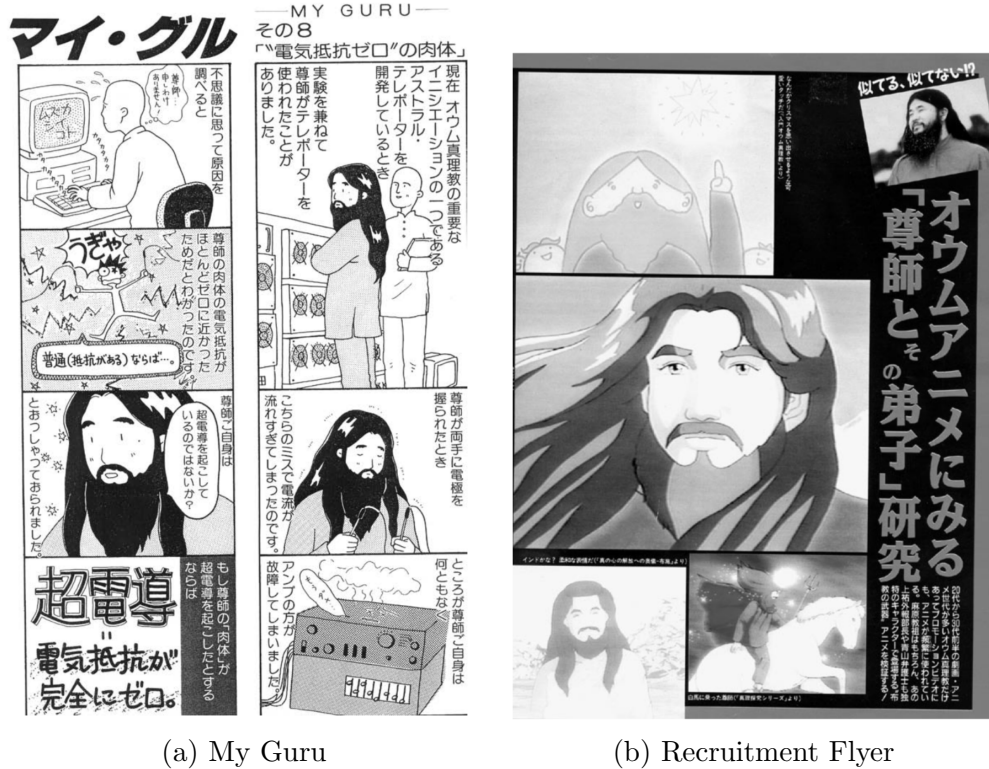
10. *The Mike Toole Show - The Anime Cult* [in en], accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/the-mike-toole-show/2015-12-13/.96470>.

11. *The Cult at the End of the World* — WIRED.

12. *Aum Shinrikyo Anime*, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVnscHsPfR4&feature=youtu.be>.

13. *AUM animation SOSEIKI*, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlq0197PEEM>.

Figure 1: Aum Manga



video is in Japanese without subtitles, so without translation, the most that can be drawn from that video is the clear biblical allusion.

### 3.2 Decline

There first major media exposure was in the *Sunday Mainichi* through a seven article series called “The Insanity of Aum Shinrikyō” in September of 1989<sup>14</sup>. This media attention had started just after they got their religious cooperation distinction. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, they published a series of interviews with six families that claimed that Aum had stolen their kid from them, not kidnapped but brainwashed<sup>15</sup>. After these stories came out, the families of Aum monks started to band together into the Association of Aum Shinrikyō Victims under

14. Watanabe, “Reactions to the Aum Affair,” 35.

15. Helen Hardacre, “Aum Shinrikyō and the Japanese Media: The Pied Piper Meets the Lamb of God” [in en], *History of Religions* 47, nos. 2/3 (November 2007): 184, accessed February 22, 2019, doi:10.1086/524209, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/524209>.



Figure 2: Harumagedon



There were some anti-Aum publications, but, as a whole, they were receiving praise

16. Watanabe, “Religion and violence in Japan today,” 89.

17. Hardacre, “Aum Shinrikyō and the Japanese Media,” 187.

from religious scholars such as Shimada Hiromi and Nakazawa Shin'ichi<sup>18</sup>. Aum also had a public debate with Kōfuku no Kagaku (The Science of Happiness), another new religion group, on “Asa made nama terebi” (Live until Morning) which aired at midnight September 28, 1991. During the debate, Aum appeared to show a deeper knowledge of Buddhism than Kōfuku no Kagaku, so they, subsequently, won. During this time, the biggest anti-Aum publications were done by Egawa Shōko, and some of her essays became the seminal papers on this area publishing in weekly journals. In general, the positive TV appearances and positive reviews outweighed the negative articles and this was a period where the media about Aum was generally positive. Religious and Television personalities such as Shimada Hiromi, Nakazawa Shini'chi, and Takeshi Kitano were warm to Aum and liked their public ideas. Even Yashimoto Takaati, a prominent philosopher and public intellectual, give a favorable review to Asahara's writings. While hidden from the public, Asahara had a limited number of his disciples to begin assembly of AK-47 machine guns and begin working on the developing different nerve gas agents<sup>19</sup>.

