Media and religion in Japan: the Aum affair as a turning point

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Abstract

This paper analyses the relationship between media and the so-called "new religions' (*shinshūkyō*) in Japan. The sarin gas attack on the Tokyo metropolitan subway by members of the Aum Shinrikyō in 1995 was an important turning point in the relationship between media and religions in Japan. In order to avoid harsh criticism new religion groups discontinued big events and massive advertising campaigns. Television broadcasts on new religions were stopped and, between 1996 and 1999, news concerning these groups was very limited. Twelve years after the attacks, groups are considering new ways to use the media, because the past strategies based on advertising and mass events are no longer possible. The re-definition of the media-religion relationship involves a re-construction of religious groups' identity. As an example, this paper will focus on Agonshū and Kōfuku no kagaku and their media strategies during the last 20 years. The present analysis is based on fieldwork I did in Japan in 2003-2004 and 2005-2007, interviewing religious groups' media representatives and attending ceremonies, workshop and religious festivals.

Introduction

The analysis of the relationship between Japanese New Religions (*shinshūkyō*)[i] and society in contemporary Japan needs to take into account the role of media in both shaping public discourse about religion and in (re)creating religious groups' image and identity. On the one hand, since an article about the religious group *Tenrikyō* was published on 1895 by the magazine *Taiyō*[ii]*,* the media, in particular the press and later television, become an important source of information about new religious movements. Usually defined as *shinkō shūkyō*, "newly-arisen religions" or "newly-established religions" --expressions implying a pejorative nuance (Astley 2006; Shimazono 1990) -- new religious movements tend to be criticized by the media[iii], unlike the so-called "established" religions or "traditional" religious practices that are not often presented as more "positive" or associated with a general *Japanese culture* or *tradition* (Dorman 2001; Reader & Dorman 2007). Furthermore, during the 1970's, Japanese media played an important role in the creation of a "religious boom" (*shūkyō būmu*) and an "occult boom" (*okaruto būmu*) involving in particular the young generation, as a reaction to the modern industrialized society and a critique of the limits of science and technology (Haga & Kisala, 1995).

On the other hand, massive use of media communication and image strategies are considered important characteristics of new religious movements. For instance, a group called Ōmoto in 1908 published the first religious magazine, called Honkyō kōshū. The same group in 1920 bought an Osaka newspaper, the *Taishō nichinichi shinbun*, published a magazine in Esperanto language called *Ōmoto* in 1925 and opened its own publishing house in 1931. For the groups founded from the second half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the publication of leaders' teaching played an important role in the process of *institutionalisation*: through the written form, the oral messages of the *charismatic founders* (*kyōso*) become a more fixed doctrine and were transformed in *sacred texts*, sources of legitimation.

> Lorsque le group religieux accroît le nombre de ses fidèles et que son rayonnement dépasse les frontières villageoises, s'opère, souvent, un travail de réécriture des premiers écrits (réajustement du message en fonction de l'échéance messianique, mais aussi réorientation du mouvement dont les premiers écrits peuvent être, alors

purement et simplement supprimés). Une attention très vive est portée a la forme légitime du discours écrit, devenu, a fil du temps, « écriture sacrée » et source de valorisation, par la mise en perspective avec une tradition revendiquée.

(Berthon & Kashio 2000: 72)

Book and magazine publication is still an important activity for new religious movements. New publications are promoted with massive advertising campaign and public events; bookstores have section devoted to leaders' publications which often appear in best-sellers rankings. The first group starting advertising its publications during the 1940's was Seichō no ie, a group founded in 1930 as a publishing house and registered under the Religious Juridical Persons Law (*shūkyō hōjin hō*) in 1949. The group was also called "*the publisher religion*" (*shuppan shūkyō*) and the founder, Taniguchi Masaharu, a former member of Ōmoto, clearly stated the importance of press, radio and television in the diffusion of his teaching (Iwasa 1994; Ishii 1990: 331).

As far as radio and television are concerned, Tenrikyō started the first radio broadcast in 1935, but most religious groups started their programmes after World War Two. In 1962 the same group started a TV program called *hito-mono-koto*, which ended in 1988. In general, however, the presence of new religious movements in TV programs is limited. According to Ishii (1990) reasons could be ascribed to both economics factors and restrictive rules for broadcasting on religious issues. During the 1990's, however, TV talk shows often invited new religious groups' leaders as guests (see further).

