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Author(s)	前川, 理子; Maekawa, Michiko
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Syncretism in Japanese New Religions : The Case of Aum Shinrikyo and Aleph

Michiko Maekawa

1. Introduction

It is often argued that there is a religious pluralism in Japan (e.g. Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity) and syncretism has traditionally been one of the general features of Japanese religious culture. Most Japanese new religious movements are also recognized to share in this character. In this paper, however, instead of construing it in terms of the traditional or cultural climate of Japan, I will examine how syncretism appears in various dimensions of a religious movement. This paper focuses on syncretism within Aum Shinrikyo¹, particularly in relationship to its pragmatic nature and charismatic leadership. After briefly reviewing studies of NRMs relevant to this discussion, I will explain some of the changes surrounding syncretism that have occurred within this movement since it faced the major crisis referred to as the "Aum affair" in 1995.

2. Syncretism, Pragmatism and Charismatic leadership: in the NRMs and Aum

(1) NRMs as offshoots of the cultic milieu

Amongst a large literature on the NRMs, the studies to be looked at first here are those on their emergence. Campbell, who is one of the first to treat this area of concern sociologically, refers to the "cultic milieu".

He describes it as "much broader, deeper and historically based than the contemporary movement known as the underground, it includes all deviant

belief-systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligence and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded, despite its apparent diversity, as constituting a single entity- the entity of the cultic milieu." [Campbell 1972:122].

NRMs typically emerge around eclectic syntheses of doctrines and practices available in the prevailing cultic milieu either spontaneously or around a charismatic figure [Wallis1974:325]. In Japan, a similar cultic setting has appeared most recently in the 1980s. It is better known in Japan as the "seishin sekai" or spiritual world. Many new religious movements emerged from this milieu [Shimazono1992]. NRMs that developed during and after the 1980s are referred to by Japanese scholars as "neo new religions" while movements from earlier periods are simply called "new" religions². The former shares some of the characteristics attributed to the NRMs in the West, including patterns of emergence, leadership, organizational development, and membership.

Aum Shinrikyo, founded in the mid-1980s, shares some of the characteristics mentioned above. The founder, Shoko Asahara, and most of his followers were floaters in the milieu, coming in and out of peripheral religious associations. Asahara was a highly recognized seeker in the milieu. He was visible through the underground cultic magazines such as "the Moo" and "the Twilight Zone". He started a movement with the admirers who gathered around him. They ran a yoga circle where members were recruited

and lived in a Sangha (a commune of seekers, who left home in order to devote themselves fully to their practice).

While they started in a small apartment room, the movement grew and acquired various properties, including some large building facilities. The group was registered with the government as a religious corporation in 1989, and at the time there were about 300 *shukkeshas* (those full-time devotees who had “renounced the world” and join the monastic community).

(2) Syncretism and pragmatism in Aum

Syncretism in Aum consisted in a synthesis from the variety of religious tenets and practices that were available in the cultic milieu, including the historical religions, esoteric and occult traditions in the East and the West³, and elements from the New Age and other religious subcultures in Japan. For instance, Asahara and his followers were attracted to the image of fighting warriors that showed in Japanese SF animations such as *the Cosmic Battleship Yamato* and *the Ultra-men*.

In the early years, emphasis was placed on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. These diverse traditions were not viewed as separate, but unified by their common interest in bodily training through ascetic practices (yoga, breathings, meditation techniques etc.). Shimazono[1995] pointed the influence of Agonshu, a new religious movement that Asahara previously affiliated, on Asahara's early belief-systems. Of many things Asahara learned from Agonshu, what attracted him most was the theory and practice of yoga. He learned about the awakening of kundalini (original life force), the chakras and curriculum for the development of psychic powers.

As the movement developed, the concept of karma and transmigration in

Buddhism, apocalyptic ideas and beliefs about an impending war that would bring history to its conclusion were added to the mix. Using the words from the Revelation of St. John the Divine and Nostradamus's prophecy, and underground stories about conspiracy between freemasonry and capitalist Americans, they talked over a war against them and evil existences in light of martial gods from late Indian esotericism.

