

Media and its Role in the Development and Downfall of 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 1996¹. It was published in the 21st .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 “intellectuals² 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.

1. Watanabe 1997.

2. *Ibid.*, 33.

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

This source is a WIRED article in 1996³. 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 an Religious Cooperation in 1989 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. The cult was started by Asahara Shoko, birth-name Chizuo Matsumoto, who is believed to subject to *pseudologia phantastica*⁴, otherwise known as pathological lying. He later developed severe incarceration psychosis⁵ over the course of his trials before getting the death penalty. This psychiatric analysis supports how media and other religions effected Aum's actions and beliefs. Aum is an outstretch of a larger 'New Religion' wave in Japan, and was, in many ways, an offshoot of Agonshu⁶. During his time with Agonshu, he started to mix Buddhism

3. *The Cult at the End of the World* — WIRED 2019.

4. Olson 1999, 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

6. Watanabe 1998, 82,83.

and Yoga. Not Yoga like the activity of modern housewives, but one of the six schools of Hinduism. With his connection to Yoga, he chose Shiva as his main deity. For his own Buddhist practice, he went to Tantra Vajrayana which is a Tibetan esoteric Buddhism.

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 leader⁷. 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, a different sub-division of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. When someone is reincarnated based on their karma, or 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 Humans⁸. Aum also uses the idea of the Three Ages of Buddhism: shōbō, zōhō, and mappō. Shōbō is the period were Dharma, or behavior in accordance to the cosmic law, is at its highest, and Mappō, the Degenerate age, is were 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, he co-opted the idea of Poa, or phowa, from more violent esoteric Buddhist sects. Poa is a Tibetan term for the transference of consciousness, or, in other words, death. With a skilled enough practitioner could transfer a consciousness to a higher realm. Asahara weaponized this concept to make killing at the order of a spiritual leader, him, virtuous. They believed 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. Now Poa also serves the purpose of bringing the cleansing of Mappō, raising the Dharma of the new kingdom and

7. Metraux 1995, 1144.

8. Watanabe 1998, 83.

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 losers and rejects 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. These people were generally known for being anti-social nerds, and therefore, good for science. 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*⁹. 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^{10,11}, the disillusionment of the youth can be somewhat attributed the culture in post-WW2 Japan. Hiroki Azuma is a Japanese philosopher that separates post-war Japan into 3 periods: The Period of Ideals, The Period of Fictions, and The Period of Animals. The Period of Ideals is the pre-postmodern period where the grand cultural narratives are still intact. The Period of Fictions is the early postmodern period where the grand narrative is dissolving, but people still cling to their security. This is the point where the grand narrative started to fracture into

9. MacWilliams 2008.

10. *The Mike Toole Show - The Anime Cult* 2019.

11. *The Cult at the End of the World* — WIRED 2019.

smaller meta-narratives, this is also the period where *Space Battleship Yamato*, *Akira*, and *Mobile Suit Gundam* were made. This period started after the failed communist revolution¹². The Period of Animals, for Azuma, begins after the 1995 Sarin Gas attack, and represents the total decline of the grand narrative and people have moved on instead gaining meaning by choosing their story from the cultural ‘database’. Instead of beckoning in the new era of Shōbō, Aum marks the turning point to total postmodernization in Japan. The other anime which has aspects similar to Aum and also straddles the periods of Fictions and Animals is *Neon Genesis Evangelin*.

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^{13,14}.

Figure 1: Aum Manga



12. Kane 2016, 12.

13. *Aum Shinrikyo Anime* 2019.

14. *AUM animation SOSEIKI* 2019.

Figure 2: Harumagedon



Figure 2 and 1 are examples of Aum publications in three different styles of Manga. These types of materials emphasize Asahara's powers like Figure 1a which is a section from their story, *My Guru*, where they test his body for resistance, and, strangely, his body has none. 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. The second video, *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 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

The breakdown of Aum can be stated in thought of in four stages according to researcher Manabu Watanabe¹⁵.

3.2.1 1st Stage: Development (1984-1989)

The first stage was the formation from Aum Shinrikyō from his original Yoga group *Aum Shinsen no Kai*. This phase is before they have received any major attention as a religious organization.

3.2.2 2nd Stage: First Contact (1989-1990)

The second stage was the period where major criticisms started to arise. Their first major media exposure was in the *Sunday Mainichi* through a seven article series called “The Insanity of Aum Shinrikyō” in September of 1989¹⁶. This media attention had started just after they got their religious cooperation distinction. On October 2nd, they published a series of interviews with six families that claimed that Aum had stolen their kid from them, not kidnapped but brainwashed¹⁷. After these stories came out, the families of Aum monks started to band together into the Association of Aum Shinrikyō Victims under the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi. There was previously the Defense Counsel for Countermeasures to Damages from Aum Shinrikyō lead by Sakamoto which got absorbed into this new association. Sakamoto and his family disappeared on November 4th and assumed dead. Later, in September 1995, it was confirmed they were killed by Aum followers and their bodies were recovered. Beyond being the group's first killings, this event was important since it was the first use of PoA justified killings, a hallmark of Aum¹⁸. To add insult to injury, they bought

15. Watanabe 1997.

16. *Ibid.*, 35.

17. Hardacre 2007, 184.

18. Watanabe 1998, 89.

large plots of land in small villages around Kamikuishiki-mura in 1990. Similar to other communes like Rajneeshpuram for Osho, the locals were unhappy with these communes and large communities suddenly converging on their towns. The Association of Aum Shinrikyō Victims also came in and helped the locals voice anti-Aum sentiments. Another aspect of them bursting onto the scene was their attempt to get elected¹⁹. In February 1990, Asahara and twenty four other leaders inside Aum entered the general election under the Supreme Truth Party, created by Aum for this purpose, and all of their candidates failed. This sparked even greater distrust of the Japanese government.

19. Hardacre 2007, 187.

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