The relationship between media and religion that I have briefly outlined above changed on March 20, 1995 when a nerve gas believed to be sarin was released in Tokyo metropolitan subway and the members of a religious group called Aum shinrikyō were accused of organizing the attack. The *Aum affair* (*Oumu jiken*) is considered an important turning point in Japanese religious studies, religious movements social perceptions, and, more specifically, in the relationship between new religious movements and society (Kisala & Mullins 2001). As far as this paper is concerned, the year 1995 was an important turning point in the relationship between the media and religion in Japan.

In particular, the main responsibility for the subway attack was immediately attributed to the charismatic leader Shōkō Asahara's (born Chizuo Matsumoto) influence upon his victims/followers. Subsequently, religious leaders, particularly those of new religions, were harshly accused of "brainwashing". Following the attack, journalists and lawyers began talking in term of "cults" and "brain control" (Takahashi 1995; Nishida 1995; Takimoto & Nagaoka 1995) in defence of former followers. Anti-Aum shinrikyō groups were formed and several texts published by American anti-sect movements were translated into Japanese.[iv]

Before the attack, being a small-scale group, Aum Shinrikyō had not been extensively studied. These caused a lot of criticism against Japanese scholars after the attack. In fact, as explained by Helen Hardacre:

> Besides the media coverage the reported Aum's various scrapes with the law since 1989 and mostly since the subway attack, Aum's own publications, a couple of "istant books" rushed out after the police investigation began, and a single book by investigate reporter Egawa Shōko, no literature of volume or substance on Aum had been available. […] In the absence of academic research, scholars, no less than general public, were heavily dependent upon media representation for their understanding of this religion and then nerve gas attack.
> (Hardacre 2007:173)

At the same time, the media were accused of letting the group and its leaders' imposing personalities use and manipulate them. Indeed, the group used the media not only for promoting its image with publications, spectacular events and advertising campaign but also to reply to criticism and to claim legitimate authority (Reader & Dorman 2007). According to Richard Gardner:

> The history of Aum Shinrikyō cannot be written without continual reference to questions concerning the relation of religion and media. The growth of Aum, for instance, might be charted by tracing Aum's development of a range of media forms (books, magazines, audiotapes, *anime* [animated films], *manga*, radio broadcasts, homepages, ect.) for use both in proselytising and religious practice. Much of Aum's teachings might also be viewed as a recycled version of images, ideas, and notions circulated in a variety of forms by the mass-media (Gardner 2001:133).

For several months after the attack, around until the end of 1995, Aum shinrikyō-related issues continued to receive extensive coverage on newspaper and TV news programs.[v] Then, in 1996 the television broadcasts on new religions decreased and between 1996 and 1999 news concerning these groups were very limited.

At the same times, groups decreased their big public events and massive advertising campaigns in order to avoid harsh criticism. Suddenly, these religious groups seemed to disappear from view.

Twelve years after the attacks, and after the Aum's leader has been sentenced to death, there seems to be a new upsurge of broadcasting of religious matters and of religious advertising. Also, the groups that chose to become "closed" after 1995 are now showing a new open attitude toward non-members, media and scholars. At the same time, the groups are considering new ways to use the media, because the past strategies based on advertising and public events are no longer possible. The aim would be that of re-creating the image of new religions to erase the negative and "dangerous" image still lingering in the media and popular culture. For example, in 2006 a manga called *karisuma* (charisma) was published by Futabasha and based on the novel by Shindo Fuyuki published in 2003-2004. With extremely gloomy and violent images, the manga introduces the story of a young woman and her involvement with religious groups founded by a violent leader using cohercitive and punitive methods with his follower.

Furthermore, the re-definition of media-religion relationship entails a re-construction of identity. New religious groups must distance themselves from Aum Shinrikyō, as they construct an identity as a "not-Aum" group. For these reasons, it is important to understand that the media strategies of religions in Japan must be examined in terms of the period before, and the period after, the events of 1995.

In the last few years some work has been published about the relationship between media and Aum Shinrikyō and about how media changed their representation of religion after the attack (Hardacre 1997; Reader 2000; Dorman 2001; Gardner 2001; Watanabe 2005; Reader & Dorman 2007; Hardacre 2007). However, very little research has been done on how religious groups changed their uses of media communication and their ways of (re)presentations through the media after the 1995. To start filling this gap in scholarship, this paper examines the development of media-religion relationship of two religions movements, Kōfuku no kagaku and Agonshū.