Some observers may describe syncretism in Aum as obscure and changeable according to the time and circumstances. But it is not inconsistency that governs the religion. It is pragmatism that works as a foundation of their eclecticism. Pragmatism, a frame of reference that is based on verifiable experiences, stands out most in the Eastern oriented new religions like Aum. In such religions, personal transformations through ascetic trainings are pragmatically sought after⁴. Led by this, religious items are compiled around practical experiences.

A good example is Aum's usage of the Buddhist conception of karma. Using it uniquely as in "karma exchange", Asahara interpreted the concept in his own way. It is based on his own experiences during practicing initiations. He claimed that he assimilated the person whom he provided an initiation for and sensuously understood the state of his/her mind and body through energy exchange. However, a lower state of mind and body that the follower was in effected on that of Asahara's mind and body and adhered to them. This process was considered that Asahara shouldered the follower's bad karma. Asahara remained in poor condition until he "cast the bad karma off" while the follower's condition was "pulled up". He interpreted this, using his familiar term of Buddhism, as an exchange of karma. Here, karma was considered as exchangeable between two or more persons through the flaw of

energy, which was expressed in his teaching as a doctrinal formula of “karma=energy exchange”. While consistency in theology may be desired to some extent, it is not a first priority.

In Aum, the decision about what would be included in the belief system had been yielded into the hands of Asahara. This was consistent with the pragmatic orientation of the members, which involved evaluation of leaders on the basis of empirical evidence. Absolute trust in the founder was established because he led the way in ascetic training, manifested various mystical powers, and had already experienced the liberation taught in the Buddhist scriptures. As one young female member told me:

“A Shaktipat initiation⁵ that the Master provided me was terrific. I sensed the energy filled up in me and the fevers went on for a couple of days after that. I got real into Aum. I started ascetic training following instructions and I experienced just as are said by the Master. I know that Aum is the “Truth”. We all know that...we have confirmed it with our own experiences.”

Here, ironically, the members’ individual demands were in balance with submission. Their “epistemological individualism,”⁶ a notion I am borrowing from Wallis [1975], coexisted with authoritarianism—although the two seem incompatible. Pragmatism brings them into harmony.

It was believed that Asahara raised the truth from the dead traditions of religions in the world, the truth of which any religion must hold to some extent. For this reason, the eclecticism did not have negative meaning and was regarded as inclusive of all elements that should be a part of the True Religion of practice.

(3) Charismatic leadership in Aum

The roles that Asahara played in the movement are ideal-typically distinguished into four categories.

(a) an exemplary seeker. He was a senior practitioner in line of what they believed to be the essential Buddhism, and advised juniors in the group. He finally claimed that he accomplished a spiritual liberation, becoming a Buddha.

(b) a *guru* or a religious teacher. He presented himself as a good transmitter or interpreter of the great tradition. He clarified the disciples' confusions occurring in their spiritual quest and evaluated their growth.

(c) a prophet and later a living god. He conveyed religious messages of the God Shiva (the god of destruction in Hinduism; Aum's main image of worship) and other numerous gods from Hindu mythology and from the Buddhist scriptures. Later on, he had gone so far as to identify himself with the Shiva.

(d) a world savior. He made himself a savior, a Christ. He took over pains and agony of the followers through initiations he practiced for them. He claimed that the initiations took positive energy from him and absorbing negative energy and karma from the receiver, and had severe effects on him. It was believed that Asahara sacrificed himself for disciples and thus he was called a "Christ". This image of him was extended as he came to be regarded as the savior of the world.

New roles took precedence over earlier ones as time passed. Asahara's charisma was affirmed through various sorts of initiations, manifestations of his healing power and miracles that he showed before the members. In 1984, when he started a yoga school, he had already practiced Shaktipat rites. But at

this time it was not yet called an “initiation”, implying a religious meaning, and his primary role was a senior or a guide (a). It was after he met Dalai Lama and another high priest of Tibetan Buddhism in 1987 and 1988 that he began presenting himself as a religious *guru* with every confidence in it (b).

