

# 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: The Rise of the ‘Anti-Cult’ Movement in Japan.”

“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 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 reevaluated” Aum Shinrikyō, and finally, the fourth is the gas attacks to their downfall<sup>2</sup>. 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

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1. Manabu 1997.

2. Ibid., 33.

with culture at large for an academic conference.

## **1.2 “Aum’s Shoko Asahara and the Cult at the End of the World”**

This source is a WIRED article in 1996. 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, that 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 Bibliography

Kaplan, David E., and Andrew Marshall. 1996. “Aum’s Shoko Asahara and the Cult at the End of the World.” *WIRED* (July). <https://www.wired.com/1996/07/aum/>.

Manabu, Watanabe. 1997. “Reactions to the Aum Affair: The Rise of the ‘Anti-Cult’ Movement in Japan.” In *Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, 1996*, vol. 21. Nanzan Institute for Religion / Culture, November.

### 3 Appendix