Kōfuku no kagaku and Agonshū are not the biggest new religious movements in Japan, but they are significant examples in a discourse concerning media and religion for mainly three reasons. Firstly of all, they can be considered the most self-conscious groups when it comes to media communication strategies. Secondly, both of them received a significant negative publicity after the subway attack in 1995. Kōfuku no kagaku was strongly critical of Aum Shinrikyō and its activities (Kisala 2001) and the two leaders were considered "rivals", but at the same time the two groups shared similar characteristics: young leaders, extensive use of media and large numbers of well-educated young people as members. As for Agonshū, Shoko Asahara, the founder of Aum Shinrikyō, was a former member of the group and Aum's doctrine was strongly influenced by the founder of Agonshū, Kiriyama and his teaching. Thirdly -and most importantly for the aim of this paper- both Kōfuku no kagaku and Agonshū undertook significant changes in their media and image strategies after 1995.

Kōfuku no kagaku: (re)creating group image through the media
The group was founded in 1986 by Ōkawa Ryūhō (born Nakagawa Takashi) and in 1991 was granted official recognition under the Religious Juridical Persons Law.
From a doctrinal standpoint, the group changed from a "research group on human happiness" to a more marked Buddhist identity. Ōkawa's teaching syncretically draws from Buddhism, Christianity, the European philosophy, Greek mythology and new religious movements. The group's beliefs focus on divine spirits existing at various level of a multi-dimensional universe. Ōkawa is believed to be the reincarnation of a supreme divine spirit, which they have named El Cantare.

While never introducing specific novelties in terms of organizational structure and of expansion strategies, Kōfuku no Kagaku managed to select the techniques which had proved more useful among the experiences of previous groups. At the organizational level, for example, the group implemented a rigid hierarchical structure and a system of exams as in Sōkagakkai; then the group organizes vast public events (as GLA) video transmissions, large festivals and advertising campaigns (as Agonshū), and focused on text publication methods (as Seichō no ie). The group combined these techniques and organizational structure with a "commercial" approach to religion,

based on the blending of characteristics specific to corporate structures with those of religious groups[vi]. Because of its charismatic leadership (Ōkawa Ryūhō is the first leader of a new religion to have graduated from the law faculty of the prestigious public university of Tokyo, and is one of the wealthiest men in the country)[vii], its organization (the structure of the group is that of a "religious corporation" which aims at "selling happiness to its faithful-clients")[viii], and doctrine (a specific approach to work, seen as a means of spiritual growth), Kōfuku no Kagaku is a unique example among new Japanese religions. Furthermore, Kōfuku no Kagaku also has a unique relation with the media: not only during its rapid growth, but also in its moments of crisis the group's fate can be seen as resting on this relation.

The history of the group from its foundation down to the present day can be divided in three main periods, during the course of which new strategies in the use of media communication followed substantial organizational and doctrinal changes[ix]. The first period (1986-1991) might broadly be defined as a "planning" stage, when Kōfuku no Kagaku developed the bases of its structure and the role of its leader. This is a particularly important period, because it set up both the organizational and executive core, composed of the most convinced and trained followers, and the kind of strategies of expansion and promotion, which were to determine the future of Kōfuku, no Kagaku. In this first period, the group founded its publishing house and started publishing the leader's books.

The official recognition granted in 1991 represented a turning point in both group's doctrine and organization. The period from 1991 to 1995-6 can be seen as the peak of the expansion and visibility of the group and the members increase rapidly (Astley 1995: 352-354). On the one hand, this success was due to specific doctrinal and organizational choices, and, on the other hand, to an effective media campaign centred on the figure of its leader. It is in this period, and particularly in the two years 1991 and 1992, that the group underwent the most radical changes in terms of its doctrine, which became more markedly Buddhist, and turned its leader, previously seen as a teacher, into the reincarnation of the chief deity, known as El Cantāre. The radical change in doctrine and leader's image was carefully planned and presented through the media.

Between March and July 1991, the group hired Dentsū[x], one of the best known advertising companies of Japan, for an expensive advertising campaign. The aim of the campaign was to promote two books published by the Kōfuku no Kagaku press and attributed to Ōkawa Ryūhō: *Nosutoradamusu senritsu no keiji* (The terrifying revelations of Nostradamus) and *Arā no daikeikoku* (The great warning of Allah). Later, the group advertised the works *Eien no budda* (The Eternal Buddha) and the event *Kyōsō otanjō kinensai* (Commemoration for the birth of the founder). The campaign, defined "Megaton Campaign" by the press and even compared to the campaign for the presidential elections in the United States (Iwasa 1993:133) was designed as a run up to Ōkawa's birthday in July of that year. At his birthday party, which was held at Tokyo Dome with more than 30,000 people in attendance, he first announced to his followers that he was the reincarnation of Jesus, Buddha and El Cantāre.

