

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

There first major media exposure was in the *Sunday Mainichi* through a seven article series called “The Insanity of Aum Shinrikyō” in September of 1989¹⁵. 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 brainwashed¹⁶. 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 Tsutsum. 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 groups first killings, this event was important since it was the first use of Poa justified killings, a hallmark of Aum¹⁷. To add insult to injury, they bought 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 elected¹⁸. 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.

There were some anti-Aum publications, but, as a whole, they were receiving praise from religious scholars such as Shimada Hiromi and Nakazawa Shin'ichi¹⁹. They also had a

15. Watanabe 1997, 35.

16. Hardacre 2007, 184.

17. Watanabe 1998, 89.

18. Hardacre 2007, 187.

19. Watanabe 1997, 38.

public debate with Kōfuku no Kagaku where Aum won and showed a deeper knowledge of Buddhism and Kōfuku no Kagaku were seen as being more surface level. 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 generally good period for Aum Shinrikyō. It was actually after this period when the series of attacks that Aum has been come to be known for took place. During this period, he had order a limited number of his disciples to start assembling AK-47 machine guns and begin working on the developing different nerve gas agents²⁰.

In 1993, they successfully synthesized Sarin, and, by 1994, has 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. 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 1st 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 28th 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. 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 20th 1995, Aum Shinrikyō sprayed Sarin gas in a coordinated attack on 15 Tokyo train stations. The largest attack being on

20. Watanabe 1998, 91,92.

the Hibiya line involving between 300-400 victims²¹. 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. Of course, all of the criticism cannot be leveled on assorted articles and essays, but it, undoubtedly, played a role.

5 Reflection

The hardest part of this essay is preventing scope creep. In reading a source they would hint at some other aspect like the specifics of the history of esoteric Buddhism. In general, the information is reliable since all of the events happened with a large number of people recently. There are some questions on if the cult had gotten a small nuclear or dirty device, but the evidence on that is dubious at best. 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

21. Olson 1999, 513.

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^{22,23}. 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.

22. Watanabe 1997.

23. Watanabe 1998.

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