

Media and its Effect on Aum Shinrikyō

Simon Abrelat

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Contents

1	Evaluation of Sources	2
1.1	“Reactions to the Aum Affair”	2
1.2	<i>The Cult at the End of the World — WIRED</i>	3
2	Introduction To Aum	3
3	Media	4
3.1	Recruitment	4
3.2	Decline	7
4	Conclusion	9
5	Reflection	9
6	Bibliography	11

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 is 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. 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 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 a Religious Cooperation in 1989 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. The cult was started by Asahara Shoko, birth-name Chizuo Matsumoto. Aum is an outstretch of a larger ‘New Religion’ wave in Japan, and was an offshoot of Agonshu⁴. Asahara started to mix Buddhism and Yoga. Asahara took the basic ideas from Agonshu and synthesized them with other practices to create an approachable religion. He co-opted the idea of Poa from more violent esoteric Buddhist sects. Poa is a Tibetan term for the transference of

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

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

consciousness (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 had a revelation through Shiva when he reached the tenth realm of buddhahood. Shiva had told him that he would bring in a age of purity, 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 and purify the earth.

3 Media

3.1 Recruitment

In Japanese culture, the socially inept and isolated are the otaku. An otaku is so deeply interested in something to the point they are dysfunction. Stereotypical otaku were taken out of top universities. These are anti-social nerds that thrive in academic or scientific studies, but fail to live a complete life beyond that so resort to escapism in anime. 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*⁵. Given Asahara's blurring of reality and fiction, he drew parallels between these franchises and Aum.

Being the cultural scapegoat, otaku are often at fault. Beyond the over-sensationalized

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

news articles^{6,7}, the disillusionment of the youth can be effected by the culture in post-WW2 Japan and postmodernism in Japan. Capitalism and industrialization morphed the centuries old Japanese culture and narratives. 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. There are some Aum Anime^{8,9} that connect to these cultural narratives.

Figure 1: Aum Manga



6. *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>.

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

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

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

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. For example, Figure 1a is a manga called *My Guru* where they test his body for resistance and find nothing, showing his attunement. 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 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 1989¹⁰. 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 and brainwashed their kids¹¹. The families of Aum monks started to form the Association of Aum Shinrikyō Victims under the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsum. Sakamoto and his family disappeared on November 4th and assumed dead. In September 1995, It was confirmed they were killed by Aum and their bodies were recovered. Beyond being the groups first killings, this event was important since it was the first use of Poa justified killings¹². Sakamoto was opposing Aum’s expansion and decreasing Dharma by stopping them; therefore, using Poa to kill him would be saving him and increasing Dharma getting everyone closer to paradise. Aum’s goals of expansion came in buying large plots of land Kamikuishiki-mura in 1990 and entering the general election under ‘the Supreme Truth Part’¹³. All of these attempts were stopped by locals of The Association of Aum Shinrikyō Victims. All of their candidates failed and the legal battles for the land sewed a greater distrust of the Japanese government.

There were some anti-Aum publications, but they were receiving praise from religious scholars such as Shimada Hiromi and Nakazawa Shin’ichi¹⁴. 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) where Aum appeared to show a deeper knowledge of Buddhism. The biggest anti-Aum publications were done by Egawa Shōko which were largely ignored. The positive TV appearances and reviews outweighed the negative articles

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

11. 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>.

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

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

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

and media about Aum was generally positive. Religious and Television personalities such as Shimada Hiromi, Nakazawa Shini'chi, and Takeshi Kitano were warm to Aum. 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 agents¹⁵.

In 1993, they successfully synthesized Sarin, and, by 1994, had produced thirty liters of it. On June 27th 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, but none of the judges were killed. Yomiuri Shimbun published an article on January 1st stating that some residue of the Sarin was found near an Aum facility in Kamikuishiki-mura.

On February 28th Kariya Kiyoshi was abducted for trying to rescue his sister. The cult forced a confession from him, drugged, and killed him. This incident was another Poa killing and was the first investigation done on Aum by the police. The pressure on Aum was increasing much like the production of chemical weapons so an incident was inevitable. Aum followers started to hand out fliers for Asahara's new book *Disaster is Approaching the Land of the Rising Sun*. Asahara supposedly foretold the Hanshin Earthquake and talked about another disaster to befall Japan. On March 20th 1995, Aum sprayed Sarin in a coordinated attack on 15 Tokyo train stations. The largest incident being on the Hibiya line involving between 300-400 victims¹⁶. 12 people were killed and 3,796 were injured in the largest modern terrorist attack on Japanese soil.

15. Watanabe, "Religion and violence in Japan today," 91,92.

16. Kyle B. Olson, "Aum Shinrikyo: Once and Future Threat?," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 5, no. 4 (August 1999): 513, accessed January 17, 2019, doi:10.3201/eid0504.990409, https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/5/4/99-0409_article.

4 Conclusion

The story of Aum is that of violence and manipulation. They used a mixture of religions to gain wide spread appeal and use the media to target the downtrodden and ‘give them a voice’. Aum always had vocal antagonists, but eventually they gained enough power and exposure to become more publicly respected. With the mix between esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism, they justified all of their actions and only increased their fanaticism. The ability which Asahara had to tap into societal issues and weaponized them was impressive. The ability to twist fantasy and relate to connect anime and cultural narratives to religious action is unparalleled. Because of their ability to connect to people, Aum was able to gain popularity and become a unrivaled terroristic force in Japan.

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 historians run into was in what people chose to omit or neglect to mention. For example, in the 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^{17,18}. 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.

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

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

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. Any topic worth covering has a ridiculous amount of detail so it is a constant challenge to battle the specific research used to make a given point, and make sure intellectual integrity is maintained. 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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Appendix

List of Figures

1	Aum Manga	5
2	Harumagedon	6