It was at this time that Kōfuku no kagaku came under increasingly harsh criticism from scholars, the mainstream media and other religious groups (Yakushi'in 1991; Yonemoto & Shimada 1992). The culmination of these attacks resulted in what was called *kōdansha jiken, or The Kōdansha Affair*. This was a very high profile legal action brought about by the group after its members felt liabled by articles written in Kodansha publications, in particular *Friday* and *Genzai* magazines (Astely 1995; Baffelli 2007).

The group was first accused to resemble more to a "company" than a religious group (*Sukora* 23 May 1991: 60-63) and its example used to confirm a "dangerous" trend in Japan's "return to religion" (Berthon 1991: 33-36). Then, the critics focused on leader's image provoking a group violent reaction (Astley 1995:370-371). Members started demonstrations against the publishing house and in September 1991 they blocked the telephones lines of Kōdasha offices for five days by sending protest faxes. The group published a few texts against the publishing house, such as *Kibō no kakumei* (The Hope Revolution) and some members founded the National Associations for the Victims of Friday Magazine (*Kōdansha Furaidē zenkoku higaisha no kai*). The legal suit ended in 1995.

In the same period, in 1991, Aum Shinrikyō using of media took a new turn and the group started used the computer communication technology launching a private network and a discussion forum on Fujitsu's Nifty serve (Watanabe 2005:47).

Furthermore in September 28, 1991 Kōfuku no Kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō appeared in a live debate on a TV show called "Live TV until morning" (*Asa made nama terebi*) during a program on "Young people, Religion and the Age". Ōkawa refused to attend the debate and Kōfuku no kagaku members seemed to have some difficulties in explaining their Buddhist teaching. Conversely, the Aum Shinrikyō's members were considered more prepared about theological issues:

> The impression received by most people through this programme was that Kōfuku no kagaku lacked appeal, that there was almost no difference between the common Japanese ethos and its teachings, and that although it claimed to be faithful to the Buddhist teachings its believers were quite ignorant of them. On the other hand, Aum Shinrikyō came across as presenting a deeper understanding of Buddhism, even though it had been regarded as an antisocial group. It was quite obvious that Aum Shinrikyō had won this round in its rivalry against Kōfuku no kagaku.
> (Watanabe 2001: 92)

As a result of the *Kodansha affair* and the subsequent risk of instability, the third period (from the mid 1990s to the present) can be seen as an adjustment phase of the group, now attempting to reach stability both from the point of view of its identity – by more rigorously systematizing its doctrine – and of its image – by establishing fixed places of cult, in the form of identifiable "sacred" buildings. This phase also coincides with the beginning of the use of *new media*, and with an increase in activities of overseas expansion.

At present, the most popular media format used by Kōfuku no kagaku is the press. The leader published over 400 books, some of which are also available in comic-strip format, or *manga*, through the group's own publishing company, IRH shuppan, which was legally separated from the religious group in 1991. These books are often among the most widely read, and a few large bookshops have shelves exclusively devoted to Kōfuku no kagaku publications (Astley 1995: 350). The group also publishes six magazines in Japanese and one in English.

Besides printed material, between 1994 and 2006, the group also released five animated films, or *anime*, based on its leader's writings, which were distributed by Toei and shown at mainstream cinemas throughout the country[xi]. As far as other

media are concerned, by 1992 Kōfuku no kagaku-inspired music had appeared on store shelves. CDs and videos with speeches by Ōkawa also became available.

After the end of the civil suit with Kodansha and after the Aum affair in 1995, Ōgawa effectively left the scene, and started appearing on video. Occasionally, he attends training courses for ministers and other high-ranking leaders of the group or shows up, by surprise, at one of Kōfuku no kagaku's designated sacred places. He is the only leader of a new Japanese religion who has chosen to no longer appear in public. To this day, the leader of the group only speaks to his followers through books, magazine articles and the videos he regularly sends to various branches, and which are shown to the believers during ceremonies, exam courses and training meetings. The setting of these videos can hardly be identified in terms of its specific location. It is reminiscent of an office, or a study room of one of the group's branches; the leader appears behind a desk or a bookstand, and speaks through a microphone. The neutral background only shows the symbol of the group.