In 1993, they successfully synthesized Sarin, and, by 1994, had produced thirty liters of it. On June 27<sup>th</sup> 1994 they did a smaller Sarin release in Matsumoto killing seven people and injuring 144. This attack was to kill the judges who were providing over a case in relation to Aum's Matsumoto branch office. None of the judges were killed, but they were wounded and the case was left dormant for months. The Japanese authorities did not know the perpetrators, but, on January 1<sup>st</sup> an article documenting new was published by Yomiuri Shimbun stating that some residue of the Sarin was found near an Aum facility in Kamikuishiki-mura, Satian 7. On February 28<sup>th</sup> Kariya Kiyoshi was abducted by the group after offering a hiding place and way out of the cult to his wealthy sister. For this, the cult forced a confession from him, the hiding place of his sister, and, heavily drugged, killed him. The incident Kiyoshi was again a time where anyone obstructing Aum would have Poa

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18. Watanabe, “Reactions to the Aum Affair,” 38.

19. Watanabe, “Religion and violence in Japan today,” 91,92.

used against them. This is the first investigation done on Aum as an organization by the police. The pressure on Aum from the authorities and civilian organizations as well as the increasing production of chemical weapons meant that a larger incident was inevitable. In the beginning of March, Aum followers started to hand out fliers for Asahara's new book *Disaster is Approaching the Land of the Rising Sun*. In the book he supposedly foretold the Hanshin Earthquake and talked about another disaster to befall Japan. On March 20<sup>th</sup> 1995, Aum Shinrikyō sprayed Sarin gas in a coordinated attack on 15 Tokyo train stations. The largest attack being on the Hibiya line involving between 300-400 victims<sup>20</sup>. In total 12 people were killed and 3,796 were injured in the largest modern terrorist attack on Japanese soil.

## 4 Conclusion

Asahara was a master manipulator. His possible mental instability, as manifested in pseudologia phantastica and eventually psychosis, allowed him to blur the lines between religion and pop culture. In his inability to adequately separate story and reality, he and his philosophies embody the breakdown on traditional narratives but clinging on to a greater purpose. In this "Era of Fictions", media played a large role in giving people value and purpose since it was a form of escapism. This escapism gave Aum power since they used the people seeking a way out to gain power and influence, but in that system of fast growth, they blew up. An upwell of anti-Aum articles and media cemented their already paranoid and anti-social beliefs and meant that the already unhinged leader's lies were falling apart.

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20. Olson, "Aum Shinrikyo," 513.

## 5 Reflection

Like many emotionally-charged, historical events and movements, the importance of Aum Shinrikyō is overstated and people quick to criticism. There is a strong conversation about the media’s portrayal of otaku in these events and where they were used for a scapegoat for broader cultural issues. The problem is that these conversations are mainly on online message boards, so not conducive for academic decision and, if it were, beyond the scope of this investigation. One of the complications I ran into was in what people chose to omit or neglect to mention. For example, in my Decline section, there was “Reactions to the Aum Affair” that had a nice framework for how media affected Aum and their paranoia, but it did not say anything about police investigations. In fact, to pull together the events before the Tokyo Subway Attacks I had to synthesize information from another of Watanabe’s works<sup>21,22</sup>. Each article is highly specialized given the size and implications of this topic so it requires combining multiple sources to approach a timeline of important stressing events. People would also reference the beliefs of Aum, but tracking down how specific elements of culture and religion interact was also difficult. With the exception of “Religion and violence in Japan today,” the most detail papers talk about their beliefs is yoga and Poa. This project is basically impossible to explain in its fullest since I have not documented the affects on Asahara himself or go into specific detail on their brainwashing techniques and cult indoctrination required to plain recruitment and operation. There was also a wealth of new religions popping up in Japan in this time, so further exploration into the landscape of religion and spiritualism in 1980’s Japan would help this essay. Although those topics would be useful, it would be impossible to fit all of the information to adequately cover these issues in this paper.

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21. Watanabe, “Reactions to the Aum Affair.”

22. Watanabe, “Religion and violence in Japan today.”

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# Appendix

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