In the preceding years, he claimed his achievement of an ultimate liberation (July 1986), and named his group religiously, Aum Shinrikyo (July 1987). “Shinrikyo” conveys in Japanese a “religion of the truth”. In the beginning of 1987, Asahara declared a new direction of Mahayana for the movement, expressing a new emphasis on the salvation of others as a religious movement.

The idea of himself as a savior had been growing through the initiation practices that required Asahara’s self-sacrifice of power and spiritual energy. It was manifested, along with the idea of the end of the world and salvation on a large scale’, in the publication of four volume books titled “Declaring Myself the Christ” during 1991 to 1993 (d).

As the movement developed further, he came up with a thought that he was a contemporary embodiment of Shiva or a living god. Utilizing the logic of Vajrayana in late esoteric Buddhism, which requires absolute devotion to a guru, his deeds and words became the Law and the Sacred Text (c). In July 1994 the “Vajrayana Textbook”, which included his talks and sermons delivered during 1988 to 1994 were distributed to shukkeshas. This came to be most important to learn of all the texts of Aum.

In sum, as the charismatic founder gained growing power, the extent of syncretism increased and fell under the control of the founder.

3. From Syncretism to the Orthodoxy: After Losing the Charisma

As is explained so far, syncretism in Aum was conditioned both by the pragmatism of members and by charismatic authority. It ended up with an unstable theology that continually changed according to the charismatic leader's tastes and desires in varying circumstances.

Now we turn to look at what happened when the charismatic leader was lost in the movement in and after 1995. Asahara was arrested soon after he and his leading disciples carried out a gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in March 1995. Losing the leader of the movement, those who remained in power at first attempted to replace Asahara with his three and five year old sons. This turned out to be unsuccessful. Internal discord around Asahara's six children caused a scandal. And social criticism against the Asahara family frustrated their attempt, although the members firmly believed in their natural charisma as direct descendants. They finally had to announce in public in order to continue the movement that it became detached from Asahara and his family members.

During this time, the group adopted a new orientation much closer to the orthodox Buddhist tradition. In a 1996 interview, a male member in his forties explained his position as follows:

"I am and has been from the very beginning, a Buddhist *shugyosha*...just pursuing my spiritual growth according to the Buddhist teachings. Nothing actually has changed between before and after the incident. I'm here with Aum just because I fairly think that this is the best place to conduct my training...they are highly experienced and have accumulated empirical knowledge. We need proper guidance from them avoiding risks that ascetic training accompanies. I would not hesitate to leave if there was better place

where the true Buddhism is put into practice.”

The claim of Aum as a group of sincere Buddhists was noticeable among the members during this time of confusion. Aum’s spokesman at the time complained, “The media reports are too biased. They take up on Aum’s teachings related Armageddon or freemasonry thing, but Aum is above all a Buddhist group. I don’t deny some of the members are attracted to Armageddon or other motifs in Aum, but most of us are just earnest Buddhists...you know, we’ve got credit with Tibetan Buddhist leaders. But they never report this.”

These two statements show well the way they coped with the crisis. They attempt to detach themselves from the motifs that seemed to deviate from what they believed to be orthodox Buddhism. This modification can be understood as an endeavor to re-identify the religion of their own independently from Asahara’s personal charms. This is in stark contrast to the views expressed by a leading disciple before the incident occurred. “Ascetic training within Aum,” he explained, “is rooted in the conviction that Asahara, as the Guru, is the source of our spiritual energy and our religious training is nothing more than the practice of the methods provided by him”.

On the premises, theological miscellany had hardly been a crucial issue. The charismatic power that Asahara personally held was guarantee of the religion as a whole. After losing Asahara, however, as we have seen above they transferred the grounds of legitimacy from personal charisma to the orthodox ideology in order to sustain the religion. They started deliberate studies of the Buddhist scriptures in the original Pali language⁸, and declared that the teachings of Aum should be examined and reorganized according to the research.

Similarly, the theme of personal growth aimed at spiritual liberation that had been central in the earliest years of the movement was reemphasized and the world-saving motif was downplayed. This was in accord with their interpretation of orthodox Buddhism. Under Asahara's charismatic leadership, dedication to a collective goal gained more emphasis than the earlier focus on individual salvation. In their monastic life the "works" which were associated with activities aimed at serving collective purposes were considered to have priority. The "works" included various activities from daily duties at his/her post to manufacturing guns or poisonous gas and other criminal activities. All these were given sacred meaning as the realization of the God's will—where Asahara was equated with God.