According to its followers,the reason why the leader left the public scene is to be found in the excessive amount of energy required to sustain a public conference before such a vast number of people, or in the fear that such emotionally enthralling events might give way to episodes of religious fanaticism[xii]. However, the choice made by the leader can actually be attributed to other factors, such as the attention paid by the media to religious leaders following the *Aum jiken*. The first critiques were centred on the excessively imposing personality of some of the leaders and on their exhibitionism, fuelled by frequent apparitions on TV. By leaving the public scene, Ōkawa, who despite his harsh campaign against Asahara's group was considered just as dangerous a charismatic leader, managed to avoid criticism and to make his presence less noticeable. Besides, one can argue that the leader's choice was also influenced by a number of elements inherent in the image and structure of the group. The *mediatisation* (Boni 2002) of the leader's body, achieved by means of the advertising campaign and of the media events of the early 1990s, exposed the leader to an attack, which aimed at discrediting and belittling him. If, "the aura of the leader suffers as much as that of an artwork in the age of its technical reproducibility" (Boni 2002:37), his weaknesses grow in the face of the increasingly intimate critiques levelled at his person, and of competition, namely other religious groups, which can

easily replace a weak figure with a new *leader-product*. In order to preserve the leader's authority, it is not enough merely to safeguard him from attacks against his *backstage space* (Goffman 1961) making a mystery of his private life or romanticizing his biography, but it might in fact become necessary to completely withdraw his physical body from scrutiny.

The ultimate answer lies in the *virtualisation* of the leader's body (Boni 2002). The *charismatic authority* (in weberian acceptation) emerging from the direct contact between the leader and his followers is lost, even though the leader is still alive, while his figure becomes perfect, immaterial, *semi-divine*, only occasionally *manifesting* itself. The leader's choice not to appear in public is turned into an effective means of maintaining his authority and legitimacy as a spiritual guide, in such a way as to guarantee the survival of the group itself.

This radical change in the relation between the leader and his followers is also reflected in the media products created and distributed by the group with new types of graphic. In the case of *manga*, for instance, the face of El Cantāre no longer appears, but has been *transfigured* into a form of divine light[xiii]. In advertising campaigns, the *body* or image of the leader is no longer shown, but has been replaced by a sacred *symbol*[xiv]. The image of the leader is protected. Furthermore, the *guarding of the leader image* is reflected in the limited use of Internet by Kōfuku no kagaku, compared with its aggressive use of other media. The official website of the group came on line in December of 2004[xv], while most of the Japanese New Religions have had an established Internet presence since the 1990s. Although during the last two years the group is improving its Internet presence, especially in online community, such as *2channel* (*2channeru*)[xvi] and social networking service, in particular *Mixi*[xvii] the image of the leader is still guarded and only a small picture appears on the official website.

Agonshū and the media: the construction of religious image by *media mix* strategy

Kiriyama Seiyu, born in 1921 as Tsutsumi Masao, founded Agonshū in 1978.

In 1955 he obtained lay ordination in the esoteric Buddhist school Shingon and changed his name. In 1954 Kiriyama founded a group called Kannon jikeikai (Kannon worshipping movement) and in 1978, he changed the name of the group to

Agonshū and introduced the reading of Agama sutras, early pre-Mahayana Buddhist texts. Agonshū's cosmology draws from both Japanese "common religion" (Reader and Tanabe 1998) tradition and Buddhism tradition. By the beginning of the 1980's Agonshū came to prominence and the group became widely known in Japan through its aggressive use of media and for one massive public event, the Star Festival. Its intensive use of the mass media to advertise its teaching and events was nothing new for Japanese new religious movements. Agonshū, however, was the first group to use satellite communications and was considered one of the most technology-conscious religious groups (Reader 1991: 218).

The strategy of media usage was planned by the Public Relations Department, focusing on the so called "media mix". As with most religious groups, they founded their publishing house (Hirakawa Shuppan) and aimed to change the use of the press:

> "The 'old new religions' proselytized almost exclusively by the distribution of leader's books by believers, but we developed our publications activities starting a strategy based on 'making the bookstores the windows of the group". [xviii]

The distribution of publications to major bookshops was improved and promoted by advertising campaign on newspaper, magazine and television. Agonshū was the first group to hire Dentsū Corporation, the largest advertising company in Japan, to implement their strategy. Dentsū never worked for religious groups before, but Agonshū opened the way between the company and others religious organizations (for example Kōfuku no kagaku).

The advertising campaign was centered on the leader image, his publications and group's events:

> Generally speaking, in advertising we have first 'the formation of a name', then 'the formation of an interest' and, finally, 'the formation of favor'. We did not think to obtain immediately, through the advertising, the 'purchase' (in the case of Agonshū, conversion). Applying that general theory, I started with 'the creation of a name' for Agonshū that was still a group unknown to the large public. I modified my strategies doing marketing researches[xix].

