

Media and its Role in the Development and Downfall of Aum Shinrikyō

Simon Abrelat

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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. Manabu 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, 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 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 contemporary activity of housewives, but one of the sixes 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 Bibliography

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Appendix