The "works" were deprived of a sacred meaning with the arrest of their charismatic leader and members started to re-identify themselves as personal seekers. In their new circumstances, their communal life does not have any special meaning *per se*. It is simply understood as a matter of convenience for individuals to share facilities and utilities.

These changes were brought by the loss of the charisma. Before Asahara's arrest, it was his personal charms that legitimated the righteousness of the religion. Without Asahara, the movement required some alternative form of legitimation. Many members sought this by representing themselves as serious practitioners of a well-known and respected religion. It is also aimed at dodging the social criticism that Aum is not a religion but a terrorist group⁹.

4. Conclusion

The argument of this paper has been that a theological pattern in religion—

from syncretism to dogmatic orthodoxy—is closely related to attitudes regarding practice and the type of leadership in the movement. This process was considered through an examination of the reorientation in Aum following the “Aum affaire”.

Their theological reorientation from a religious syncretism to the Buddhist orthodoxy after the arrest of the founder is relevant to the shift that occurred in the grounds of legitimacy: from personal charisma to religious traditionalism. The change was triggered immediately by the incident. It was required strategically to distract public criticisms, but also to resolve the confusion in the minds of those who remained in the movement and faced a serious identity crisis.

NRMs after a loss of the charismatic leader in most chances are to be reabsorbed into the cultic milieu [Hammond and Machacek1993:99]. However, Aum, which has been undergoing severe and continuous conflicts with a society at large, is an exceptional case. In extreme cases, social surveillance on ex-Aum members prevents them from disaffiliating. Some of them cannot but stay in Aum, holding doubts.

In the future, Aum will most likely continue as a voluntary group of personal seekers centering their religious life on Buddhist precepts and practices. Another possibility, however, has recently emerged. One of Asahara’s closest disciples who was released from jail in December 1999 assumed official leadership of Aum in January 2002. He is greatly respected and admired by current members and is considered to be the first to take over the founder’s position¹⁰. It appears that there is some chance that the movement could be centered around this new charismatic leader in the near future. It is impossible to predict how this movement will evolve, but the

ongoing study of Aum provides a unique opportunity to deepen out understanding of the relationship between syncretism and charisma.

Endnote

- (1) They changed the name to Aleph in 2000. But I will use "Aum" for Aum Shinrikyo and Aleph for convenience.
- (2) "New religions" are those organized before the 1980s, but it is called "new" as opposed to established historical religions. But in this paper, I use the term "new religious movement" for the Japanese "neo new religions".
- (3) The cosmology of Aum owes much to that of the Theosophy.
- (4) It is particularly the case with Aum in its early stage, when the awakening of kundalini was the central pillar of its religious praxis.
- (5) The Shaktipat initiation was one of Aum's rituals that were aimed at helping the followers achieve the higher spiritual state. Through this rite, spiritual energy was directly transferred from Asahara in order to awake the kundalini of the receiver.
- (6) Wallis characterizes a cult primarily by the "epistemological individualism"; the locus of authority is the individual participant who may select from a variety of cultic practices and beliefs according to personal taste and desire. In Aum, personal judgments have a pragmatic nature.
- (7) "The Doomsday" and "the Great Prophecy of Nostradamus" published in 1989 and 1991 treated with this theme.
- (8) Throughout the movement, they paid good attention to the Agama (the sutras of early Buddhism). But it came to be less thought of as the Vajrayana doctrine (that implies that the words of guru is the Laws) was put forward.
- (9) It must be noted, however, that an Asahara cult comprised of some extremists still exists.
- (10) Up to the present, at least four members have newly been recognized as having achieved a *joju* (a higher spiritual stage), and holy names (as a sign of spiritual achievement) were awarded to them by this new leader. Before the incident, however, it was the principle that only the guru Asahara was able to do so.

* This paper is based on the research done from 1996 to 2002. Some new changes have occurred in the movement after 2002, which is not in full reflected upon this paper.

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