The advertising image, was created by the creative staff of Dentsū following the direction of the general manager of the Public Relations Department. He accepted the proposal and than asked the permission of Agonshū's leader (who, it seems, always agreed). At the same time, the group focused on television and radio broadcasting, shortwave broadcasting and satellite broadcasting. In addition, they promoted some events, defined by the general manager as *religious entertainment*, based on religious festivals or aimed at sponsoring interfaith dialogues on world peace (for example, the meeting with Dalai Lama in 1984 and with Pope Johannes Paul II in 1985).

According to the former head of Agonshū's Public Relations Department, the organization didn't decide on a step-by-step strategy. Rather, they worked simultaneously on different media projects as circumstances dictated. Agonshū also produced numerous videos and films that expanded the leader's messages, and installed video display systems at all their centers so that any member or visitor could view them.

Agonshū's major media event was, and still is, the Star Festival (*Hoshi matsuri*). The annual event is held on February 11, the Founding of the Nation Day, at the Yamashina headquarters near Kyoto. During the *matsuri* a *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics) fire rite (*goma*) is performed and millions of wooden sticks (*gomagi*) are written by members and burned into two fires. The event advertising campaign focus on the grand and spectacular event offered and at the site of the Festival an elaborate media centre is set up that utilizes an entire building. The coverage of the event is complete. Cameras are even mounted on helicopters to give a bird's eye views of the event. At the same time, the ritual "contains media and media devices" (Grimes 2002: 222) to convey a sense of intense drama and spectacle:

> […] the helpers wear headphones and have two-way radios (including may of those dressed as *yamabushi*, making a rather interesting cameo picture of the traditional costume of the mountain ascetic topped off with the technology of the modern age) to keep things coordinated. […] Teams of *yamabushi* take turns in beating great rows of drums and chanting through microphones, to accompany the activities of those

hurling *gomagi* on to the fire, and specially composed dramatic music is played through the banks of loudspeakers to add to the overall effect.

[Reader 1991: 224].

The *spectacle* promised by the advertising campaign is guaranteed and the *religious entertainment* (including fortunetelling, traditional dance and music performance, entertainment for children and family, food) is offered all day long at the sacred centre.

Satellite communication

Agonshū was not only the first religious group to use satellite communication, it was one of the first private organizations of any kind to engage in live satellite broadcasting in Japan[xx]. Its first broadcast was transmitted on the 8th of April 1987 (satellite CS-2b, Sakura 2 go b): the group borrowed a transponder of NTT load on CS and they transmitted to centers in Kyūshū and Hokkaidō.

In the early 1980s, some telecommunication companies contacted the group and it decided to use satellite broadcasts. The *appropriate occasion*, as defined by the media representative, was the ceremony for the inauguration of the Kantō region center. Afterward, it was decided to perform a fire rite on the first day of each month (*tsuitachi goma*) and to transmit it by satellite. According to the former general manager, "When we decided to experiment satellite broadcasting, we decided to hold the fire rite in Tokyo and transmit it to Kyoto. We then started the transmission to other regions[xxi]. At that time, the group rented half an hour transmission time and the rite was created to take exactly 30 minutes (Reader 1991:226).

In other words, the *tsuitachi goma* rite was created to fit the new media. It is a traditional fire rite performed by esoteric Buddhism sects, but in Agonshū's ritual the presence of the media is not only important, it plays a central role. The rite for the ancestors (*meitokusai*) performed on the16[th] of each month at Kyoto centre started some years later.

During the last twenty years, Agonshū has developed the use of its satellite broadcasting and nowadays two types of events are usually screened: indoor rituals (the monthly *tsuitachi goma* and *meitokusai* transmitted respectively from Tokyo and Kyoto) and outdoor rituals (the annual *Hoshi matsuri* and some exceptional *goma*

rites performed by the leader overseas). In the first case the camera is placed at the same vantage point as a worshiper attending a rite. Usually facing an altar or some other focus of worship, which is often an Agonshū monk leading a prayer or chant. There is no panning, no zooming, nor fading to another scene. The camera image is static and unchanging as if the person viewing the ritual from a distance is right there at the same physical location. The video and audio is then transmitted to other Agonshū centers throughout Japan, where members assemble in front of large video screens and participate in the rite being performed on the other side of the country.

When I took part in the rite, the members watching on the screen responded in very much the same way as those attending the "live" performance. The ritual seemed to be "extended by the media" (Grimes 2002: 220) and "made present" through the screen (Grimes 2002: 221). The members "participate" in the ritual, even though they do so at a distance, and are actively involved. At the beginning and at the end of the transmission, a speaker thanks the believers who are taking part by satellite broadcasting, or invites them to pray.

During an interview, the former general manager of the Public Relations Department said that they focused on the "*sense of unity*" and the "*feeling of solidarity*" created by the synchronism of satellite communication. For the members, he said, it is usually difficult to understand what the leader is doing during the ritual because he is too distant and the sacred relics are often closed in an inner altar and are difficult to see. By satellite television, every member has a good position- that is the position of the camera- and can clearly understand the founder's speech. Then, the members can participate along with Kiriyama in events in Kyoto or Tokyo without having to travel.

> Even if the place is distant it is wonderful the feeling of sharing the same prayer and the same feelings. In the traditional pilgrimage the sense of unity come from being in the same place, even if at different time. With the satellite communications it is the contrary: being in a different place at the same time[xxii].

Ritual through screen involves the *collective* body in a specific physical space (the sacred place) and the role of ritual was to *unify practice* and create a *collective identity* (*coscience collective*, Durkheim) as part of a *nationwide temple*.

The transmission of the Star Festival or other outdoor *goma* rite[xxiii] is the complete opposite of Agonshū's closed circuit members and guests only broadcasts. Instead of a camera and microphone being the eyes and ears of distant worshipers, the media *enter into the ritual*. The ceremonies are not just transmitted by the media, but *re-created* by them. The viewers experience not just being there, but they see *more* than those attending the ceremonies in person: they can see the ceremonies from different point of view, read supplementary explanation on the screen, *enter* in the ritual space and enjoy close-up images of performers and ritual objects. Allowing the viewers to become *omniscient* compensates the lack of *physical proximity* between charismatic leader and followers.

The transmission allows them to see details and the on-screen written explanations give them more information about the different phases of the ceremony. The members in the centers participate actively in the rite, praying during the central part of the ritual, but above all creating a *festival atmosphere* in the center. The big festivals are an extraordinary occasion also for the members that watch them by television. The rules of daily life in the center are temporarily suspended. For example, on the day of the transmission of the fire rite performed in Poland in June 2006, the Tokyo center offered gifts, free drinks and fortunetelling services for the visitors. The *planned performance* of the "media event" (Dayan & Katz 1992) is perceived as *extraordinary*: some believers said they took a leave day from work to attend it.

Both indoor and outdoor types of satellite transmissions have in common the *place* that is the center of the group. The only places where we can see the satellite transmission (and most of the group's DVDs) are at the centers around Japan[xxiv]. The rituals, both *live* and *mediated* by the screen during the satellite broadcastings, cannot be *consumed* in a private space (i.e. at home), but only in a public space controlled by the group. The centers are open to all visitors, but all must register at the entrance or show their membership card.

The different use of satellite transmissions depending on events shows different image strategies. In the case of indoor rituals, the focus is on the sense *of community* of the members who participate together, but at different physical locations. The aim of the (*virtual) nationwide temple* is to reinforce the inner cohesion of the members and the

proximity between the leader and the members. In the outdoor rituals, the focus is on the *spectacularization* of the event. As pointed out by Ian Reader describing the Star Festival:

> For members it serves as an affirmation of the vitality and prominence of their religion, and enables them to play an active part in this, helping and transmitting, their feeling of joy to visitors or, dressed as a *yamabushi*, helping to pacify the angry spirits and bring about world peace.
> (Reader 1991:224)

For non-members it is a demonstration of the power and wealth of the group and can persuade them to join.

After the Aum attacks Agonshū was strongly criticized for its massive use of media and for its spectacular image. The group reacted with withdrawal from mass media. They never stopped the Star Festival, but they decreased their advertising campaigns and their presence in the media. In the late 1990s, the Agonshū website, for example, was just a simple information page on the group's teachings, without any information about its centers, or contact information.

In the last few years, however, the group appears more open to external contact. For example, they changed their website design and we can now find information about ceremonies, festivals and meetings (but it still no possible to buy DVD of the group). Most events and rituals are open to non-members and everyone is welcome to visit their centers.

Concluding remarks

Considering Kofuku no kagaku and Agonshū use of media in the last two decades, we can outline some concluding remarks on media-religion interaction in contemporary Japan:

- media practice can create new forms of religious practice or affect existing ones. In the case of Kōfuku no kagaku, the *direct* contact between leader and followers is no longer possible and totally mediated. In Agonshū, ritual

performance and consumption evolved in a new forms modelled by media. And the mediated form of rites affected the direct experience (Hoover 2002).

- Kōfuku no kagaku and Agonshū chose different images strategies to face the criticism after the *Aum affair*. Kōfuku no kagaku undertook a drastically change supported by its flexible doctrine and it is still exploring new ways of media communication (especially internet-based). Agonshū chose to change from a public-oriented to a private-oriented group. The group never stopped its public events, but it limited advertising on newspapers and television. The common point between the two groups can be seen in the special attention given to the *location* of media products consumption, especially video. The only place where we can watch videos of the groups or attend ceremonies through satellite transmission (Agonshū) or watch leader video messages (Kōfuku no kagaku) are the *controlled space* of the sacred centre.

As Stewart M. Hoover notes that "it is through the media that much of contemporary religion and spirituality is known" (2006:1). Indeed, media can affect our ways of interpreting, understanding and representing religion.

Furthermore, when studying new religious movements in Japan, as considered by Trevor Astley:

> one must take into consideration the potential for new religious movements to transform themselves radically in a relatively short space of time, such that they may have a different appeal, carry a different message, and respond to different problems of human existence in different ways at different times. (Astley 2006: 92)

And, in my opinion, media communication can play not just an important role but in fact a central role in creating, re-shaping and innovating the identity of new religious movements. Media are not just *informing* about religion, but they can *make* religion.

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[i] For a definition of *shinshūkyō* see: Astley (2006), Shimazono (1990;1992), Inoue (1992; 1996).

[ii] On newspaper and magazine articles about new religions see the chapter *masukomi to shūkyō* in Inoue *et alii*, 1994: 516-560.

[iii] But, as Reader and Dorman (2007:6) note, media reporting of new religious movements is not only negative.

[iv] For instance, Steve Hassan, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, written in 1988 against the Unification Church; Michael D. Langone, *What Parent Should Know*, 1988; Phillip

Zambardo, *What is Mind Control?*, 1995. Furthermore, many representatives of American anti-cult movements were invited to Japan. Cf. Watanabe (2001)

[v] 40/50 hours every week according to Hardacre (2007:175).

[vi] In accordance with the definition provided by Tenant (1995).

[vii] Cf. the chart of largest tax-payers of the year 2004 provided by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper (May 16 2005).

[viii] According to Iwasa's definition, this is a " business based on clients whom to sell happiness to" [*shiawase o uru kaiinkei bijinesu*] (1993, p.128). Ōkawa himself defined the group as "*a factory that produces happiness and a company that sells happiness* (Kōfuku no kagaku to wa, Kōfuku no seisankōjō de ari mata Kōfuku no hanbaikaisha desu, Cf. Ekawa, 1991)

[ix] When I visited the group centre in Tokushima (Shikoku island) in October 2006 they showed me a very interesting promotion video on Kōfuku no kagaku which presented an historical overview of media used by the group, the foundation of the publishing house, the first magazine published, the first radio broadcast ecc.

[x] www.dentsu.co.jp

[xi] The most recent movies are: *Ōgon no hō The Golden Laws* (2003, http://www.toei.co.jp/ougon/) and *Eien ho hō The Laws of Eternità*

[xii] In the course of my field studies in Japan, I actually attempted to touch upon the subject with members of the group. In most cases, followers tended to avoid the issue or to provide rather evasive answers, of the aforementioned kind.

[xiii] For instance, compare the leader's depiction, as it appears in the comic *Manga de miru Kōfuku no kagaku Tengoku no mon* in 1992 with the one provided by *Kibō no kakumei* in 1995. The same graphics is used by other *manga* published by new religious movements on the founders' life history. For example see Hattori Takeshiro and Nakashiro Takeo, *Gekiga kyōso monogatari*, 1986-1987 on Nakayama Miki, the founder of Tenrikyō
 See also Baffelli (2005; 2008 forthcoming).

[xiv] Compare the advertising images of the early 1990s with those from the mid 1990s to the present day. An analysis of the various advertising images can be found in Baffelli (2005).

[xv] http://www.kofuku-no-kagaku.or.jp/

[xvi] hppt://www.2ch.net

[xvii] http://mixi.jp/,

[xviii] Private conversation with the former general manager of Public Relations Department, June 2006.

[xix] Private conversation, June 2006.

[xx] NHK started experimental broadcasting TV program using BS-2a satellite on May, 1984. After these successful experiments, NHK started regular service (NTSC) and experimental HDTV broadcasting using BS-2b on June, 1989.

[xxi] Private conversation, June 2006.

[xxii] Private conversation, June 2006.

[xxiii] For example, the *goma* rite transmitted the 13th June 2006 from Poland.

[xxiv] They broadcast publicly on some terrestrial channel only a 30 minutes program on Star Festival.